Changing Fate
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**Changing Fate**

by melWinter

**Summary**

Loki was supposed to go back to Asgard to assume control of the throne after saving Thor on Svartalfheim. He was supposed to be the portent for Ragnarok...too bad fate didn't ask for his opinion. After all, fate didn't plan for Loki to find an abandoned baby elf. Nor did Loki plan to discover how intriguing Jane Foster can be. And what the heck do the Avengers and his trickster of a daughter have to do with any of this?

Loki makes a different choice. But can Loki truly escape the fate that has been his since the beginning? Can the trickster learn to love? With Thanos rising and the infinity war looming, the universe may come to an end if the nine realms can't reconcile with the prince it once rejected. Eventual Jane/Loki. Warning: Loki and Hela snarkiness, Tony cockiness, Thor cluelessness, and random cuteness of Loki dealing with being a dad.
Chapter 1

Loki, the recognized God of Mischief, let the spell keeping him invisible and unnoticed fade. Now that his idiotic adopted brother, Thor, and his brother’s sometimes love interest Jane Foster were off to save the universe it was safe enough. It was a shame really. Thor was a kind-hearted idiot, in his opinion. What a woman as intelligent as that saw in him was a mystery.

He took a step closer, staring coldly at a dead body with his angular face and ghostly complexion. He sneered down at his dead double and vanished him with a flick of his wrist. As if he would die for Thor. Dusting off his hands as if to rid himself of that pathetic display of sentiment, skillfully ignoring the tiny voice in the back of his mind arguing that he would do it if necessary, he glanced around to find the dark portal he was looking for when a cry caught his attention.

His hearing was sensitive compared to other AEsir but not that sensitive and he could see nothing in the barren vastness around him. A malicious smile curled his lip, envisioning a pair of dark elves tearing each other apart. He raised his hands when a second cry pulled at him, demanding his attention, and demolishing his concentration. With an annoyed snarl he spun, the tails of his armored jacket fanning out as he stalked across the rocks and windblown surface towards it. Whoever it was, if they weren’t dead were going to die horribly at his own hands.

At the edge of a short cliff he spied with his grey-green eyes movement a short distance from the mouth of a cave and teleported himself from point to point, enjoying the freedom of finally being able to use his magic as he wished. He would make Odin and all of Asgard pay for imprisoning him. Stalking forward, pulling a dagger from an invisible sheathe on his thigh, he froze as he stared down at a small form. The tension melted out of him as he chuckled and shook his head.

It bothered him that the child was just left out here in the elements, especially considering the state of the dark elves’ planet. In spite of AEsir opinions he knew there were small remnants of the species deep underground. Where was their remembrance of children to leave a child out here like this? As he looked the boy over he thought he knew why. The babe was obviously ill, an unusually unhealthy parlor of white for an elf and the ears were not formed properly, much more subtly pointed than they should be.

And Loki, as a Jötunn runt, knew what happened to the weakest of the litter.

It would be a kindness to put the child out of its misery than to just leave it here to slowly die from exposure. He found himself kneeling down before he’d even thought it through, hand extending with a soft greenish glow of magic on his fingertips. A tiny fist wrapped around his index finger and his magic retreated so sharply it felt like a chastising slap to the back of his head.

His magic was supposed to be his to command alone. The only time he’d ever had that
Pulling in a deep breath and shaking his head rapidly, he threw himself from the vicinity and almost ran in his haste to get away. He had plans. He had to see them through. He would not let his own pathetic sentiment stop him, not this time. But the distressed cries, escalating, pulled at his feet, slowing him down. He flinched and clutched at his head. Not enough sleep. Not in years. Or maybe it was his magic, spiting him. Perhaps his overburdened conscience finally resurfacing. Whatever it was, he crumpled to the ground.

And unbidden, a vision came to him. It couldn’t have been a memory, he had been much too young and it was so long ago, but he envisioned Odin in this same moment. A warrior, a king, blood stains on his hands and armor, eye missing from battle, kneeling down over the frozen wasteland of Jötunheim to pick up a sickly runt of a Jötunn babe from the snow. Him. The child of a hated race. A child abandoned and left to die by his own kind. Instead of leaving him to die Odin took the child home and gave him his name. Loki Odinson.

The image of the man he had called father and himself as an infant faded. He was still there on the barren expanse of chilled Jötunheim, but he was visited by someone else. He blinked and visibly started at what he was seeing. It was impossible. She was gone, in Valhalla for certain but his eyes searched a face that wasn’t, couldn’t, be there. The specter that looked like his mother but couldn’t be smiled with that chiding look he was far too familiar with.

Loki came back to himself, back curving as he bowed as if in prayer, shoulders shaking as he sank his hands into his dark hair. He had no idea why he shed tears, almost as if some gaping wound to his heart had felled him. Was it guilt? Remorse? Regret? He did not know, yet still he cried. He cried for the mother he still mourned, a mother not by blood but his ‘mumma’ nonetheless. He cried for the disappointment he was to his father, now a warmonger and a blood covered tyrant. He cried for the traitor he was to his brother, a brother he denied and abandoned. And he cried for himself, for the Loki he had become that he hated with every fiber of his being.

He screamed once, a wounded sound and hit the ground in futility with his fists before stilling. Even when his own tears ceased the child’s cries continued to pull and speak to him more clearly than words ever had. Not even he, the Liesmith, the trickster Prince, not even he could abandon a child to die. Though he didn’t know it at the time, this was the moment that he chose a different path. This was the moment that the fates hadn’t foreseen. The moment when Loki would no longer be the portent for Ragnarok.

Roughly shoving himself away from the ground, swaying on his feet as he scrubbed at his face in irritation, he stalked back to the boy. With a series of movements the pieces of his armor fell off one by one, hastily pulling the green tunic he wore over his head before wrapping the child carefully. The little ones cries slowly tapered off, staring up at Loki in wonder with deep green eyes as the trickster snapped his fingers and the armor reappeared on his thin body.

He put a warming spell on the fabric, which helped cease the child’s shivers. Hold tentative and gentle, Loki rose with the babe in his arms, supporting the fragile head and looking around carefully to be certain they were unseen. He couldn’t return to Asgard. The moment his feet touched soil he would be magically bound and the child would be taken, most likely killed. Not that he cared, he hastily corrected himself. He only cared about the fact that he’d be back in the dungeons and that simply wouldn’t do. In fact, there were few races he hadn’t managed to offend at one time or another, but he knew that the forests of Alfheim’s smallest moon were so extensive it would be
easy for him to hide there, at least for a time. Loki had reached a fork in the road of his life, and he chose to go right instead of left.

Author's note:

Hello there.

Just as a friendly warning: this is a long story. Seriously not kidding about that. You'll have all the drama, little bits of humor thrown in, and I've been told you might cry.

Hopefully you will like and I am always eager to improve so feel free to leave constructive criticism.

Next:

Loki finds a place to hide
Chapter 2

ALFHEIM

Out of all the nine realms, only three of them offered a practical solution for a home that someone like himself could use. Specifically Loki, since there were many pranks he’d pulled that even after centuries the people would still glare just from hearing his name. Midgard would be the easiest and the hardest to hide on, even with magic now that SHIELD probably wanted to hang him by his heels. Not to mention Thor and Odin would look there first if they knew he was alive. Jötunheim would be cold but possible for him, but not for a young elfling…not to mention he’d rather never see a Jötunn again. Alfheim held promise since he rarely caused the elves mischief, but if he officially hid there they would be beholden to report him to Odin. The smallest moon of Alfheim, however, might just be perfect.

The baby was sleeping fitfully, having exhausted himself into an uneasy sleep from his incessant crying. Loki looked over the clearing thoughtfully. It would be a tight space for a cottage but that would be ideal. Tight enough to be relatively unseen but wide enough that a protective magic shell could fill the entire space. And it wasn’t horribly far from a small village of light elves so what few items he couldn’t produce easily with magic, they could supply.

With a snap of his fingers his grimoire flashed into existence and he looked through the pages carefully as if hovered before him as if on strings before focusing on creating a modest home for himself. His magic sung and swirled around him and he embraced it with a smile. Perhaps he didn’t hate himself completely. If not for the past, he wouldn’t have his freedom now and he certainly didn’t regret that. When he was satisfied with the single story outside and protective spells he carefully scooped up the child and walked into the interior. Within an hour his work was satisfactory for now and a small basinet housed the child who was still sleeping.

Making a stew heavily laden with meat since he couldn’t really abide much else, pulling supplies out of a dimensional pocket, he slapped his hands over his ears when angry wails shattered the quiet. “No doubt you would give Thor competition for who can destroy my eardrums the quickest.” Loki muttered this, eating the stew and growling. “Oh shut up! By the Norns…”

The wails only increased in volume and intensity. Loki snapped his fingers and there was instant quiet. Smirking to himself. “Ah…I love mag—…” He jerked around in horror as the babe started screaming, a glow of blue light sparkling around him before slowly fading. Loki’s mouth hung open. No. Impossible. He had not just cursed himself with a miniature version of himself. His luck couldn’t possibly be that bad. His mother had told him horror stories of himself as a very fussy infant, somehow doing random acts of magic to make sure his displeasure was known throughout Asgard.

Assuming a pose as if he were prepared to grovel with some unseen deity in the heavens, eyes looking up and hands pressed together in supplication. “I know I’m not one of your favorites right now…” Another scream shattered what remained of his ear drums. Damn, was all he could think.

With a defeated hanging of his head Loki stood up and picked up the elfling whose little face was red, fat tears rolling down his face. He wondered what he had gotten himself into this time. Scowling at the little face. “I saved your life, elf; it does not mean I am required to feel any affection for you.” Mumbling to himself. “…because Odin certainly held none for me…”

Yet even as he said it he couldn’t convince himself to completely believe it anymore. Odin
had betrayed him, his entire existence a lie. He was a blue skinned monster from a race of monsters. He was little more than a political ploy that had failed…but he still remembered falling sick as a very small boy and Odin spending half the night holding him and pacing. Why show that he cared if he didn’t?

He frowned to himself suddenly in realization. “Milk.” He winced at his own idiocy, thankful it happened to be one of the few perishables he carried in dimensional storage. Shaking his head at the child, “I pity you for choosing me…” He was also thankful this wasn’t a mortal child or the poor thing would probably be dead by now. A snap of his fingers and it appeared. He silently prayed this child was not as selective an eater as he was. He studied the babe for another second, vaguely remembering warm would be better than cold.

Yet even after feeding him, he still wouldn’t settle. Loki knew it had become a contest of wills, but which would break was the question? He held the little elf and started to pace with him back and forth. It seemed to soothe him a little, but he still cried and Loki felt his heart soften the tiniest bit. He reached up to feel the soft forehead with his fingertips, brow furrowing to feel unnatural warmth. He went about preparing a fever reducing broth and carefully fed it to the boy little by little.

His cries were softer, obviously pained, but the broth seemed to help. Throughout the night the little elfling continued to cry and no amount of pacing seemed to help.

Loki was reduced to begging he was so tired, but it wasn’t as painful as he thought it would be, to admit defeat to an infant. “Please, be quiet. Just…oh please, please, please stop…” He knew the child was sick, but there was only so much healing magic he knew. In desperation he sought out one of the elven healers of the village. He abandoned his Asgardian armor for a simple tunic and breaches with a dark green cloak thrown over it, used just enough magic to alter his ears and ducked into the healing room with the squalling babe in his arms.

The healer, who he later learned was called G’dath, said not a word as she took the infant and placed him on a healing bed in a nest of pillows. As her assistants fusssed over the boy she turned with narrowed eyes on him and pointed to a neighboring bed. Loki gaped and moved to object but her blue eyes just narrowed a bit further. He was tired, his head was starting to ache and his eyes were burning; if ever there was a time when her bullying him into compliance would work it was now and he found himself unwillingly bowing to her silent order.

A few more silent prods from her, completely ignoring his objections, she had him stretched out on the bed, divested of his cloak and tunic. He hissed softly as she applied a healing stone to an old injury he’d picked up a few centuries ago in his left shoulder but was surprised by how quickly it repaired the deep tissue damage he had assumed was permanent. He sneered at the potion she handed him but then he glanced at the elfling who had finally stopped crying. She obviously knew what she was doing and after considering his shoulder he drank it down. She gently pushed at his now healed shoulder and he curled up obediently on his side, ignoring her touches on his back as he watched the elfling waving his hands happily in the air, his eyes slowly closing.

Loki’s eyes shot open, about to leap up but freezing to feel the babe tucked into his arms, he on his side and protectively curled around him, a soft blanket over both of them. He hadn’t even realized he’d been as exhausted as he was, falling asleep beneath the ministrations of the healers. His shoulder was the best it had ever been and even the odd twinges along his back, courtesy of Thor, were blissfully absent.

The tiny baby’s eyes were open, a startling emerald green and he found himself smiling just a little looking down at him. So much like him as a child. He remembered his mother always
telling him how his eyes were this beautiful emerald green as a child. The baby’s skin had warmed to a soft pale and Loki used an index finger to curiously trace along a white eyebrow before moving to gently touch a delicately pointed ear. The baby stuffed part of his fist into his own mouth and Loki smirked with a soft chuckle before realizing this child needed a name.

The name in itself was easy enough to decide on, it was to give him or not give him his name was the question. This boy could just a foundling of his, a little pet to teach and eventually send off into the universe when he was old enough. But it would be a poor way to repay what Loki now knew Odin had been trying to teach him. He may not agree with it, but he understood it. That every species is important and no innocent should suffer simply for being born to a hated race. Although the hypocrite would probably be very eager to see every last dark elf exterminated now.

His life had come full circle, he realized. He, in this moment, truly was Odin. He may not have taken a child from a conquered enemy but he was taking in a cast off just as he had been. And wasn’t it interesting how not even for a moment did he consider not keeping this child. Would this boy’s fate be his own? Would this child grow up to be as betrayed, embittered and angry as he was? As he looked at this innocent little face, his brow furrowed. No, this child would not be lied to. He would know his birthright. He would know where he came from, where Loki came from; Loki would not make the mistakes done to him.

Turning his right hand, palm up, he concentrated and a swirling mist of green filled the space. It swirled and moved, chaotic but gentle. This was him. A touch of the essence of him. He smirked down at the wide eyes watching him, a mist of blue tentatively reaching up towards him from the baby. The two colors swirled and danced around one another. A mixture of magic that would never separate. A connection of more than just claim, as solid as biology and love. Instinctively he knew he’d shared such a connection with Frigga, who would always be his mother in all the ways that mattered.

He would always be able to find this boy. He would always come forward to protect this child. Whispering softly, a silent promise. “Your name is Indel. Indel Lokison.”

SVARTALFHEIM

Svartalfheim had once been beautiful. The roaring rivers and crystal lakes. Continents and more filled with the ancient forests of knowledge. The kingdom of the elves had been a thriving society…until evil had swayed a population that named themselves Dark Elves.

War across the World Tree banished the evil and scorched the skies of Svartalfheim forever. War had decimated the population to scattered remains. War had introduced imprisoned light elf bloodlines into dark elf lineage. Now the land grew barren and cold, the predators fiercer and the game scarcer. Some small clans remained on the planet in the sparse expanses of forest, or moved deep into the caverns beneath the planet’s surface.

The Clan’s hunters moved to the entrance to their cave, staring down with perplexed expressions. It was a good distance away from Malekith’s former fortress, and they were deep underground to avoid notice. They wondered where the child was. It happened within each generation. Some strange mixture of light elf and dark elf would produce an aberration. A child with stunted ears. It was best for the Clan and the child this way. These genetic mistakes were weak and never survived their first year, growing sickly and eventually dying. Leaving them as bait for a predator, the Clan ate in return and the child was spared months of suffering.

“I told you a predator would not wait until nightfall.”
One of the men gestured with a snarl to the other one who had spoken. “There is no blood and no scent of death, there was no predator.”

“I disagree.” A new voice caught all of their attention.

The elves moved with fluid grace for all their speed, weapons and balls of protective power at the ready for this intruder. The figure didn’t move, watching them silently. Skin as white as porcelain. Eyes a deep green. Hair as black as midnight. A nonexistent wind blew the layers of the black cloak away from her body, revealing the Asgardian armor that had been stained black from the blood of thousands. Along her hips, two inordinately long swords laid quietly, ready to be used. Ready to sing.

She watched them, no expression on her face.

Her lips formed a subtle smirk as she spoke again. “I am a very real predator.”

“Asgadian.”

“You do not belong here.”

They converged on her and she disappeared like smoke, reappearing a few feet further. Such simplistic creatures, the dark elves couldn’t even speak outside of their own language. Her smile was little more than bared teeth as she corrected them. “I do not belong anywhere, certainly not Asgard. I am here to ask a question, and it is thus: why?”

Heads tilted slightly, the Clan pausing to reassess this apparition before someone from the crowd asked in confusion. “Why?”

She nodded her head slightly, expression bored. “Yes. Why? Why leave a child to die? Why show so little regard for your own kin? You have been doing this for centuries, why?”

A towering elf stepped away from the others, if not the leader then the most authoritative of them. “It was not our kin.”

“Then to whom was the child kin?” She considered the question straightforward enough. The elfling had been perhaps a day or so old. If these elves weren’t related to the child then they should know where it came from.

Eyes flickered towards the deserted fortress. “It matters not, it would never survive, so we do what is necessary to keep those strong alive.”

She caught the movement but made no mention of it. She nodded slightly to herself before her tone turned mocking as she asked. “And you are strong?”

“We are Clan. That is everything.”

Her own head tilted, speaking out loud but not focused on them. “Father?” Her question was to someone not there, feeling his mind brushing against her own. Impossible, one would say. But then she and her father had a very special relationship and rules were made to be broken. There was a moment of nothing. No sound that any could hear, before a delighted smile crossed her face that was so frightening they took a collective step back. Her gaze returned to them, expression gone. “I claim and I conquer and tonight…I exact a penalty.”

“A penalty…”
The smile grew, becoming a trickster's smile. “The souls of the dead children that have washed upon Helheim’s shores will be accounted for.” She gestured with her right hand and the cave behind them sealed as if it had never been there. She let them keep their weapons; it would make their delightful struggles more interesting. “And as father requests, so shall I do.” Heads jerked both ways, bodies tensed. Elves naturally acclimated to magic but they all sensed the overwhelming dark power in this otherworldly being.

“Who are you?”

Her expression melted away behind a blank mask, eyes flashing green. “Death.”

Metal sang through the air and the dry ground was bathed in blood.

The crunch of bone.

The gurgle of drowned screams.

Another coat of black collected and dripped from Asgardian armor.

On Alfheim’s smallest moon, a very dark, very satisfied smile crossed Loki’s sleeping face.

Author's notes:

Morbid, I know, and perhaps a little confusing. But it will make sense I promise.

**Just to clarify since I don't want too much confusion.**

The timeline hasn't changed. The girl is neither Loki nor Indel (Loki is like a thousand years old if you borrow movie-verse math, he's just old enough that he could have other kids). I'm borrowing a tiny bit from norse mythology but I will return it so it's not stealing. There are subtle clues as to who this is and since she will reappear later I wanted to introduce her now.

Next:

Loki meets Azni and G’dath
Chapter 3

ALFHEIM

Loki loved and he hated his dreams all at the same time. Unlike any other creature in the nine realms, a mage experiences dreams differently. Sometimes, it was like the human version of television. There can be several scenes of the past enacting around him at all times. He can choose to interact with those scenes or not but he will find himself more exhausted than not on those nights.

Most nights, he will be wrapped in magic, a blanket of stars wrapped around him, safe and warm. He is cradled and rocked and drifts as he feels the harmony at the core of his being, a fleeting whisper of it here or there. It lightly tugged at his senses, not enough to wake him; just enough for him to know that it exists. He used magic, but he is magic. It ran through his veins. It flowed with his emotions.

Every once in a great while, it was an opportunity for Yggdrasil, the world tree, to reach out to him and teach him a new path. Envision that the entire known universe, all nine realms, are incorporated within a great tree. Nine specific planets make up certain aspects of that tree, but there are still the millions of golden branches and roots to connect those realms together. A million possible ways to walk from one world to the next, just by following that golden path. And the tree is always growing. Like a mischievous child, the tree changes and the tree likes to play with him. The tree is as alive as magic. As alive as a person. He is the only mage Yggdrasil invites to learn secrets like this.

And then on certain nights, like last night, sleep invited absolutely no rest at all. Where there was no dream. Where Loki could use his sleeping state to slip quietly beyond the living realm to speak with the Queen of Helheim. He knew it was a mistake to take this child. To give Indel his name. He’d already become attached. Attachment would lead swiftly to love, sentiment his biggest failing, but it was a selfish attachment. When someone hurt that which he loved, there was Hel to pay. Quite literally, since he knew a very special goddess of the underworld, after all. He’d been offered some lovely images of the dark elves that she’d slaughtered at his request.

Loki woke but forced himself to stay absolutely still, eyes closed, as he felt a gentle poke to his forehead. There were a few muffled giggles, before another gentle poke. He fanned his senses out a little, identifying Indel curled against his chest and the pair of annoyances next to his bed. He was mildly tempted to throw the brats poking him into a dimensional pocket for a few hours but a sharp clap had him opening his eyes.

The head healer he’d tried to tangle with and failed was sending the two children next to him a look of deadly anger and with frightened yelps they ran out the door. She was a classic looking elf, hair white and eyes a soft blue. She huffed a sigh and shrugged as if to say ‘children, what can you do?’

His immediate thought was beat them, but then he glanced down at the elfling and decided perhaps he was being a bit harsh.

She glanced at him with arms held out and raised an eyebrow until he reluctantly relinquished Indel to her. She checked him over thoroughly before pulling two thin books on baby basics and one slip of parchment. Loki wrestled the covers off and sat up, putting back on his clothes and boots. She handed him the parchment while putting the books in a small pouch before handing it and the baby back to him.

He glanced over the note. The healer was a very reasonable woman. All that she required
from him were a few of the fresh herbs that he had discovered as he was building the cottage in exchange for her healing services. Loki offered her a slight tilt of his head in thanks, more than he was used to offering anyone. She seemed to take it all with stoic silence and Loki idly wondered if she was mute.

He took his time wandering around the village, getting a feel for the people here and mapping everything out. He was always very geographically aware and old habits die hard. There were maybe sixty people here, at most. How depressingly spartan and yet, perfect for a refugee like himself. There were the houses of course. The healing rooms. He mapped out a building that was used as a community gathering site. From what he gathered the people hunted for their own kills and grew their own vegetables. The only items up for trade were arranged between households so he was going to have to find milk quickly.

His wandering had a dual purpose. Yes, he was taking in everything that was here, but he was also making sure that they all got a look at him so he would be left in peace.

Loki stopped at the home that was at the edge of town, pausing at the gate and unsure if it was rude to proceed without invitation. Well, better to ask for forgiveness than permission, his life’s creed. He lightly pushed open the gate, keeping to the path up to the front door and knocked lightly on the light blue surface before stepping back several feet.

The door opened slowly, almost as if on its own. Loki frowned to himself but didn’t venture further. ‘Is anyone there?’

An elf filled the space a moment later, soft auburn hair pulled back from her face, her smile sweet even if there was age and wisdom in her brown eyes. “She mentioned you might come by. Come in. Come in.”

Loki opened his mouth to ask who ‘she’ was but for once in his life he was almost completely speechless. “Um…” He trailed off but allowed himself to be pulled inside.

She patted his forearm, her fingers lightly dancing on top of Indel’s bald head who was looking around with bright eyes. “Such a handsome young man.” Her fingers tapped Loki’s cheek. “Both of you. Ah, here. Sit.” There was just something so…Frigga about her he couldn’t take offense. So he quietly sat in the chair, completely outside of his nature, and watched her. She smiled and moved into the kitchen, humming an elvish lullaby under her breath as she moved jars around and filled a basket. She came back with it in her arms. “Here you are.” His eyebrows folded together, taking the basket in his confusion to sit it by his feet and she smiled at him, sitting across from him. “I have a few goats and no one has young ones right now. I do, however, have several repair needs and I hear that you might be able to offer your skills in trade.”

Tone low. “Do I look like a carpenter?”

She blinked, nonplussed. “No you look like a mage, and any mage that can use their magic to build a house can fix a back door. Or am I mistaken and you have already developed a trade of requests with another family?”

Indel whimpered and Loki glanced down at him, swinging him slightly. “No, you are not mistaken.” And because he was trying to not make an enemy in this town so soon did he say anything further. “I do not have the best manners when I am caught by surprise.”

As good of an apology as she was going to receive and she took it in stride. Smiling again, brown eyes warm. “Then I apologize for being so forward. We are a very small community and gossip flows like air. G’dath visits me every morning, whether I agree to her presence or not.” Loki
grinned at that one, caught off guard, and she bowed her head slightly in greeting. “I’m Azni.”

“P-…” He coughed into his hand, mentally scrambling at his own stupidity. As if there was more than one Prince Loki in the universe. Not to mention he wasn’t really a prince anymore. He wasn’t anyone anymore. Clearing his throat. “I am Lokhi.” Slightly different pronunciation to throw off suspicion. No titles or ties to Asgard and it was amazing to him how utterly freeing that felt. But there was no denying the melancholy he felt as well. They had lied to him. They had abandoned him. He was right to be angry, but still the hurt was there.

He’d spent the morning talking with Azni, gleaning useful facts about the people here, as well as the seasons. He offered a few facts about himself in return, amidst a labyrinth of half-truths and misdirection. Still, for all the falseness he’d offered, he could honestly say Azni was now closer to him than many of his so-called friends in Asgard and that was rather sad.

By the time he’d wandered back into the cottage it was midday and he was famished. Indel was too, if the whimpers were to be believed. So he made himself some stew and fixed some milk for his boy. He paused, mulling over that thought. His boy? He looked back down at those expectant green eyes and realized he was just fine with that thought. So he fed the both of them and curled on his bed so they could take a nap. And later when he was feeling more awake and braver he would grill G’dath on exactly what she had forced him to drink that would make him so drowsy.

Loki studied the empty bowl, deep in thought. The very last of the stew and he’d exhausted all of his other perishables. He was going to have to start hunting or become a daily beggar at Azni’s door and that would simply not do at all. He twirled one of his throwing knives before sighing. Good in a fight, not as practical for a kill larger than a man. He thought about the other weapons he had in dimensional storage, including the Casket of Winters, and a sheathed hunting knife appeared. This might do.

Whimpers pulled him from his thoughts, glancing at Indel who had a few tears in his eyes, little face scrunched up. He started to wonder why, then pulled a face as he realized the very evident reason. A few twitches of his fingers and the crisis was averted. Magic was a good short term solution for a number of problems and he gave thanks for having it. How did human mothers handle having to change diapers? And the clean up afterward? He shuddered, feeling slightly nauseas at the thought.

Indel giggled and thrashed about his arms and legs excitedly, Loki smirking in spite of himself as he picked the boy up. He crossed the entryway and opened the door, intent on stargazing and froze as a book tipped on its side. Brow furrowing, knowing that wasn’t one of his own, he bent down and scooped it up. “And what surprise is this?”

Intrigued, Loki thumbed through the pages and figured out rather quickly it was a basic healing book. But the spells and potions were unlike any he’d ever heard of. They were less focused on the spell itself and more so on the ingredients. He wondered if that was that why the elven healer had had so much more impact than the Asgardian healers’ attempts.

Sitting down in a rocking chair, Indel tucked in the crook of his arm, he searched through the pages for healing stones. Different ingredients. Different spells. He didn’t hear her but he somehow felt her and looked up to see the elven healer standing just on the outside of the porch. His eyes out of habit searched out for his warding spells to find them all in place before jumping to his feet and backing up with Indel clutched close. She shouldn’t have been able to place the book at his door. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid!

She smiled a little before sweeping into his home. Blinking rapidly. “Wait! What-…”
There was no answering sound and warily he moved to the doorway on silent feet, his magic now dancing on his finger tips and ready for anything. She was walking out of his sleeping chambers with a satisfied nod, scowling a second later at the pot with leftover stew. She wagged a finger at him and he shifted uncomfortably, as silent as she was. She continued her inspection, nodding at something, shaking her head at something else before turning to face him fully.

Her tone was brusque and to the point. “I am aware of who you are, Prince Loki Odinson of Asgard.”

Loki stiffened defensively. “You have me mistaken for someone else.”

Nothing in her expression betrayed her amusement, her tone tightly controlled. “Your glamour is quite good, but those spells are slightly outdated and do not fool me.” A mere lifting of a single finger and the guise on his ears fell, his Asgardian armor sliding back onto his body from dimensional storage. She worked two independent actions with a single gesture. On his best day, with the entirety of his spell knowledge, he couldn’t have done that. He didn’t insult her intelligence by trying to deny who he was further, listening as she continued. “I am also aware of your origins, changeling, which is why the spells in that book seem different. They are better designed for your physiology.”

He visibly jerked back before she could do anything to those spells that hid his true Jötunn form. The body that disgusted him. “I-I will accept your word to that effect and trust that no demonstration is needed. What is it you require?”

She seemed about to say something, then seemed to change her mind and moved on to another topic. “I have had many assistants over the years, all of them extreme disappointments even if they are perceived as capable by healing standards. The book is a gift, regardless of your decision, but I would like you to consider becoming my apprentice.”

Apprenticeships are offered to very young mages by masters in their field. Back straightening, glaring even if inside he was quivering. “I am not some mere child dabbling at magic, madam, I am a mage, and a master at that.”

“And the standards that tested you were inferior.” His gray-green eyes flashed green, taking offense that he could be seen as inferior. She tilted her head towards him in concession as she spoke. “You have the raw talent, without question, you are more powerful than I am. Your work is good, but it is not great nor is the finesse of it at my caliber or your wards would have repelled me.” She raised a challenging eyebrow at him then and his ire subsided, recognizing her point. She shrugged lightly before continuing. “As I said, the decision is yours, but I would be disappointed to see so much potential go to waste. And there is the child to consider.” Loki looked down at Indel who giggled sleepily. “I have never heard of a Jötunn nor an Asgardian take in a dark elf. Your power is well known, as is your reputation…but this boy’s power will one day equal your own. If you do not have the foundation, how will you teach him?”

Loki slowly frowned. He was not one to trust easily and agreeing to be an apprentice to anyone would require a level of trust that he wasn’t sure he was even capable of anymore. “Who are you?”

That small little smile that he had mentally labeled an ‘elf’ smile curled the corners of her lips as she introduced herself. “I am G’dath.”

That explained Azni’s comment about G’dath showing up daily whether she was wanted or not.
“Why me?”

G’dath’s smile stretched just a little further. “You are an adept warrior, Loki Odinson, but I think you might be better served with a foundation as a healer.” A sly look crossed her face, there and gone. “Not to mention if you return with Indel for something as basic as elven colic I will be forced to mock you.”

He scowled at her.

Author's Notes:

In my little world Loki is good, but with the right training he could be a BAMF.

Next:

Tony and Jane meet; Loki receives a letter
Chapter 4

MIDGARD

Tony Stark had a reputation as a womanizer (man-whore), there was no denying it. Not that his interests didn’t wander to both sides of the tracks. He was a firm believer in equal opportunity, after all. But when you are perceived as the lady-friend of the God of Thunder, even he will brush off his manners and act like a gentleman. He wore his friendliest smirk as he twirled about the lab, Jane Foster keeping a professional smile on her face as she followed him. “And this…this is my pride and joy. Ten floors of dedicated research and development and this floor is at your complete disposal, fair maiden.”

Jane was feeling a little overwhelmed actually. She’d been dropped off by Thor and whisked away by Tony’s private jet on the same day. The universe was safe once more, the dark elves defeated and Malekith dead, but Thor couldn’t leave his grieving father and she’d told him she understood. And she did, a little. She just wasn’t so sure Thor’s reason for not returning to earth had anything to do with the deaths of his mother or his brother. She suspected it had more to do with Odin not approving of her. It hurt, but that she understood, at least logically. If Thor was to one day be king, she really couldn’t see herself as a queen. And she may love the excitement of his presence and hearing the stories of his adventures but she wasn’t so sure about ever truly falling in love with him. It didn’t mean she was giving up hope that her own research couldn’t continue to construct a Bi-frost between earth and Asgard.

It was why Tony Stark had scooped her up as soon as Thor had left for Asgard. He’d explained that even with all the holes and research suppression SHIELD had enforced on her work it was still impressive and he was eager to see what results she could produce with his backing. Stark Enterprises was no longer developing weapons but their focus was constantly expanding to new territories. Energy research. Projects to create crops to feed the masses in starving countries. A way to travel to distant realms, like her research to create a bridge, was just the sort of project they were interested in investing in.

She tucked a strand of caramel colored hair behind her ear and tried to walk with the least amount of awkwardness possible. Which only meant she’d tripped over invisible bumps twice instead of six times. “Thank you, Mr. Stark…”

Tony whipped around, wagging a finger at her. “Nope that will never do. That was my father and I will never be my father. Tony. God of Sex. Your royal rightness…hmm, scratch that last one. Anyway, Tony. And I will call you Dr. Foster if you prefer.”

Smiling a little more warmly, her brown eyes friendly. “Jane.”

He took her hand and kissed the back of her knuckle. “Pleasure, Janie.” Mentally she cringed at the butchering of her name. Not that he released her hand. Tony leaned in close and wiggled his eyebrows. “Now that we’re best buds, what’s the deal with you and Thor?”

Jane felt like face palming. She refrained, barely, and pasted on a weak smile as she rescued her hand. “He had some business to take care of in Asgard.”

Tony’s eyebrows arched up once and then back down again, voice deepening. “I’ll just bet he did.”

She felt her face burn and damned her own idiotic idea for looking up any and all myths
concerning Thor. If the stories were anything to go by, chaste he was not. It was mean, but she just
couldn’t stop herself from replying tartly. “He needed to tell his father his brother died.”

Tony froze for a second in surprise, an unreadable expression racing across his face for a
moment. “Ah. Reindeer Games finally got himself killed, huh?”

Brown eyes flashing with just a tiny spark of anger that frankly surprised the inventor.
Almost as if she were daring him to say something nasty about Loki. And all Tony could think
was…isn’t that interesting.

“You could say that.”

Passing on the opportunity to see just what kind of temper slept in this, at least he had
thought, meek woman and changing the subject. “Well, anyway…” Making a sweeping gesture with
his hand to the equipment as if she hadn’t told him Thor went home to grieve. “Everything your
heart desires is here. All your research is here, or already downloaded. JARVIS is at your disposal
for anything you want. If you’re missing anything, anything, just tell JARVIS or Pepper and they’ll
take care of it.”

Frowning slightly. She would have had to have been in a coma for the last two years not to
know who Virginia “Pepper” Potts was but the other name. “JARVIS?”

“Yes, madam?”

Jane’s head jerked upward in surprise and Tony chuckled. “My AI. He runs everything
automated and then some. Be careful, he understands sarcasm, don’t you JARVIS?”

“I have endeavored to learn from your example, sir.”

Jane blurted out a laugh and slapped a hand over her mouth, blushing. Tony smirked and
Jerking his head slightly towards the elevators as he continued the tour. “R and D have their own
floor, apartments, actually all your things are already in place…well, sort of…”

Pepper, dressed professionally but beautifully in a pencil skirt, walked out of the elevator,
giving Tony a very small smile before addressing Jane. “I trust Tony has been behaving himself.”

Tony clutched at his heart, right where the glowing arc reactor keeping him alive was
hidden under his suit. “You wound me, Pep.”

Sighing, tucking her arm through Jane’s and pulling her towards the elevator. “Ignore
him.” Her tone turned a little more firm. “Tony, go do something constructive. You have a board
meeting in 45 minutes.” A single eyebrow lifted, her expression the same but a firm glint in her eye
that was just for him. “Do NOT make me come find you.”

Stuffing his hands in his pockets and skulking away. “Fine.”

Pressing the button, taking a card key from a pocket and handing it to Jane. “The floor is
coded to your key only, as is your room. All of your things are in boxes.” The elevator opened. “Ah,
this way. There is a public kitchen just to the left, fully stocked, and a lounge. Down this hall we
have several suites, these are yours.” A beep and the door opened to a full apartment. “This is one of
the few apartments with a separate kitchen, just in case you wanted privacy.”

Jane’s jaw dropped. “Wow-wait, why would I need two bedrooms-this is too much!”

Pepper smiled. “Three, actually. And nonsense. What if you have a guest? And don’t you
want a separate space for your own office. Not to mention this apartment has an impressive view, perfect for putting up your telescope. Trust me, if Tony hears you say less, he will give you more, best to just accept.” Tapping a few keys on the computer already set up on a desk by the door. “I took the liberty of setting up an account for you and we’ve approved you for moving compensation. The details are in the file here.”

Jane felt her head spin and wasn’t completely sure if she was nauseous or had already fainted. Swallowing hard to get the lump in her throat back down. “Thank you?” Jane took a few tentative steps, looking around and feeling absolutely stunned. Turning and blurting out the first thing that popped into her head. “Is there anyone else on this floor?”

“Not yet. You may have new neighbors soon, one of the researchers the floor below yours, and one of your three assistants will be moving here from England so he’ll be taking one of the apartments, the other two are local to New York.” Nodding to herself, seeing that Jane was completely overwhelmed and speaking kindly. “Take the weekend to move in and get comfortable, no one will bother you and your assistants won’t arrive until Monday. If you need anything, or me, just tell JARVIS.”

Jane smiled weakly and nodded until Pepper closed the door behind her. Sitting down, Jane took a slow breath and chuckled as she exhaled. Her breath caught and she reached for the picture frame sitting on the table, finger moving lightly along the glass. Her parents, taken a few years before their accident. She missed them, still. It was an ache she would probably never be rid of but the ache was comforting. She wondered if they would be proud of her. She hoped so.

ALFHEIM

When the unexpected knock came to the door, Loki almost ran to greet G’dath. It wouldn’t have been a very dignified walk in either case. The elf blinked in surprise, taking in the quiet panic before glancing down at the suspiciously quiet child in his arms. First time parents were always so quick to turn every small symptom into an epidemic but she knew for all of his newness to the role, he was not one to instantly panic. With a furrowed brow of concentration, she gently lifted his limp form into her arms and checked to find the baby’s breathing even and his body warm. He simply would not wake up.

Looking Loki in the eye. “Try not to slit my throat.” The question formed in his eyes before he gasped in shock to see her firmly pinch Indel’s arm. The little body jolted in her arms and a screaming wail of anger filled the air. Fury burned in Loki’s eyes, a growl in his throat as his body tensed to pounce. “LOKI ODINSON.” That pulled him up short. Even Indel stopped wailing but continued to whimper pitifully. She lifted a bottle from the ether, sharply twisted his right wrist and slapped it in his hand. “Feed him.”

Loki’s scowl was thunderous but since Indel was awake he snatched him back and obeyed. “You hurt him.”

He backed up protectively, feeling something tense in him ease as Indel greedily drank. G’dath’s tone was exasperated. “First of all, I said I would mock you for elven colic, not if you couldn’t wake the child.” She was gracious enough to leave off the silent idiot at the end.

His default scowl made an appearance. “How am I supposed to know that?”

She tilted her head slightly and just looked at him.

His scowl deepened. “I am not a mind reader, madam.”
Rolling her eyes. “I believe I gave you a few books on the basics.” Blinking in surprise, red started to creep up his neck as he closed his mouth and growled. G’dath gave him a patient sigh. “Have you ever seen a newly born child?”

Loki snorted in reply and slowly she shook her head.

“My, my…not the most articulate, are you?”

His eyes narrowed, letting the words flow of their own accord. “While I may currently harbor a deplorable lack of manners I have never been thusly accused of an inability to articulate a thought when it is required of me. More to the exact opposite. And unless you prefer that I verbalize my prose in such a manner, learn to embrace.”

Her lips pulled upward in amusement although she fought it. “Pass.” He rolled his eyes, listening when she started explaining. “A child that does not cry is worrying so we will use techniques that demand a reaction. Causing a brief sensation of pain is one such method.”

A glimmer of suspicion flickered in his eyes. “Indel is not newly born—…”

She wasn’t completely sure how much she should tell him. She could see it in his eyes, his body language betraying the love he already felt. No, this was a possibility she wouldn’t tell him. He would live in daily fear if he thought there was a chance this boy could die. “But he is weakened, and I needed him awake so that he would eat.”

“This is not just milk?” Loki asked as he glanced down to study the bottle Indel was still feeding from in curiosity.

Laying down her satchel, pulling out several books before pausing. “Are you actually going to read these this time?”

His tone flat, eyes flashing. “Yes.”

So naturally her tone was just as caustic. “Wonderful, and no. It is a very special formula to make him stronger. His ears are actually a symptom of a greater problem. It is usually the result of a dual raced child, or a dark elf with light elf ancestry. I am sure you are aware that a light elf’s diet largely consists of vegetation. Would it shock you to know dark elves are almost entirely meat eaters? Simple goat’s milk is not enough for him. Not nearly enough for the nutrients he will need.”

She studied him for a moment, which had him frowning. “I might also suggest a few things for yourself.”

“I am not an elf, madam.”

Raising an eyebrow. “No. Really?” He glared and she smirked. “You have been existing on the diet that you found works for you while still maintaining Asgardian sensibility. I think you will find yourself quite content to eat your meat nearly raw.” He curled his nose. “Think on it. After all, what fire actually burns on Jötunheim?” He blinked in surprise, but his gaze did turn thoughtful and the fact that he considered it was progress.

After a moment of consideration Loki turned his attention to Indel who was almost finished. “So he will require this formula instead?”

“No, this is merely to help boost him.” She picked up a book. “But I do have a few suggestions you might look over. There is a weekly supplement he should be given, the details are within.” She looked through the pages thoughtfully before glancing back up at him. “This is actually the original, a copy of it was donated to Alfheim from Asgard.”
His brow furrowed but he wasn’t oblivious to her leading tone. “Why would that be significant, I am not the only one from Asgard educated to read?”

“That was given to us by your mother.” Loki almost, almost thought about putting Indel down to greedily grasp the book. Instead he shifted the boy to rub his back gently, his eyes not leaving the tome. G’dath placed it carefully on the table, understanding in her eyes. “I think you will find her suggestions enlightening, I certainly did, even before I realized she was talking about you.” Only once Indel was sleeping soundly did she hand over the delicate letter within the pages. “She wrote this for you. No one has read it, as she requested.” He took the parchment page reverently and G’dath nodded to him. “I will check on both of you in a few days.”

She was almost to the door when he replied, not turning. “Thank you, G’dath.”

Another sly smile. “My, how I am certain those words stung.” He smirked at her absently, not even watching her leave.

As he read through the letter, his brow furrowed slightly to see her familiar hand writing, the light scent of something that was Frigga still on the pages. He laughed once, uncaring of happy tears falling from his eyes and by the end he hugged Indel tightly.

My darling Loki,

I find myself quite nostalgic today, standing on the balcony and watching you and your brother at the training yard, both of you too young now but so eager for when you will be old enough to learn to be brave warriors one day. As I stand here I feel the warm breeze that will one day sweep away innocence and it saddens me. But that you are alive to read this letter chases away such emotions.

I do not share my visions often, but I knew as soon as I held you that of all the different pathways you would follow, you would take one of two paths. I loved you the moment I saw you, but I also feared for you. If you read this now, then you have turned away from the path evil was trying to pull you to and I am very proud of you. I know that I am smiling down on you from Valhalla and I cannot wait to see the man you will become.

So, the purpose of this book is simple, an account of the difficulties that I faced raising a very special boy. A very special, mischievous boy who is responsible for every one of my grey hairs. As you know, for all of our similarities, a Jötunn babe is not quite the same as an AEsir babe, and it took quite a bit of trial and error to find what worked best for you. Now that you have your own special boy, you will see this for yourself but I think you will find that these suggestions will be helpful for raising him.

Be happy, my love. And know that my love for you was always complete.

Your mother

Be certain to give Indel a hug for me.

Author notes:
We were all deprived when Frigga died...mostly because her character had potential we never got to see.

I know, some people might be wondering how I'm going to get Loki and Jane together. It will happen. Eventually.

Next:

Actions have consequences; Azni + Loki bonding
Chapter 5

ALFHEIM

Loki was absolutely positive at this point that his mother was getting even with him from Valhalla. He could remember vividly the embarrassing stories she would pull out in front of him and Thor of his being such a difficult baby to soothe. Indel would only sleep if he was tucked up against him at night. When given milk the babe would immediately become colicky, much as he had as an infant, unless it was mixed with sunflower. And now this. The ultimate insult to injury. Well, he didn’t suppose it was too much of an insult and with a resigned sigh he dipped his fingers into a jar of honey, warmed them with a hint of his magic, and let the infant grab for a digit and gum them as he read.

All manner of teething toys and pacifiers were rejected with squalls of anger. There was just something about honey and Loki’s fingers that satisfied. The boy was too young to be cutting teeth. In this instance Indel was a fussy babe who required something in his mouth to be soothed. Scowling. “Do my royal fingers satisfy his highness?”

Indel giggled and kicked his feet and Loki sighed with a roll of his eyes, a small grin tugging at his lip. He didn’t really mind in all honesty, something he would vehemently deny were anyone else present. He could just imagine Thor laughing him right out of Asgard and he felt his brow furrow. He hadn’t checked up on him and Loki wondered why he had forgotten to do that.

Did he care? That was an easily dismissed question. Of course he cared. He’d been lying to himself on Svartalfheim. There was a time when he would have died for Thor. He had slowly become this sullen, selfish creature but there was still a small part of himself that would forever be Thor’s little brother. Did he feel more than that for his once-brother? That was the question. He knew he once did. He wasn’t sure what he felt now.

He was angry and jealous of always being passed over, the golden boy always favored. He was resigned and sullen to never receiving his fair share of attention and he resented how he was chided for feelings that were valid. He hated how oblivious his br-Thor was to what went on around him and quite convinced Thor did it on purpose. It irritated and infuriated him to no end and yet still Thor was perceived as more worthy to the throne than him. He didn’t really want to rule, he just wanted it acknowledged that he was as worthy as the golden child.

Yes, he loved him. And he hated him. But there was still more love than not. Still, it was easier to deny a bond that could hurt him than to be made a fool when that hope shattered. Loki wasn’t convinced Thor even knew that he was a Frost Giant.

Loki tapped his fingers to his lips, book set aside. Did Thor succeed? Did his silly little human Jane survive? He knew that Midgard was in one piece, as was Asgard, but that was all he knew. He was effectively cut off from both worlds. He didn’t dare leave, afraid to draw attention to himself from several different sources. Then a thought occurred to him and he pulled a length of mirror out of nothingness before he could second guess the decision, hanging it on the wall. Just an echo. He was easily dismissed when he tried this trick.

Thinking carefully, Indel still in his arms, he tapped the pane and glanced in. He didn’t use any reflective surfaces near Odin, the All-Father much too magically sensitive. It reflected out to the hallway across from Thor’s chambers. Loki felt an instant pang of longing at the familiar columns and stones.
Courtiers passed through the halls silently. A servant or two that he recognized, all of them tread carefully and quietly, as if they were showing their respects. His eyes widened in horror.

*No. Not after all I’ve done to make sure he survived!*

Reckless but suddenly needing to reassure himself Thor was alive, he moved the image to the mirror in the sitting area of Thor’s chambers. He breathed a short sigh of relief to see Thor sitting in an overstuffed chair, staring at the far wall. But Loki’s brow furrowed as he watched him, his thoughts betraying him. *What ails you, brother?*

Thor was never one for sitting still. If he was in his chambers, he was entertaining a lady or sleeping.

He looked tired, which Loki would never have associated with the man. As if the life had been wrung right out of him. He had seen the older man spend days and weeks in battle and not look nearly as tired as he did now. Thor’s hand moved to cover his face, lips parting to speak one word and a tear trailing down his face. Loki gasped and vanished the mirror, feeling a sharp pain near his heart that somehow he knew had nothing to do with physical pain and everything to do with regret.

Even he, the Liesmith, could not convince himself that his name hadn’t been uttered in absolute grief.

Azni smiled as she opened her door, silently admitting father and son. Loki entered the room quietly, his expression worryingly blank, taking a seat when she gestured silently to do so. She went about making tea, the quiet almost comforting and soothing. There was a little swinging cradle and she pulled it around, coaxing Loki into swapping Indel for the tea cup and settling the sleeping baby inside.

She turned to see that he was staring at the cup as if it held the secrets to the universe, his grey-green eyes distant. Murmuring as she sat down next to him. “My, I have not seen such a troubled look in some time.”

Loki looked up slowly. He didn’t know why he was here. But then he saw Azni’s concerned brown eyes and he knew why he was here. Someone who would just listen without judging him. Someone who would reassure him without making him feel like a helpless fool. Someone like his mother. “I…I made a miscalculation.”

She nodded slowly, as if she already knew. “Then could you not simply erase the mistake and try again?” Loki jerkily shook his head, nibbling on the inside of his bottom lip. “Hmm…and I suppose you could not simply tell me this mistake?” He glanced at her once, his face once more blank but his eyes full of misery and her tone held no more judgment or recrimination than it did before. “No, then. What do you think you should do?”

Putting down the tea before clenching his fists, talking in short bursts although he’d probably shout if he could. “I do not know. Me. Of all people in the nine realms and I know not what to do. This is not mendable. It is broken and I cannot repair it.” Voice hoarse. “…it shouldn’t matter anymore…but it does…” He rubbed at his face with a shaking hand, his voice cracking. “How do you repair a broken heart? How—He will not forgive me for this.”

Azni rubbed his back lightly, wondering if she even knew that his own heart was broken. She doubted it.

She rubbed for long minutes, waiting until the shaking in his hands stopped and he was just
sitting quietly. “Does he love you?” Brow furrowing in distress, mouth thinning, he jerkily nods just once. Smiling slightly. “Then he knows you need him to forgive you and he shall.” He shakes his head, mouth opening to object and she leans in closer, wrapping her arm around him as if cuddling a child. “Now, you listen to an old woman. I know stubborn and I would be willing to bet my life that you and this other person are two of the most stubborn men in the nine realms.”

Loki grins in spite of himself. “You have no idea.”

Her smile grows. “I am certain once you trust me more I will have an idea.” He gives her a surprised look. “I’m an old woman, I know when secrets are being kept from me. And that is fine, you have a right to them. Just know that you can trust me.”

Muttering to himself, so cautious of trusting anyone. Trust meant vulnerability and betrayal…and he’d had quite his fill of both. “Perhaps…”

Squeezing his shoulder lightly. “Now, the point I was going to offer you. When there is love, there is always forgiveness. And if he loves you even a fraction of what you feel for him then you have nothing to worry about.”

How could she know that he loved his brother?

_Brother?_

His head hurt, constantly reminding himself that Thor wasn’t his brother. Brow furrowed again, stress lines appearing. “That is what concerns me. What if love…stops?”

She nodded slightly. “It can start again.”

“It breaks…”

“And then it heals.” She pulled at him gently until he leaned against her, his head slowly resting on her shoulder. Loki closed his eyes. Just like Frigga. His mother always knew when he needed words, and when he needed quiet. Azni closed her own eyes, her cheek against the top of his head, this lost boy reminding her so much of her oldest son.

They stayed that way for some time, the light outside dimming as the sun moved towards sunset. Whispering to him just as the sun disappeared, the words washing over both of them like a comforting blanket. “Love never stops. It blooms and burns. It grows. It changes. It sometimes becomes confused and clouded…but then the clouds part and it shines through once more.”

**Author notes:**

Aww...I know. Pretty short so I'll throw in another chapter.

**Next:**

Loki has a minor meltdown; Odin reflects; Tony and Bruce chat
Chapter 6

ALFHEIM

Loki muttered to himself, head bent as he poured over the books and ingredients before him, Indel giggling in the little swing made for his amusement. He’d haggled with G’dath with all of his skills of persuasion and felt like he’d barely escaped on even terms. Her offer to teach him had been too tempting to resist but resentment burned brightly in him to be termed an apprentice. She’d advised him to get over it.

She was a strict task master, there was no question, but she wasn’t unreasonable. No idiotic quests for her amusement. No abusive use of his abilities for her own purposes. Yes, she had him working on the base potions for her healing room, but she explained firmly that until he could do the work in his sleep, he needed practice.

He also couldn’t say he wasn’t learning more in weeks than he had in centuries of work on his own. He actually felt like he’d been transported back in time, back to those innocent days when he’d been buried in his studies as a child while Thor thundered about the palace with Sif and his friends. They would come bursting into his rooms, tugging and pleading until he would put down his books and play with them.

Sighing, he rested his forehead between three fingers and didn’t even resist the inexplicable longing he felt for a return of that time. Thor had been the annoying older brother that he had looked up to. He would play pranks on them to feel like an equal, or to get even for perceived and real slights. Horseback riding with his father and brother. Sitting contentedly by mother’s feet and reading as she hummed soft lullabies to herself and worked at her loom. That Loki was long departed, his innocence shattered with anger and betrayal, his ability to ever go home again destroyed, but still the wish was there.

Sometimes he wished it had never happened. It wasn’t like him to think about the possible twists and turns of his life but the longer he was here, alone, the more he was filled with old regrets. As miserable as he’d thought he’d been, it was worse to know the truth of what he was…and what he wasn’t. Everyone would have been better off if he’d remained ignorant of his origins.

Or if he knew the truth, what if he’d never let go? What if Thanos never found him? What if he’d been seen as useless and killed? What if he’d succeeded in conquering Midgard? What if he’d requested sanctuary in exchange for offering the mortals everything?

Loki blinked to himself suddenly. Where in Hel had that thought come from? Not once had he ever considered in trusting anyone with that much. Offering the truth and just hoping that there was compassion in the nine realms…he must truly be insane.

His eyes moved to innocent Indel who was blissfully nodding off in the swing. No cares. No worries. He stopped the swing and picked him up, tucking him in tightly to his body. He smoothed his fingers along the delicate skin, Indel wiggling with a little grunt. The green eyes opened sleepy, mouth opening and a tiny little ‘mew’ sound escaping. His finger moved to trace a white eyebrow and the eyes closed, tongue moving so he was lightly gumming the muscle. Moving his finger, a little hand grabbed for the digit and legs kicked again. Little brow furrowed, more angry grunts and Loki was quick to bring some honey to the rescue. Best pacifier in the universe, apparently, and only when he was sure Indel was out like a light did he transfer him to his bassinet.

He took a step back. Then another, and slowly sat down, thinking.
He was providing a good home for the boy. A lot better than most homes, he liked to think. Loki’s brow furrowed. But no little warriors to play with. No big brother to look up to, to bully him into doing new things. No mother to kiss away his tears…

He pushed himself away from the worktable and pressed at his eyes with the heels of his hands as his heart squeezed. He’d rejected her. It was the last memory he had of her, passing his hand through her shadow sprite so her and her tricks would leave him to his misery as a prisoner in the dungeons. And then she was dead, and he couldn’t even go to her funeral rites. He never got to say goodbye…

He clenched his jaw. No, he was right to be angry. He was right to want revenge. He was the one wronged. He was the one…why was he cursed with such…SENTIMENT??

He was living on a moon at the edge of nowhere in chosen exile because the alternative was prison and it was all his own doing. He was supposedly one of the most brilliant minds in all of Asgard. Why? Why was he so inexplicably stupid? Why couldn’t he have contained his emotions instead of destroying everything he held dear? Why couldn’t he have ignored his pride just once and asked his idiotic brother for help? Why couldn’t he have yielded to his mother’s pleas? Why? WHY??

Forcing himself to his feet, he walked forward and used the doorframe for support, pushing himself out of the cottage and stumbling to his knees in the clearing. He looked up at the unfamiliar sky, the constellations not in the same places he was used to as a child.

Looking up at the sky defiantly with clenched fists and teeth bared as if Odin could see him and hear, shouting and ignoring that his voice cracked with pain and loss. “I don’t see what the fuss was about! I don’t! You never reacted to Thor the way you abandoned me. Just because I’m a Jötunn runt! Just because I’m not your blood? Why?? Why did you take me if you didn’t want me? Why was I never good enough? Weak. Worthless. Never the favored, always the ignored. Why is magic less worthy to you? Why isn’t intellect worthy of the throne? Why am I cursed with this? Why can I not—why can’t…WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME??”

He screamed and ripped at his hair, frustration with Asgard, his father, and himself ruling him. Green flame leapt to his left hand, unstable, and he hurled it at the nearest tree, grinning with sadistic glee as the flames leapt, the animals scattered, and the trees screamed.

He could imagine Midgard up in flames, screams and chaos filling the sky and the darkness within him swelled with excitement. He would find his revenge, killing those supposedly under Odin’s and Asgard’s protection. The All-Father, finally defeated by the foundling he’d thrown away. “FINE. You wish for worthy, I will show you worth. I will burn Asgard to the ground! Destroy the Bi-frost once and for all and kill all of you!” Voice deepened, more snarl than words. “I will be your greatest enemy ever created since I can be nothing else...and I will do so in exactly the way that you all fear. Not with might, but with cunning and deception.” Sneering. “The coward’s way. The trickster. MY WAY.” His eyes deepened to emerald green and burned with the full potency of his dark potential.

Destroy.

Make Yggdrasil shatter and topple into nothingness. Yes, rain fire and ash and kill them all…no.

NO.

A bird cried in the distance, sounding so remarkably like one of Indel’s cries that it shocked him cold. He blinked, the emerald retreating back to grey-green.
Those weren’t his thoughts, his dreams.

_I am Loki, of Asgard._

Thanos. This was what he wanted. Thanos would not win, could never win. He would not let that monster destroy what little was left of who he used to be. His manic grin faded as he realized what he was doing and he spread out his fingers, water gently dousing the flames.

He forced himself to his feet and stumbled over to the old oak, resting a hand lightly on the bark as if in apology. He whispered and poured a little of his energy back into the majestic form, watching the burns fade and the screams quiet.

He could only think that he was better off in the dungeons, at least there his destruction could only harm himself…

He hung his head and sat, his knees giving out. He was tired of being angry. He was tired of raging against a universe that heard nothing. It hurt too much to feel, but he couldn’t seem to stop. What made it worse was that now the only parent he had left was the one that he was most estranged to. Because his mother was dead. Because she was dead…and it was his fault. He might as well have killed her with a sword to her heart and he could almost feel his wounded heart break and shatter completely.

His pride was gone now. Pride meant nothing now that everything he’d held dear was lost. He brought shaking hands to his mouth, as if he could somehow snatch back every poisonous word he’d uttered. He couldn’t, and he was somewhat thankful they would never be heard, ashamed he had given them voice. He rocked in place, back and forth, the static rhythm soothing.

Home. He just wanted to go home.

Not with all the trouble he’d caused. Not in a thousand years of missteps and lies and deceit had he ever been able to truly apologize, not to anyone. Not and actually mean it. His actions were as they were. _What was the point in an apology?_

Words that he’d never been able to speak with sincerity flowed easily over his tongue now, pouring out of him in a deluge. “I’m sorry…it’s not enough…it will never be enough but I’m…. I’m so sorry, father…” It was futile, he knew. The only way he could be free was to remain hidden. His home was shielded and warded, not to mention the spells placed on himself to keep him from Heimdall’s and his father’s sight, yet he still wished they could see him. Unknown tears trickled down his cheeks, his breath hitching on choked sobs. Clutching his stomach as if in pain, curling in on himself and whispering. “…do you still see me?” And then, even quieter as something hard settled in his throat and his eyes burned with grief. “…am I still your son?”

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**ASGARD**

Time moved so quickly, so strangely on Alfheim’s moon than for anywhere else in the universe. Weeks on that moon would mean only a few days, even less for anywhere else. A far distance away, at the top of the world tree was the grandeur that was Asgard, home of the AEIsir. The race of warriors that were strong and fierce, the defenders of the nine realms.

But there was a taint of sadness and loss to the great city. The walkway paths that led to the palace were lined with flowers in remembrance of the departed. It wasn’t a common honor, but the recent deaths that had struck Asgard recently were for those worthy of it.
Everyone knew of the departed Queen, who was no doubt sitting in Valhalla right now, toasting with the great warriors of the past and at peace. But still there was mourning and so the main path had been dedicated to her and the flowers were lain. But now there was another sadness, another death to this great family. The second son, the trickster prince who was remembered for his wit and humor as much as he was remembered for his troublemaking and mischief. The brother who had fallen in battle, saving his older brother’s life. Another path had been left to his remembrance, the path that led from the slow repairs of the Bi-frost to the palace entrance. There were flowers there as well, and one of the most recent offerings had been left by the first son.

Upon his return from Midgard, Thor had tried to tell Odin of Loki’s fall in battle as gently as possible, but his father could do little more than nod in acceptance and brought the court to close with finality and it would remain so for several days.

In the throne room, where the All-Father sat on the throne alone and looked over the universe, a quiet king kept two fingers pressed to his lips to keep from shouting. He watched, and he listened as only he could. As the words and oaths of destruction had poured out of Loki, it was everything he had ever feared. Because his adopted son was dangerously powerful, and with the right incentive he could end Asgard and everything else in the exact fashion he had described.

**No, Loki**

Mistakes. Thor had been an arrogant fool before his banishment but he’d learned to be worthy of the throne. It had been one of the hardest choices Odin had ever had to make, but he’d done it for the good of the realms, not just for his son’s sake. Now another son who needed to learn some of the same lessons. No one, not even he, was guiltless of making mistakes but time was needed so that Loki could learn from them. There were wrongs committed on both sides, but Loki was as much to blame for his current reality as Odin was.

He was known as the All-Father for a reason. Life was a journey, deep and personal for each individual. He could see the different twists and turns, the different journeys that a person would take. Loki had always confounded him, never following a path that made any sense. But he could now see a path being manufactured for his youngest, which would not be possible unless it was designed by the World Tree. Had Yggdrasili consulted him he never would have agreed to such a reckless, dangerous plan. It was necessary, he knew. For as long as there would be Thor, there would be Loki, but it could end all of them for all time if Loki rejected them.

Loki had the body of a man but he was still a boy in his heart, learning to be a man. He wanted to demand the immediate return of his youngest, but he kept silent. It was painful, to watch him and be absolutely helpless to interfere but it was good. Loki was finally stepping towards healing. He sat with his seeing blue eye staring out into the expanse of the world tree as he shakily whispered. “I see you, my son…I see you…”

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**MIDGARD**

Tony Stark, the world’s Iron Man, sipped the scotch at his bar on the observation deck, looking out at the skyline of New York. It was his kind of city. The city that never sleeps…and considering the amount of liquor and coffee usually floating in his system he rarely slept. Just as well, his sleep was never restful.

It was a quiet night for once, no bad guys to beat down and Pepper still off somewhere, mad at him. With a sigh he moved around the bar and sat down with a groan on the second step that would take him down to the lounge area, leaning back and glancing to his left with a smirk. He’d had a plaque engraved in his floor after Hulk had hammered a Loki shaped imprint there, and read
the words silently.

Best ass kicking of the God of Mischief

Courtesy of a green rage monster

He looked back out the windows, taking in the landing deck and remembering the brief amount of time he’d had to talk with the dark demi-god. It had been fun to play a bit of cat and mouse with him. He’d wanted to punch him, obviously, but the guy had been sharp and it was so hard to find a decent conversationalist. Idly Tony wondered what that said about him, that he could only relate to a power hungry lunatic.

He took another sip with distant eyes, not even surprised when Bruce Banner, the Hulk, silently settled down not too far away. A soft chuckle had him turning to see the scientist eyeing the plaque with a small smile on his face. “I’m not sorry I got it installed.”

Still smiling slightly, hands folded in his lap. “I expected nothing less.”

Tony tilted his hand. “Want a drink?”

Bruce held up a hand defensively. “No. Alcohol leads to impulse control problems… unless you want to have more dents in your tower.”

Tony shrugged and took another sip. “Your loss.”

Bruce sighed and took another sip. “Your loss.”

Bruce sighed and shook his head before standing up and loosely shoving his hands in his pockets. “I’ve been getting some pretty strange readings in New Mexico.”

Frowning just a little, Tony struggled to remember what it was Bruce had been doing before he gave up. “What were you doing again?”

Sighing louder since this was Tony’s company, he should know more about what was going on, but still patient. “Tracking magical signatures. It might be useful the next time Dr. Von Doom decides to try to take over the world.”

Shrugging lightly, frowning at the stiffness of his fingers and wiggling them. “So you found weird magic around New Mexico.”

“Yes.”

Tony lifted an eyebrow at the scientist. “I’m off the clock.”

Bruce turned a little. “They seem remarkably similar to a certain scepter that was supposed to be destroyed by SHIELD last year.”

Tony paused and made a choking sound. “Okay, back on the clock. WHAT??”

They both knew he was talking about the scepter Loki had been wielding. The one with the curious ability to control people’s minds, like Hawkeye. Director Fury, SHIELD’s boss, had assured them the scepter would be destroyed so it could never be used against them again. Bruce slowly nodded. “I almost went a little green… anyway, I did a little digging and found out through… someone that SHIELD built an underground research laboratory near Thor’s first landing site.”
Wiggling his eyebrows. “Someone?”

Bruce blushed but was used enough to Tony’s teasing that he ignored most of it. He wouldn’t have taken the billionaire’s offer to become a researcher in his company’s tower if he couldn’t maintain his temper. “Moving on, please.”

Tony grinned before finishing the glass. “Okay. So your bed buddy found out our secret intelligence agency lied to us…big surprise…and underestimated your intelligence. I’m insulted. I’m tempted to have JARVIS spam the hell out of them… actually, that’s not a bad idea…”

Bruce clasped his hands together. “What can we do about it?”

Tony shrugged, sarcasm flowing in his voice. “Confront Fury who will undoubtedly deny it.”

“What if we get a few more visitors who want that staff as badly as they wanted the cube?” Bruce glanced out the window apprehensively as he asked what was really a rhetorical question.

Grimacing, knowing the last thing New York needed right now was another invasion. More than a year later and the repairs still weren’t complete. Tony was glad the death toll hadn’t been nearly as high as most feared but it was still a waste of life. “Good point. And nobody wants a repeat of New York.” Huffing before standing up. “This is interrupting prime drinking hours, I am un-amused. Okay, since we can’t do it we’re going to just have to be as sneaky as they are. JARVIS.”

His AI’s cool, collected voice responded as promptly as ever. “Yes, sir?”

“Contact Pepper for me.” His grimace was subtle enough that it was unnoticeable.

“What shall I say it is regarding?”

Crossing his arms. “Tell her to get me in touch with Xavier’s group…or the Fab Four. Uh, but make it sound nice.” Glancing at Bruce. “One of them should be able to slip through Fury’s security.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow questioningly. “Why do you need to ask Pepper nicely? What did you do?”

Grimacing noticeably. “She’s still a little pissed I had to cancel on her.” His grimace deepened as he added a wince. “Again.” Bruce tilted his head a little in silent question, which threw Tony on the defense. “I got a little drunk, okay?”

“The request is being relayed, sir. She will return your call promptly.”

Tony frowned since usually the AI would just patch her through. “When?”

“I believe her exact phrasing was ‘when hell freezes over’. Sir.”

Tony’s jaw dropped while Bruce swallowed a chuckle. Tony ran a hand through his hair and picked up his phone, speed dialing. “Pepper… but… you…” Holding his palm to the face of the phone and grimacing at Bruce. “Rain check on saving the world.” He walked away, phone back to his ear. “Come on, Pep, you know this is as mature as I get!”
Loki eyed her with all the wariness of a snake facing a mongoose…although he was fairly certain he was the very dead snake in this instance. G’dath was not one to be underestimated. He had no idea how old she was, but it was obvious she had several millennia on him. Even if that weren’t the case, she was more cunning than he was…and that was what scared him. She smirked and casually moved a small bit of marble across the wooden surface. Scowling, Loki knocked over his piece. Check mate.

She clapped once in delight and reached into her bag. He slumped and pushed the chess set to the side, resting his chin in his palm, elbow on the table. Damn. She put the book in front of him and fussily brushed invisible dust off the cover. Snarling at her. “I will read the damn thing but I don’t see the point.”

Letting her hands fall into her lap, she slowly raised an eyebrow. “You are a prince—”

“Not anymore.”

G’dath ignored him and continued speaking “…of Asgard, and you fail to see the point of knowing the other realms.”

Loki waved a hand at the book in disdain. “They are just mortals.”

Her other eyebrow rose, tone challenging. “So are you.”

Jumping to his feet and hissing with venom. “I am AEsir by choice and Jötunn by blood, both of which tower above Midgardians in might and accomplishment. Those mortals do not even deserve the life granted to them by Yggdrasil.”

G’dath just sighed, her expression similar as if she were dealing with a trying child.

“Oh…sit down.”

Clenching his fists and sneering down at her. “And if I do not? What could you possibly do to heel me? I am not your child nor your servant. I am, at most, your apprentice which is a facilitation of learning, not of you owning my person.”

Something dark and foreboding settled in her blue eyes. The kind of foreboding he felt when he’d pushed Odin’s or Frigga’s tempers too far. “First of all, my comparison to mortals has more to do with the fact that both of those peoples age and die, which those of Vanaheim and Alfheim do not. So as much as you may wish it different, the simple fact is that yes, you are more similar to mortals than I. Secondly, as you are my apprentice and I your master, I do have the capability of sealing away every scrap of magic at your disposal so do be very careful in showing me the proper respect owed to someone of my station. Third of all, that venom that you have chosen to spew is the very reason that you are unworthy of the throne for no king should ever look upon a people as unworthy of life. Not to mention if his lordship remembers, those pathetic creatures handed you your ass in a most spectacular fashion and a good portion of the nine realms is aware of it.” A quiver raced up Loki’s spine, no color on his face as she leveled two words at him as if it were a physical blow. “Sit. Down.”

He sat down.

She blinked at it was gone, the darkness hidden behind sarcasm and wit. He was surprised there was no hint of amusement at his capitulation in her eyes, her tone almost gentle as she spoke. “You are young so I will forgive you of much, but you have your father’s temper. Do the rest
of the realms a favor and learn to think for yourself.”

Loki suddenly came to the conclusion of why he got along with G’dath and Azni so well. Both women reminded him of his mother, just in different ways. Azni was the gentler side of Frigga, although there was a quiet strength to the older woman that intrigued him. G’dath was the backbone. The stern mother who had appeared infrequently in his youth.

Plucking the book in front of him with a finger, brow furrowing. “And what does his temper or my ability to think have to do with Midgardian history?”

“AESir have looked down on mortals for some time—…”

“As do elves, madam.” Loki cut her off to remind her of that fact, not about to let her look down her nose at AESir when elves were just as guilty.

G’dath nodded slowly in agreement. “Yes, most do. But it is not a state of being I agree with. Your rants and raves are simply reprocessed garbage that AESir have been saying for a millennia. You are old enough and smart enough to decide for yourself without their bias. Your father’s defense of them, particularly his protection, was wise in that regard.”

Loki was distracted with that reminder. “I never understood that.” Odin. All of Asgard, in actuality, looked down on mortals. That Thor had shown such interest in a mortal had surprised him as much as her being allowed to come to the golden realm.

G’dath raised an eyebrow slowly. “Then allow me the opportunity to explain…or do you prefer to sulk for a while?”

Loki huffed before gesturing. “I am listening.”

“Will wonders never cease?” She smirked when he scowled at her yet again. She was going to have to find a way to show him that expression. It was becoming dangerously close to a pout. But she was more than eager to discuss this topic and remained focused. “They live but a fraction of life, yet in such a small span their accomplishments are great. While in a hundred years most of our races are not even considered small children, in that same span they create and grow and learn. They are too young to show true accomplishment with Yggdrasil or magic, but their innovations live beyond them and are passed on to their children.” He nodded slightly, conceding that point. Stark and Banner had been impressive to him, even if he may never admit it out loud. And Agent Romanoff was a curiously clever creature, very sly and cunning. He’d underestimated them. “They will continue to grow and change. They are the epitome of life while we exist in stagnation. But they are still a child race. They are not ready to truly harmonize with the other realms, so Odin has protected them with Asgardian might until they are ready.”

G’dath had long come to the conclusion that Loki was very much like mortals in that regard and one of the reasons he had never fit in with Asgardian society. He was change. Something different and unique, even if he wished he wasn’t. Life wasn’t neat and orderly. It was vibrant and out of control. It was chaos. And he was aptly named the God of Chaos.

Loki glanced down at the book in front of him curiously as he asked, “Why Midgardian history?”

G’dath shrugged and spoke as if it were obvious. “If you understand the past, you will appreciate their present.”

Brow furrowing. “Why is my understanding important to you?”
She studied him quietly for several moments and he resisted the urge to squirm. It was always disconcerting when she did that, like she was seeing something in him that he couldn’t. “Perhaps because I would hate to see Indel grow up with your views about mortals.”

He couldn’t hold her gaze and he studied the cover. Damn. His own mother hadn’t been as skilled at cutting him off at the knee.

She rose to her feet, pausing just behind him. “Besides, if I recall correctly, one of your former traveling companions had been mortal…and you certainly went to a lot of trouble to protect her life.”

Mumbling a grumble. “Thor’s idea, not mine.”

She laughed huskily and squeezed his shoulder lightly. “Keep telling yourself that if it helps you sleep at night.”

Author Notes:

Thank you for your comments and your kudos. I feel the love :)

Next:

Loki dreams...and does a little stalking
Chapter 7

Brow furrowing slightly in confusion, Loki sat up and looked around.

This was a particularly peculiar dream. His grey-green eyes swept over the room, realizing it was most definitely Asgard and with a frown he strode the distance to the doors and stepped outside. The familiar corridor caused a brief moment of sadness but he pushed it to the side.

He wasn’t sure if this was his magic or Yggdrasil but in either case visions like these were always important. They were warnings to guide in the right direction. But they were also encouragement that this could be the future if the path is followed. He hadn’t had many and it had been several centuries since the last time.

He took the stairs down to the practice yard, but for once it was strangely empty. Hearing the sound of laughter he followed it down the path to the private gardens of the royal family. His jaw tightened to see his father dressed in casual robes, sitting under a tree and watching children play with a soft smile on his face. A man no longer under the burden of kingship. Why would he be dreaming of Thor as king?

“Dada!”

Loki whipped around, seeing his elfling perhaps a few years from being a warrior’s age, perhaps 10 by human standards, dressed like a young prince, being tickled by a version of himself. He wasn’t wearing his normal green and gold armor, but neither was he dressed as a commoner. He was dressed like a prince of Asgard.

“I will save you, brother!”

His mouth opened in surprise as a young boy of perhaps six or so charged the distance. A small version of himself, down to the brilliant green eyes he’d held as a child. The little boy seemed to easily tip over the trickster and the two children immediately attacked their father. It was too much for him to process and Loki just took a step back and took it all in as it happened in front of him.

“The mighty warrior, brought down by a couple of princelings.” The teasing voice filled with gentle amusement and love caused Loki’s body to flush with heat, turning to see Jane Foster dressed like a princess and watching over them fondly. Then everything in him froze. She was beautiful. Her golden skin almost glowed in the sunlight, her hair in loose tendrils and almost long enough to touch her waist. The dress that she wore flowed around her, a light material of golds and blues. There was no crown on her head, which was the most puzzling of all. What was she doing here, if she wasn’t Thor’s queen?

The other Loki got to his feet, youngest thrown over his shoulder who continued to kick and wiggle. “Milady.” He growled the word and she raised an eyebrow, giggling when he tugged her forward and pressed a gentle kiss to her waiting lips. Her hands came up, the left one bracing on his shoulder and showcasing a white and gold wedding band while the other tangled in his hair.

Loki’s jaw dropped before he clenched his fists and turned his head. He refused to be jealous of himself in a damn dream. His eyes widened incredulously...he was JEALOUS? He looked back up just as the kiss ended.

Indel pulled a face. “Icky.” Jane turned her head a little to stick her tongue out at him. He grinned boyishly and took his brother. “C’mon, Vili, let’s leave them to their gross kissing.”
The other him sighed at the boy. “If Tony is the one teaching you to talk like that I will hang him by his heels.”

Indel snorted, walking backwards. “No you won’t, Pepper’s too scary.”

Grumbling at Jane. “I used to be frightening.”

She patted his chest lightly with her palm. “Poor Loki, no one’s afraid of you anymore.” A wicked glimmer entered her eyes. “Fear of you has been hereby banished to the ranks of fluffy kitties.”

Sighing, he stuck his tongue out at her and she giggled. He kissed her temple before pressing a gentle hand to her slightly swollen middle. “Another boy, do you think?”

She groaned good-naturedly. “I hope not. I need the female support.”

Raising an eyebrow. “Sif doesn’t count?”

Jane rolled her eyes up at him. “Sif is as bad as your brother, of course she doesn’t count.” He grinned. “Besides, it might be nice to have a little princess running around.”

He growled and dipped her, ignoring his father’s quiet retreat with an amused chuckle. “Asgard already has a princess running around our halls.” She reached up to stroke his cheek with her palm, brown eyes soft as she gazed up at him.

He pulled her back to her feet and she snuggled into his side, her temple pressed into his shoulder. “Hmm…”

His arms were wrapped around her firmly, right hand moving in a soothing pattern along her side. “Are you happy, my love?” She giggled and he sighed. “What?”

“You sound so serious.”

Loki sounded a tad affronted. “I can be serious.”

She rolled her eyes with an affectionate smile. “Loki, you’ve spent most of your life being too serious.”

He shrugged minutely. “Perhaps.”

Jane nodded firmly. “And as I am the Goddess of Mischief, it is my sworn duty to make sure you remain silly and sweet.” Her lip twitched, her words an obvious tease. Titles weren’t shared by spouses but it was a familiar exchange.

Now he rolled his eyes and ignored her trying to declare herself as the Goddess of Mischief. “Silly and sweet?”

Jane nodded enthusiastically. “Yep, yep!”

A spark entered his eyes, mischievous grin spreading. “Well...Thor is throwing a gathering feast tonight...” She watched him and raised an eyebrow. She knew that look. It would be a harmless prank, but it would be noteworthy. Her hand stroked the left side of his face even as the sunlight dimmed and the sound faded.
Loki gasped awake with a jerk in his bed on Alfheim’s moon, throwing himself in a seated position before realizing too late he was near the edge of the bed and tumbling to the floor with a yelp. His heart was pounding, face red and body flushed with heat. He panted for a moment before groaning and sinking his head onto the wooden floor, hands moving to curl into his hair. *What in Hel was that?*

Loki’s fingers drummed against his lips as he studied the mirror. He couldn’t and wouldn’t look in on Odin, but he was becoming distractedly curious as to Jane Foster’s fate. Which was absolutely absurd since he’d hardly spoken to the mortal, although that slap was delightfully memorable. Still, there was something about her beautiful mind and fiery temper that intrigued him. He mentally cursed the dream that had definitely peaked his curiosity.

Shrugging to himself that he was Loki and he did what he wanted, he leaned in to see she was off to one side of a series of rooms. He could hear her humming and this should be the point where he backed away from the mirror and went about the rest of his day. She was alive, mystery solved. But he lingered, hungry to see her one more time.

When he does, he blinked once before an evil, evil smirk curled his lip. She was only wearing a cream robe, hair damp from a shower and as much as he shouldn’t he couldn’t make himself look away. There was nothing truly revealing about her clothes but for some reason he was absolutely riveted. Asgardian armor revealed more on a woman, Sif being the only female warrior, but he had long ago trained himself not to dwell. If Sif knew as a youth he was absolutely infatuated with her and actually showed it, she would have handed him his head.

His eyes mapped out the dip of the fluffy cloth, revealing only a small, chaste portion of her chest. It was cinched tightly at the waist, the belt of material loosely knotted. Loki straightened a little and looked down to see slender legs and the most perfect feet in creation. Her lips moved as she looked in the mirror with a subtle frown to herself, he receiving a profile of her from the reflective surface to her left.

She picked up the brush and started running strokes through her damp hair and that’s when he realized she’s not humming, she’s mumbling calculations to herself. *By the Norns, was there anything sexier in the universe?*

He watched her mouth form beautiful numbers as if the concepts and ideas were tangible. His mind took a completely salacious turn and his eyes darkened.

Indel babbling pulled him back from his completely unchaste thoughts. He blinked twice at himself, face burning and heart pounding. His behavior was completely, completely unbecoming. Princes, former or not, were not voyeurs. His mother would make a special trip from Valhalla to box his ears properly if she knew. Although wasn’t it interesting that as he watched her, he wasn’t thinking about her being mortal, all that he saw was a very beautiful woman.

He waved a hand to clear the image with a mental promise to avoid her rooms in the future and retreated to his books.

MIDGARD

Bruce Banner stepped quietly off the elevator, walking with his head tilted down slightly. He had taken Tony’s offer to stay in Stark Towers and research. He was quite thankful that he was pretty much left to himself. Well, except for Tony dropping in to pester about this or that, but that was just Tony Stark.
He liked it here, but he missed his anonymity. Here he was a scientist, but he was also an Avenger. And those that knew, knew that he was also the Hulk. His inner green beast of uncontrollable rage. No one knew how exposing it was when he lost control, how humiliating for his feelings to be so blatantly on display. The only consolation he had was that when ‘the other guy’ made an appearance, it saved people’s lives. It was the only way he still lived with himself.

He turned the corner just as a petite brunette walked away from the kitchen, she jumping back in surprise and her cup falling out of her grip. “Shoot!” Her hand shot out and touched his forearm lightly. “I’m s-sorry, I wasn’t paying attention-are you okay?” He grit his teeth and slowly nodded, keeping his breathing even as she hurried to the kitchenette for a towel. “I’m a complete klutz at times.” Giving him a self-depreciating smile, brown eyes friendly. “My brain goes on auto-pilot and…” With a shrug she looked around at the mess before she attacked the wooden floor with the towel, scooping up the broken remnants and carrying them to the sink. “Would you like some tea?”

Trying to smile but knowing it looked like a grimace. “Yes, please.”

She nodded with her back to him and busied herself with pulling down mugs and ingredients. “So what is your focus…oh, are we not allowed to talk about that? Shoot, I knew I forgot to ask about something…”

He found himself smiling before he thought about it. “I work with gamma radiation predominantly.”

Jane froze and peered over her shoulder. “I thought Tony wasn’t making weapons.”

The tone was polite but the eyes were just slightly narrow enough that the question was serious and important. “He doesn’t. I’ve been applying the sciences of it to track magical signatures around the planet.”

Turning back around with two cups of steeping tea. “Wow. Wait, you…you wouldn’t have been on the team that helped track down the Tesseract, were you?”

Not many people, at least not humans, called the cube a Tesseract. “You’ve seen it before?”

Jane dusted off her hand. “I have no manners, sorry. Jane Foster, astrophysicist, Erik Selvig is a friend of mine and he became intimately familiar with it thanks to…Loki.”

Bruce yelped in surprise and took her hand excitedly. “Doctor Jane Foster, I’ve been wanting to discuss exotic matter for years with you. I’m…Bruce Banner.” Jane’s eyes widened with a dazzled smile.

They found a quiet corner of the couch and sat facing one another. Bruce sipped his tea. “So what are you working on?”

Jane pulled in a breath, trying to prepare herself for the scorn that usually followed. “I’m trying to complete a Bi-Frost. Well, at least our version of it. A true bridge is too impractical and the power needed astronomical…a traversable wormhole is more practical.” She rushed forward excitedly when no scoffing noises stopped her. “Imagine, being able to go to other planets and meet…I mean it would be amazing! There are nine recognized realms out there and no human has ever been to any of them!”

“I hear you already did a bit of traveling.”
She nodded but shrugged at the same time. “Okay, so I’ve been but I’m nobody.” A sad smile crossed her face an instant later. “And yeah, I got to see Asgard, which was beautiful…and dangerous. I almost died. And an elven planet called Svartalfheim, but I don’t really remember much of that planet, I was a little possessed by then.”

Bruce blinked in surprise, eyes filled with concern. “Possessed?”

Jane tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, talking and thinking at the same time. “Oh, it…well, they didn’t really talk too much about it with me. Something Thor called an Infinity Gem…I think.”

His brow furrowed. “But…possessed?”

Jane shivered in reply before speaking. “By the power of the Aether. But I’m human, so it was killing me.”

Her eyes lost focus for a moment, sadness tinged them, and Bruce frowned in concern. “Are you alright?”

She smiled weakly. “Yeah, I…someone who saved my life died there.”

“I’m sorry. Was it a close friend?”

Sighing softly, she tucked her hair behind her ear and knew that there would be no sympathy for him to be found. “It…it was Loki. He died saving Thor.” She’d known him for an even shorter time than she’d known Thor, but it was strange how much empathy she felt for him. Buried under all that anger and sarcasm…she wasn’t sure but she thought it was a man she might have liked. Bruce’s look turned incredulous. “I know, hard to believe but I saw it for myself. He played both sides to save my life, and then he attacked the elf about to kill Thor and-…” She shrugged uncomfortably, not wanting to go into the details and sipped her tea.

Bruce had no love for the demi-god but if Loki really did that for Thor, it made him wonder just how well they really understood him. He cleared his throat before asking, “So, where is Thor now?”

“Oh. He went back to Asgard. Future king business of course, and now that he’s lost his mother too I think he needs a little time away from everybody.”

Bruce winced in sympathy at that. “His mother and his brother?”

Jane sipped her tea, lost in her thoughts. She turned to the right and froze for a moment. Gray-green eyes. Searching, cautious, wary eyes that seemed to stare right into her soul.

She blinked and turned back to the left, eyes forgotten. Hopping in place and pushing Asgard to the back of her mind for now. “Oh, but tell me more about your opinion on exotic matter…”

The two got into a heated discussion on any manner of topic, and from the window just to the right of them, a translucent Loki hungrily watched and listened.

Author's notes:
Not to worry, this won't get all creepy. But come on. Loki has the ability, you know he's going to indulge.

Next:

Loki + Indel bonding
Chapter 8

ALFHEIM

Crying was a weakness Loki rarely allowed himself and he completely disregarded the last few times. Okay, maybe it was more than just a few times…lately…he was turning into such a weakling and he hated it. But right now he really felt like weeping in defeat. Indel would Not. Stop. Crying. He didn’t have a fever. It wasn’t elven colic from what he could determine. There was no need to change him and he’d already been fed. Loki paced with him in his arms, tails fanning out as he turned and still in the habit of wearing his armor when he wasn’t in the village.

He wasn’t in the mood for this. His attempts at sleep had been pathetic, always tumbling into the same night terror every time he closed his eyes. Of faces and half formed memories of what happened after he fell. His treatment by the Chitauri and the Other had been shoved to the back of his mind but something during that time had been buried. Something he had wanted to forget that was trying to resurface.

The scent of ash and coppery blood.

The screams.

The clicking sounds of mechanical-like laughter.

The boy’s cries took up a fevered pitch and Loki moaned. “Whatever is wrong with you??”

Ever since he’d had him, Indel was a sporadic sleeper, which didn’t leave Loki in the best of moods but this was a baby. What did he expect? This was different. His cries had been going on for hours. He’d been woken out of a dead sleep by the piercing wails and they hadn’t ceased since. His pride was almost ground down enough to seek out G’dath’s help again, who would no doubt laugh at him in her silent way. He’d given up on trying to use any spell on Indel that would cease his ability to hear the boy’s cries. The last one he’d used to make himself deaf had resulted in the volume doubling when it backfired on him.

He swung him lightly in his arms and murmured a soft elvish lullaby. He didn’t have the best singing voice but it was passable in his opinion, a song he’d heard Azni hum once or twice. But tonight his little elfling refused to be soothed. He ran his fingers gently over the scrunched up, warm face and through the spikes of white hair on his head. “Fred min sønn…”

Little fists clenched and shook in protest, battling some unseen foe. Stopping, he lifted Indel up, underarms supported by his hands and fingers keeping his head steady. Loki really, really wanted to shake him, little face red and pained. Growling softly. “Why are you so dis-…”

His words ended in a horrified gasp as a splatter of warm milk glanced off his chin and coated his neck and chest. He stared at this child with wide eyes, mouth hanging open and frozen in shock. It was speckled along his cheek and nose. It was in his hair. And it was drenching the tunic under his armor and sliding along his skin. Loki shuddered in revulsion, his expression priceless, and all Indel did was giggle at him and yawn. Slowly his eyes narrowed as they flashed green, lips thinning and anyone else would run away screaming. This little boy just reached out and grabbed for his nose.

In the palace of Asgard, as courtiers spoke and discussed important matters to their king,
they were stunned to silence when he started to chuckle.

Loki threw the rag away in disgust, examining his armor closely to be sure it was thoroughly clean. He sighed and stored it in a dimensional pocket instead of putting it back on. He was looking after a baby and apprenticing to be a healing mage, a mighty warrior right now he was not. It was a habit, one he’d picked up over the centuries of living on Asgard. Always be prepared for attack, for war.

He frowned to himself. Not when he’d been young. Even when Thor was constantly wearing his practice gear to fight invisible enemies unless the instructors required it of him he never wore armor. He blinked as realization filled him. The clothes he’d been given in the dungeons…they had been his as a child, just altered to fit him. His brow furrowed. Someone must have raided the back of his closets for them…

He opened his hand and called in one of the books, staring at it with new eyes. Thor was the only one who had known of the secret compartment under the armoire where he’d kept this. Another book that he’d enjoyed as a child. They were reminding him of who he’d been, even though he hadn’t realized it at the time. He sent the book away for now but it left him wondering if Thor had stayed away, not because he’d wanted to, but because mother had asked him to.

Why? What would be the point?

He had been banished to the dungeons by the All-Father for the rest of his life. That’s what Odin had said. It hadn’t been a lie, he would have detected it instantly. Loki’s brow furrowed in confusion before he sighed and idly rubbed at his forehead. He didn’t have the answer so there was little point in focusing on it.

Resting his chin in his hand, watching the baby. “Little brat.”

Indel had definitely gotten most of it on him than on himself but the boy had required a bath or else Loki was never picking him up again. The little elf waved his arms and kicked his feet, carefully laid out towels keeping him in the water but supported so he couldn’t roll and drown himself. Dipping his fingers in the water, Loki lightly flicked the boy in the face with water droplets and was rewarded with a squeal, happy green eyes crinkling in delight. A reluctant grin tugged at the corner of Loki’s mouth before he yawned.

“What are you going to be like? Will you be like me, logical and mischievous with an overinflated ego and quite content to spend your days reading?” Indel’s arms shot into the air, body even naturally paler than he was and luminous in the firelight. “Will you be like Thor, brash and silly with too big a heart and too small a brain?” His small hands grabbed at nothing, squealing again. Cupping a little of the warm water, he let it run over the fuzzy white hair, another classic feature of a dark elf. “Will you be like mother, nurturing and protective with a lion’s courage? Or perhaps father, gruff and strong, full of power and might who still makes little tricksters like me tremble at the knee.”

Legs kicked excitedly with a series of babbles, splashing Loki lightly. Grumbling to himself, he scooped Indel out of the warm water and dried him off, tickling his soft belly and grinning fully when the boy giggled. Grabbing a tiny ankle lightly, he nibbled on the tiny toes without thinking about it and chuckled as another squeal filled the air. A small hand reached out and grabbed for a lank of black hair, yanking with a giggle. Loki winced. “Ouch, Indel.”

The hand immediately released him and Loki lifted an eyebrow in surprise. Those wide green eyes studied him before the hand wandered back to his mouth, gumming on his own fingers. Loki slowly shook his head. “You are going to be as frighteningly intelligent as I am.” It wasn’t ego
that made him say it. He knew he was bright, his mother had always said so. But he acknowledged, if only to himself, a truth that he never had before. That bright didn’t mean wise. He found himself going through the routine automatically, slipping on a sleep shirt for him before holding him up to talk to him.

Tilting his little body gently from side to side, tone light as he thought about his rather silly habit of wearing his armor. “Were you telling me I looked stupid? Is that what…” Loki tilted his head slightly and paused to think to himself. *Where in Hel had that impulse come from?*

Was he really attempting to converse with an infant that couldn’t understand him? It was completely beyond his logic and he was a thoroughly logical creature. Yet some instinct demanded that he talk to and play with this child that couldn’t understand him.

But then he thought, *what would be the harm in it?* There was nothing wrong with it and Indel had to eventually learn how to speak anyway. He’d heard Midgardian parents talk to their own offspring and he sneered at the very thought of making such noises. This child was his get and no one would ever say he raised an insipid fool.

His brow furrowed but he acquiesced nonetheless, tucking the baby into the crook of his arm as he moved to the couch and stretched out. But what to tell him, that was the question. The beginning, he supposed. His brow creased…who was he? Laufeyson? Odinson? Who was Odin? Thor?

Indel squeaked and babbled and he grinned, the words slipping out his mouth and he decided not to think about it, just to say whatever felt natural. “Hello, Indel. I am Loki Odinson of Asgard…and I am your…father.” The word felt strange in his mouth, yet he had no doubt now that he would get used to it. Hela had used the title often enough. “Your grandmother was Frigga, the most wonderful woman ever created in the nine realms. Your g-grandfather is Odin Borson, the All-Father of Asgard.” Loki swallowed once, it might have been his pride. “And your uncle is Thor Odinson my…the first born of the king. Perhaps one day you will meet them, but for now let me tell you about the wonders of Asgard…”

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**Author's notes:**

*peace my son = Fred min sønn (Norwegian)*

*I don't speak it, I just used a program to translate it.*

*The story will start gaining momentum towards Loki/Jane shipper. Like any great love, the ones that last take time to develop ;)*

**Next:**

*Paranoia; a flashback of Hela; Jane's dreams turn strange*
Chapter 9

MIDGARD

Tony flew through the air, thrusters pushing him through the stratosphere. He’d needed to just get out for a while, the world unusually quiet when it came to bad guys. Which could only mean that when the inevitable happened, it was going to be bad. But he was getting away from the tower for another reason and didn’t have anything to do with Pepper’s current mood. No word from any of the Avenger’s supposed allies. Not if it had anything to do with SHIELD and Tony couldn’t figure out what was up with that. Xavier’s group was being unusually tight lipped. The Fab 4 were guarded even more than usual. Even Doc Strange wouldn’t return calls. Not unusual but he usually at least acknowledged receiving them. Something weird was going on.

By the third ring Tony rolled his eyes in annoyance, seeing Steve Rogers face on a corner panel. “JARVIS, take a message. Cap can sit on his shield for an hour.”

“Sir, you’ve been avoiding his calls since Tuesday.”

Tony would have shrugged if his suit allowed for it. “Well, one more day won’t kill him. Message. Now.”

“Yes, sir.” Pushing himself through some clouds, seeing SHIELD’s hovering ship in the distance, he slowed. Dammit, he’d come up here to avoid everyone. “Sir, Director Fury requests your presence.”

Lip twitching before mentally shrugging when he couldn’t think of any reason, recently, that Fury would want to yell at him. Unlike Steve, Fury would get creative in hunting him down. “Yea, on it.” He modified his course a little and landed on the deck with a clang. There were agents and military looking after the planes, tethered to wired lines so they could walk without falling off the Heli-carrier. His iron suit was heavy enough he just walked towards the nearest portal inside.

Tony froze with a frown, seeing something on one of the screens. “JARVIS, upper right corner…analyze what that was.”

“Right away, sir.”

His eyes widened before JARVIS had even finished analyzing. “Shit! Warn Fury we’ve got Chitauri up here.” When he’d nuked the ship in New York all of the cyborgs had just collapsed. How was this one alive?

Spinning, he shot into the air, the cyborg creature chattering as it shot at him with a hand held weapon. Ducking to the left, right hand held out. “Missed me, Borg boy.” He fired the pulsar and it tumbled back with a screech, its own weapon falling from its grip and blowing off the side of the ship. Tony landed and took aim, mentally cautious because that had been far too easy. “Why are you here?” It chattered at him, which he took to be laughing. “Yeah…what’s funny?” Something neon slowly oozed from its chest that could be blood and Tony took another step, ignoring the sound of alarms. “Why are you here?”

More chattering before a voice as rusty as an old car door drifted through the air. “Your kind are even more pathetic than anticipated.”

Tony lifted an eyebrow from behind his visor. “Hmm…I’m not the one on his ass.”
Clicks filled the air as it spoke. “We will retrieve it, the Jötunn runt was not nearly as clever as he believed.”

Narrowing his eyes in confusion. “Okay.” Grabbing for a piece of its armor, backhanding it. Strong arm tactics weren’t his norm but something about just the sight of these creatures made him angry. “What is a Jötunn runt and what are you retrieving?”

Blood dribbled and oozed out of its mouth. It laughed again and Tony grit his teeth, leaning in and thumb clamping into the wound. There might have been respect flashing in those dead eyes but all Tony felt was disgust with himself. “The runt wore AEsir disguise but failed to take the gem back to Asgard with the thunderer.”

He knew AEsir were Asgardians. Was a Jötunn a species? Thor had said Loki was adopted but he never mentioned another species. *That tall bastard was a runt??*

It cackled with delight. “His screams were so delightful. We broke him…and now my master will tear your realm apart for it.”

The Chitauri shuddered and collapsed to the side, dead.

His pulsar wouldn’t have been enough to cause that kind of damage. Not with only one shot. He hypothesized it was a plant, maybe, but why? It had been far too easy to gain that information, as cryptic as it had been. Fury and his cronies would analyze everything. Then it clicked in Tony’s mind. They, whoever they were, were trying to make SHIELD nervous.

Considering the rampant paranoia lately it wouldn’t take much.

Even as soldiers bustled around him Tony turned and chewed over what he’d been told. The thunderer. Well, when it came to Asgard that was Thor. And the only person who’d accompanied Thor from earth other than Jane, had been Loki. *So, what gem was he talking about?*

Mentally he sighed, knowing he was going to have to analyze everything about the New York invasion all over again. But something else was troubling him and he hoped he was wrong. Thor had seemed so befuddled when it came to Loki’s actions. If these Chitauri really had tortured Loki into attacking earth, it had been intentional to focus the Avengers and SHIELD on a target. Which meant that there was something out there that could arrive at any time to finish what the demi-god started. And for now he buried his feelings on the possibility that Loki may or may not have been forced.

“Sir, I am detecting an increase in Director Fury’s—…”

Sighing, cutting his AI off. “Thanks, JARVIS. Start pulling up all the footage we have of Loki, from the moment the cube activates until he leaves earth after the attack. File name Gem.”

“Yes, sir. Compiling.”

Turning with a groan. “I need coffee, this is going to be a long week.”

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**ALFHEIM**

Living out here in the woodlands had forced Loki to acclimate to the reality that all of those survival skills that he’d hated to learn as a child were actually remarkably practical. He wasn’t a warrior standard marksman when it came to a bow and arrow, but he was good enough for claiming dinner for himself.
All those lessons Odin had insisted he learn he now put to good use, creating a bow and a series of arrows for himself. The one thing he hadn’t been taught was how he was going to hunt while still lugging around a 16 pound infant. Azni had been kind enough to teach him how to make something she called a papoose. It strapped to his back rather easily, Indel wrapped up tightly and seemed very content to fall asleep.

With his first few kills he forged practical clothing for himself to replace his Asgardian armor, the animal’s skins having a leather like quality to them. A jacket for later months, a jerkin for now and boots that were designed to allow him to tread silently. He started making clothing for Indel for as he grew, knowing from the talk that the seasons were about to blow cold and the child would need better clothes since he was still prone to getting sick.

“Hello!”

Loki raised his head from his work of tacking down a fur for drying that would be good for a coverlet on the bed, magic dagger appearing in his hand without thinking. He watched through narrowed eyes as a tall elf waived to him from the other side of the barrier. A quick glance at Indel who had managed to roll himself onto his stomach and was peering ahead with wide eyes and he let the dagger vanish, snapping his fingers and his elvish guise appeared as the barrier dropped. Not the wards of course, he wasn’t a complete fool.

The elf pressed his hands together and made a slight bowing gesture before walking forward, either not seeing or not sensing the barrier pop back into existence behind him. A curiously colored elf, his hair a rich brown, as were his eyes. “I am Elder Trax.”

At the time it hadn’t occurred to Loki to alter his own hair color. Too late now but thankfully no one seemed to question it. The elder was an elected position, in charge of everything in the community from guard postings to welfare checks. He was also the one who organized bi-weekly meetings in the community to ‘discuss’ things, which Loki had been able to escape thus far. Since he lived on the outskirts he could see that this visit was a welfare check, but he wasn’t deluded in thinking it wasn’t also a ploy to get him to attend. Dusting his hands and rising smoothly to his feet, satisfied that he was taller than the elf by about two inches. “Lokhi.”

‘Loki’ was as unique a name in the universe as could be had, no one wanted to name their child after mischief itself. Believed to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, no doubt. However, there were several versions of his name that did pop up from time to time and that had been one of the most recent.

“I am honored by the introduction. My authority begins and ends with the village line but I wanted to introduce myself."

“I see.” Loki reached down for Indel, the little imp smiling up at him with a bottom set of four little teeth already in. He tucked him into the crook of his arm and gave Trax another glance. Trax continued speaking, oblivious to Loki’s wariness. “I trust that all is well. It starts getting cold early and we do not see much of you in the village.”

Loki inclined his head in a nod. “We have acclimated well here.”

Trax nodded to confirm he heard him as his brown eyes moved to Indel. “A very handsome boy.”

With a swell of pride Loki smirked. “Thank you, though he does take after his mother than me.”
“Ah, and your mate is well, I am afraid I--…”

“She is not with us.” Technically true since he had no mate and the boy’s mother was unknown on Svartalfheim, but Trax would infer by his tone that she died and never bring it up again, exactly as Loki intended. Normally her death would mean his own as a light elf, but who would actually ask?

Trax leaned his head forward slightly. “Then I offer condolences for her life departure.” Loki nodded slightly which could be taken as a bow of thanks were he inclined to offer such displays, which he wasn’t. “Well, I wanted to welcome you officially and wish you and your son well.”

Loki made the appropriate reply. “Many thanks returned.” The elf bowed again and turned to leave, Loki smirking once he was out of sight. That was almost too easy.

Trax popped back into view. “Oh, yes, G’dath wished me to remind you to attend the bi-weekly community updates. Our next meeting is two hours before sundown today.” He held up his hand again before departing.

*And the damn elf used the one person’s authority I can’t deny. Loki’s thoughts were full of agitation. I am Loki, I do what I wish when I wish…except quite frankly G’dath scared him.*

Loki held up his own hand and muttered under his breath. “Damn.”

Indel blinked up at him and grinned. “Da!” Loki’s head jerked down, staring at the little bundle in his arms in wonder. Indel bounced, arms making jerking up and down motions. “Da! Dada! Da!”

Loki suddenly remembered one other time when he’d been called ‘father’, the day that Hela had been created, long ago.

*Vibrant green eyes looked over the pages carefully, small hands thumbed through the book, ancient runes carved into the floor of the library. It’s not as if the damaged stone mattered since he was one of the few in Asgard to even use the library. Thor was off on an adventure, his older brother having already passed his trials as a warrior. It would be a couple of more decades before he was old enough for his own passage as a warrior so Loki took the opportunity to master his craft.*

*This was a spell that he’d been intrigued with for some time, to double his own power, hidden at the very back of the library at the highest point on the shelf. The curses that kept him from touching the volume had been particularly tricky to crack but that was part of the reason he’d surpassed his tutors many years ago…nothing could be kept from him for long.*

Loki placed the book outside of the circle and closed his grimoire, sending it into dimensional storage along with some of his most prized possessions. He wore all black today, a simple tunic and breeches. He wasn’t completely certain what would happen to his clothes so he chose pieces that he wasn’t especially fond of. Even his boots were off, sitting outside of the circle of runes.

*Closing his eyes, he whispered the words under his breath, an echo of whispers surrounding him. The words moved and danced and swirled faster and faster and he jerked in surprise, eyes open as the green merged with the swirling golden hue of Yggdrasil. The wind*
whipped in a vortex, the skies outside of the palace darkened and the ground groaned.

Stillness.

Loki jerked and screamed as fire and ice collided and ripped into his flesh down to the marrow. He collapsed and writhed, trying to crawl away from his own skin as flesh split and blood spilt. He clawed at his face as flesh peeled away, bones splintered, and his spinal column snapped.

Silence.

Darkness.

There was no pain, but a distant memory. Not a drop of gore on the ground, as if it had never happened. His grey-green eyes opened and looked to the left, a girl with midnight locks lying next to Loki and breathing in the exact same pattern as he was, wearing the same clothes he was. She blinked and turned to the right, her dark green eyes sparkling as a smirk identical to his own crossed her face. He felt an echoing smirk as she whispered huskily to him. “Hello, father.”

A blink and the memory faded, firmly back in the present. Indel’s first word. The grin on his face grew until Loki was beaming at the little boy. At his little boy.

ASGARD

Thor leaned over the balcony, staring at the distance. He hadn’t left Asgard since his return from Midgard but he still wore his traditional armor. He still wore Mjolnir on his belt. But he also wasn’t interested in an adventure and had already told his friends flatly not to ask. He didn’t turn his head as Sif silently approached from his right, keeping his eyes forward. She seemed awkward, which was a strange way to describe her but there was no denying it. Whatever she was going to say made her uncomfortable. “Thor.”

Nodding slightly. “Sif.”

She sighed softly, fingers playing with the hilt of her sword. “I would never have done it.” He tilted his head slightly towards her and she roughly threw herself against the balcony, leaning back and crossing her arms over her armor. “You know I can hold a grudge better than anyone in the nine realms but…I still liked the reprobate. I knew he would never betray you, insane or not.”

Loki had always been a source of conflict for her. She wasn’t aware enough of herself to know why the second prince had irritated her as much as he had. But she was honest enough to admit it. At the same time words were different than actions and while she would threaten to kill him, actually following through on such actions was a different matter entirely.

Now Thor understood. Thor had approached Loki, still in the dungeons under Asgard, and proposed an alliance to save Jane’s life by bringing her to Svartalfheim. Sif had been one of many to threaten death if Loki betrayed him. It was no secret that there was no love lost between Sif and Loki. The loss of her golden hair because of the trickster was one of the few Midgardian stories that had a grain of truth to it, and she was likely never to forgive for it. But, Thor had never worried for Loki when all of them were on their adventures together. In spite of her words, she would have come to his brother’s aide in an instant if he truly needed it.

Thor smiled a little. “As much trouble as Loki caused…it was still hard to hate him.”
She shook her head with a ghost of a smile. “He’s probably laughing his head off in Valhalla right now at us.”

Thor’s smile slipped a little. He’d been to the entrance to the great hall that granted passage only to the souls who lived and died an honorable life. He’d looked in to see those toasted in the eternal feast and he hadn’t seen Loki. It troubled him.

Surely his sacrifice would grant him an honorable peace, he wondered. Surely he wasn’t in Hel…or worse, Niflheim.

Thor swallowed painfully and ensured his voice would not betray his thoughts. “Most probably.”

She sighed and reluctantly pulled a small bouquet of flowers from her belt. He may have irritated and infuriated her in life, but death was much easier to deal with. That he had died in a way that befitted Asgard’s worldview just made mourning him easier. She smelled them and smiled a little. “Wild flowers. His favorite.” She nodded to Thor and went off to leave them at the path dedicated to him.

He nodded to himself. Each of the Warrior 3 had said similar things, now that Loki was dead. How he wished his brother had heard such things when he was still alive. It might have made all the difference.

In fact, there was quite a bit more sadness than he would have expected. Loki was notorious for his pranks and mischief. He was a troublemaker. He liked causing strife and chaos. But for some reason now even some of the warriors held his memory with nostalgia. As if he had been brilliant and they had secretly enjoyed the jokes, even at their own expense.

He knew that wasn’t how Loki had viewed himself.

I remember a shadow.

Loki had felt like an outcast. Scorned. Hated. He’d caused mischief to be noticed, not out of fun. Perhaps when he was young it had been for fun, but Thor was growing doubtful of that as well.

For a moment he wished that Hela were here, to talk with her, plead with her to release him but he quickly banished the thought. He could summon her to Asgard by just speaking her name, but his father had forbidden it. The AEsir just weren’t comfortable with her. In fact, they had been afraid of her, though Thor never quite understood that. She was a part of Loki, acknowledged by the family as his daughter, and he’d never been afraid of his brother.

If Loki truly was in Hel, there was no chance she would ever let him go. But by the same token, she loved Loki and would make sure he would be happy. He would be a king in Hel. Selfish of her, perhaps, but he felt the same way. They were both a little too possessive of the trickster. You come home. On Midgard that demand had been as much for his sake as it had been for Loki’s.

If Loki was in Valhalla, then Thor wished him peace. He would be with their mother, and some day in the distant future he and Odin would join them and they would finally be a family again. If he was in Hel…then Thor knew Loki’s daughter would make him happy. Closing his eyes, he stilled and just felt the wind rustling across the balcony, wishing it would carry his burdens away.
Jane frowned to herself as she studied her calculations. Locations. Triangulation. Star charts. Something was off but she wasn’t sure what she was missing. If only she could get the correct data together for the exotic matter she wanted to utilize she might finally be able to create an Einstein-Rosen bridge, a traversable wormhole.

She sighed in frustration and rested her forehead in her hand. It could be the poor quality of her sleep lately but she tried to dismiss it. She’d been having the strangest dreams. Dreams of falling through a black void of nothingness. Dreams of a barren rock with nothing to keep her company but an echo of screams. Dreams of a strange, malignant laugh that made shivers dance up her spine. Those dreams scared her the most.

The figure was gargantuan in its height. No hair from what she can see at a distance. Clad in some type of armor that seemed somehow living and deep grooves carved into a deeply purple face. The eyes would glow a strange, unearthly blue and she would find herself held captive by it. She would try to step towards it from the shadows that hid her, even though all she’d ever wanted to do was run away, but someone would always be there to block the path and shield her from the creature. They were tall, almost as tall as Thor. Male. But she could never recall the details of who they were, but they would whisper. “Våkne, kjære, og glem.” Then the dream would break apart and she would wake up screaming.

Ever since she’d been a little girl she’d dreamed of the stars and proving that wormholes were real. Now she knew she was right but she wasn’t celebrated. Her work was deemed classified and dangerous. Where was the accomplishment? Where was the validation? Tony believed in her, because he knew about SHIELD and cover ups only too well but it wasn’t enough. She was still a laughing stock. Still sneered at and dismissed. She wondered why she couldn’t just be happy.

For the last few years she’d dreamed about Asgard and a man that was more fiction than reality with beautiful sea-blue eyes. She’d found him again. She’d seen Asgard. But for some reason the reality wasn’t as perfect and beautiful as she’d imagined. Asgard had been wonderful and breathtaking, but she’d seen the death of a queen and a prince. She’d almost lost her own life…and in the end she’d been led back into her plain old life and left behind.

She was disappointed…and selfishly she could admit to herself she was angry.

Where were her dreams now? What is it she wanted now? She didn’t know. She knew her research was important and mattered but even after she found the solution, and she knew she would, would she be the one to take those first steps? No. She was the researcher. She was the intellectual but it would be someone else who would be the explorer. And something in her yearned for that to be her. She wondered why she couldn’t be both. *Why can’t people see there is more to me than this?*

The last dream scared her the most.

She couldn’t explain it, but she wouldn’t lie to herself and deny it. It was the dream she’d had before, of taking that first brave step back onto the Bi-frost. It had been Thor that would be there to welcome her, strong and smiling down at her. Now it was different. A hand would be there to steady her, to welcome her. She would grip the pale hand, definitely masculine and strong, her eyes following up the armor composed of blacks, greens and golds, to stare into Loki’s cautious gray-green eyes.

She closed her eyes, the orbs burning from loss of sleep, and rested her head more firmly in her palm. She didn’t even fight the pull to sleep, slouching down to rest over her work.
Jane blinked to gaze up at the skies. She smiled slightly. It was Asgard, she was certain. “Beautiful, is it not?”

Turning her head in surprise at the familiar voice, his tone slightly sardonic. She blinked at Loki who was lounging next to her, also looking up at the sky. Oh, murmuring to herself. “…I have the weirdest dreams…” She nodded and saw that he was doing the same thing in agreement. And the dream goes from weird to weirder. But after a moment she answered him. “Yeah. It was even better at night.”

He smirked just a little. “Ever the astrophysicist, Jane Foster.”

Jane raised an eyebrow, tone teasing. “I’m surprised you even know the word.”

His eyes glinted, obviously as prickly as ever when it came to even joking doubt of his knowledge, and hissed at her. “Unlike the whole of Asgard I am not a moron, nor am I incapable of learning your basic concepts of science and terminology since magic is a much more sophisticated departure of your understanding.”

Immediately Jane felt indignant, it carrying over into her voice. “Hey, Thor said magic is basically science.”

Loki made a scoffing laugh of a sound. “Yes, I am certain he did. Magic would be equated to science as a marine biologist is to a child owning a fish tank.” His eyes glinted dangerously again, smirk revealing a few teeth. “Only my fish were piranhas.”

She rolled her eyes with a huff. “You’re not scary.”

She squeaked when he loomed over her, his hands balanced on either side of her rib cage, and snarled down in her face. “No?”

Jane swallowed, not nearly so sure of herself. She kept reminding herself that this was just a dream but his dangerous presence felt very real. She could feel her heart racing, her mouth drying. “No?”

He lifted an eyebrow and tilted his head just a little, hearing her hesitation. His eyes flickered with a destructive curiosity, green sparks on his fingertips as he moved them slowly towards her face. “No?”

She trembled a little before trying to jerk away and covered her face protectively as she admitted defeat. “Okay yes, go away.” His smirk turned malicious before he sighed and rolled away from her, onto his back with his arms crossed. She swallowed and scooted away a little, frowning as she looked at him, then away several times. After an indecisive moment she huffed as her curiosity won. “What would your magic have done if it touched me?”

Loki lifted a hand to study his nails, voice casual. “Melted your skin off.”

She was ready to run, until she heard something that paused her. A tone under the words. She wasn’t so sure she believed him. “Really?”

He smirked at her and it held almost sad tinge to it as he told her the truth. “It would have tickled.” He went back to watching the clouds.

She gaped at him as her mind assessed him with new understanding. **He was like a kid pushing at the boundaries. Curious. Testing. Needing to see the truth no matter the personal cost. Needing to see if words followed actions.** And she had a feeling he’d almost always been let down.
He was the Liesmith, and he’d proven everyone else lied to him.

Jane laid back down, scolding him. “You didn’t have to be a jerk about it.” He snickered to himself, his sharp eyes taking in the floating shapes in the sky. She pursed her lips to herself before nodding in decision. Jane pointed. “Boat.”

Loki glanced at her, perplexed, and smoothly corrected her. “That was a cloud, mortal.”

Rolling her eyes as if he was being stupid. “It’s a game we play as kids. We look at the clouds for shapes. See? Flower.”

Loki eyed the cloud she had pointed out and sputtered an objection. “That is absurd! That wasn’t a flower.”

Shrugging lightly, teasing him. “My cloud, my rules. I’m also winning, oh so clever one. Tree.”

Growling through gritted teeth, his eyes focused on searching the skies. He blinked as he spotted the cloud that actually did resemble the outline of a house. He pointed, not seeing Jane already watching him and waiting to see if he would play. “House.” She smiled a little and waited until he caught up before continuing to play.

When Jane woke up in the morning she couldn’t remember who had won. She woke up with a stiff neck and back from sleeping sitting down. But it didn’t matter. All that she knew was she woke up with a large smile on her face.

In an entirely different realm, Loki woke up with the same smile. Such a curious dream.

Then it formed a toothy grin. “I won.”

Author’s notes:

Wake up, dear one, and forget = Våkne, kjære, og glem

I know, it seems strange but I have a point, I promise.

Next:

Loki + boredom = Mischief
Chapter 10

ALFHEIM

Loki stared at the book, his chin resting in his hand. He really wasn’t in the mood for this today but he wasn’t sure what else he could do. He’d been unusually successful in hunting, enough meat to keep himself well fed for weeks. There was plenty of milk. Indel was sleeping peacefully, thank the Norns. He frowned to himself, realizing he was bored. He blinked in surprise. It had been a good while since he’d been this kind of bored.

He’d been bored in the dungeons, obviously, but all that he could do was play will illusion spells and pace. But now he was free to do as he wished. But what did he want…?

“Let’s play.” Loki glanced slowly to the left to see a boy of perhaps eleven or twelve in stature sitting on the edge of his desk. Dark hair frizzy and wild, green eyes wide and sparkling with excitement, he wore a long sleeved emerald tunic over black breeches and black boots. Bouncing a little in place. “Come on, Loki, let’s play.”

When he’d been very small, about six in appearance of a human child, he’d been lonely. Well, he’d been lonely for much of his life but he’d discovered that there was one foundation to magic: it had a will of its own. It had been that way when he’d mistakenly created Hela, and it had been the same way when he’d mistakenly created Mischief. His ‘imaginary’ friend.

He’d made the servants pull up an extra seat so that ‘Mischief’ could sit next to him, even though no one had been able to see him thanks to a spell he’d found in the library. His parents indulged him when he said he was going to play in the gardens with his imaginary friend. He’d heard murmurs from Eir and a few of the other healers to his parents that it was just what many children did. Imaginary friends were created until real friends replaced them. What no one knew was that his magic had made Mischief quite real. Not an independent life like Hela, he could only live as long as Loki had magic, but very real in other respects.

He hadn’t called on Mischief to play, on purpose or by accident, since he’d been acknowledged a warrior by the court. Not since Hela had left Asgard for Helheim. Sighing softly. “I am too old to play, Mischief.”

Mischief rolled his eyes at his adult counterpart, tone disbelieving. “You made me, stick in the mud, so obviously you’re not.”

Loki turned dismissively. “I made you when I was a boy, I am fully grown now.”

Mischief jumped lightly off the table and started exploring. “I know. You were bored. The other warriors wouldn’t play with you, so you made someone who could. Aww…he’s cute.”

Growling softly. “If you wake him I will banish you from the nine realms.”

The teens hands immediately whipped behind his back, tone innocent. “I wasn’t going to wake him.”

“I am not even going to dignify that with a response.”

Mischief stuck out his tongue.

He wandered around the room, picking up this and that curiously but always careful to put
everything back exactly where he found it. His adult self was very particular about where things went. He was different than the child him. The child him had always been ready to play. The adult him was angry and sad, he needed to be encouraged. Mischief grinned brightly in inspiration. “We could prank the villagers!”

Loki huffed and rubbed at his forehead. “Why are you here again?”

Mischief leaned against his right side, tone persuasive. “Because you’re bored and your magic is smarter than you are. You want to play, so come play with me.”

“I’m a responsible adult now.”

Mischief snickered and rested his chin on Loki’s shoulder. “Do you know how stupid you sound when you say that?”

Scowling at the brat. “Shut up.”

Wrapping both arms around Loki’s bicep, pouting. “Loki.” He tugged lightly. “You remember being this bored, I know you do. You remember what it feels like to want to do something but you have no idea what. That’s when I come in and show you something fun.” Loki gave him a considering look and Mischief smiled winningly. “Just some harmless pranks, like when mother finally moved Thor so you could have your own room.”

Loki smirked a little. “I could finally sleep at night without waking up to his snoring.”

Mischief waved his hand and a little emerald serpent appeared in the palm. “Remember we put snakes in the boar’s feast that night?”

Smirk widening, watching the little fantasy serpent fade. “And switched all the ale with vinegar.”

Mischief nodded in agreement. “Father was so mad he was turning purple.”

Loki let out a startled laugh at that, and marveled at how long it had been since he’d felt an honestly amused emotion about the past not tinged with bitterness. He sighed softly with something that might have been contentment but was most probably satisfaction. “And since I wasn’t old enough for any of those spells he couldn’t prove it was me.”

Mischief smirked. “Except to ban us from the kitchens for a month.”

Loki sighed, a forlorn expression briefly flickering across his face. “I cannot leave Indel alone.”

The boy shrugged with an easy solution. “Have a Loki clone watch him.”

The trickster slowly raised an eyebrow because Mischief should already know what would happen if he did that. “Indel hates my clones and cries for hours upon my return.”

Mischief winced, forgetting about that. “Oh. Right. Guess that’s what you get for leaving him behind.”

“Indeed.” Loki frowned almost delicately, mentally pausing as that feeling again that he was forgetting something tried to rise to the surface.

Mischief shrugged again. “Leave him with Azni.”
Loki blinked and pushed the feeling to the side, raising the other eyebrow. “You want me to give my son to Azni to babysit so that I can prank the village?”

“Sure.” The two stared at one another for several moments before identical smirks curled their lips.

G’dath blinked slowly, watching from a distance as elves slipped and fell all over one another. She frowned, looking at the ground and not seeing anything out of place. Their swears were colorful and the children were giggling. Then she noticed a boy who didn’t quite fit in with the others gliding effortlessly over the ground, spinning as well as a figure skater. An Asgardian boy if she wasn’t mistaken, judging by the clothing, smirking a very familiar smirk over his shoulder. Her eyes narrowed to see a shadow following behind him, gliding just as effortlessly.

She knelt down and studied the ground from a different angle, then smirked. *Of course.* It was as thin as glass and as clear as the summer sky but it was a magic created sheet of ice. She closed her eyes for a moment, pulling at her long forgotten memories of her own childhood as a mischief maker before whispering a few words and tapping the ice with a knuckle.

The ice shattered, the adults were finally able to find their footing, and the two pranksters tumbled to the ground with twin yelps. She looked up and narrowed her eyes at the one that was easily seen, locking eyes with the boy. His own eyes widened before he hastily concealed himself. She could still see an echo of them, the pair of them helping each other up and running for the healing rooms, ducking inside. She slowly shook her head to herself and after a quick scan to make sure everyone was uninjured, silently followed.

She entered the room, briefly glancing over the beds that were undisturbed before narrowing her eyes again. She felt more than saw at least one of them to her right, and the other was tucked into the shadow of the far bed if she wasn’t mistaken.

Mischief squeaked as a firm hand found his ear and lightly tugged him to his feet. It didn’t exactly hurt but the face that was attached to the hand was very intimidating. G’dath raised an eyebrow and the concealment spell fell, tone holding a hint of steel. “Loki, stop hiding behind the bed.” Loki stood up slowly and revealed himself, hands up in a posture of surrender.

“We weren’t doing any real harm, G’dath, really. Just a bit of fun.”

G’dath turned her gaze back to the boy. “And what if your ‘fun’ managed to break someone’s leg?”

Mischief shrugged before he smirked devilishly. “We’d feel bad?”

She muttered something under her breath that was no doubt rude. Not even Mischief heard it. She sighed and turned her attention to the older of the pair. “Where is your son, Loki?”

Eyeing her warily, ready to act if he had to. Mischief may not be real in any sense that most could understand but he was real enough to Loki that he would yank the boy back into the ether if G’dath even considered destroying him. “Azni volunteered to watch him for me.”

He debated the wisdom of ratting out his coconspirator as opposed to lying and concluded that neither prospect was appealing considering he was almost positive G’dath would know if he was lying. “Um…”

“And she knows what you were up to?”

Eyeing her warily, ready to act if he had to. Mischief may not be real in any sense that most could understand but he was real enough to Loki that he would yank the boy back into the ether if G’dath even considered destroying him. “Azni volunteered to watch him for me.”

“And she knows what you were up to?”

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Mischief smirked and winked, tone meaning the exact opposite of his words. “Of course not.”

G’dath snorted to herself. Of course Azni would let Loki prank the village, the older woman too indulgent. She released the created playmate who ran over and hid behind Loki. She gave him an assessing look, surprised by how much life was in his eyes. She smirked. “As I am considered truly adept at magic in the village, if you could refrain from playing in front of my door so that it throws suspicion on me then I would appreciate it.”

Mischief peeked from Loki’s left. “So we can do more pranks?” He immediately hid again.

She gave them both a considered look. The magic around the boy was old, a playmate created centuries ago, but enough of an independent nature that he was almost a sentient form. An echo of the child Loki had once been. As strange as it sounded, this was actually a step in the right direction of his mind healing and she decided the other elves would just have to get over it. “As long as no one gets hurt.” The two shared a conspiring look and G’dath groaned to herself with a sigh, muttering. “…I’m going to regret saying that…”

MIDGARD

As surprising as it may sound, Jane Foster and Pepper Potts got along famously. Completely opposite women, Jane’s more subdued demeanor to Pepper’s quiet confidence. The way that they dressed. Their chosen vocations. Still, even with these gaping differences, something between the two of them just clicked. They shared breakfast together during weekdays, exchanging small talk before they both went about their day. On Friday nights Pepper would drag Jane upstairs and they with Tony and Bruce would watch movies and make snarky comments. Well, Tony would make snarky comments about the plot and the actors and by the time the movie was halfway through Jane would be blurting out her own without thinking about it.

“I think I’m losing my mind.”

Pepper frowned to herself, carefully sampling her salad. Across from her Jane sat in a rumpled heap. It was midday but Pepper hadn’t accepted a decline in her invitation for lunch. Her friend’s shirt not pressed was nothing new but she looked tired and that would never do. “Not quite how I pictured this conversation starting.”

Jane tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear, one hand waving while the other held her sandwich. “Ever since I moved to New York I’ve been having the craziest dreams.” One eyebrow carefully raised and Jane blushed. “Not like that.”

Pepper blushed in return and shook her head. “I’m sorry, I’ve been around Tony for far too long. So how are they strange?”

Holding out her hand. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be bothering you with this.”

Putting down her fork, Pepper frowned with a firm voice. “Jane.”

Jane rubbed her temple after taking a bite but knowing better than to argue. “Some are so crazy, almost like nightmares but…they feel too real. Other times I’m—…it’s crazy.”

Pepper reached across the table for Jane’s wrist, squeezing gently. “Jane, it’s obviously upsetting you. Just tell me.”
Nibbling on her lower lip before sighing. “The nightmares are different and strange. Falling into a tunnel of black nothingness. Wandering on a barren rock with screams and strange laughing surrounding me but I can’t see anything, I can only smell ash and…blood. Sometimes I don’t really remember anything, I just wake up. Screaming.”

Pepper pursed her lips thoughtfully even as she shivered. On an instinctive level it frightened her, but she couldn’t describe why. “I could arrange some tests or I’m sure I could get a prescription for a sleep aide.”

Jane shook her head rapidly before she even realized it, then blushed and mumbled around her sandwich. She glanced back up to see that eyebrow raised again and blushed harder. “I…I don’t mind the recent dreams they’re just…strange.”

A spark of interest in Pepper’s eyes, perhaps even a hint of teasing. “Mhmm.”

Whining softly. “You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?”

Pepper smiled a little more serenely. “Absolutely.”

Jane sighed softly and mumbled. “I’ve been dreaming about Loki.” Jane braced herself for screaming. Pepper immediately looked worried but didn’t interrupt and Jane rushed to explain. “He wasn’t like—...he was just…” She huffed and collapsed back in the chair. “I can’t explain it.”

Folding her hands in her lap and giving Jane her complete attention. “Try me.”

Staring down at her plate, Jane pushed around a chip with one finger. “I’ve seen the footage of New York, okay. I know what he did and it’s not okay and I know everyone thinks he’s evil…but that wasn’t the Loki that I knew. And it’s not the Loki in my dreams.” She glanced up to see that Pepper was still listening. “When Thor took me to Asgard, I met him. Okay so the anger was there. He was arrogant and he was snide and I punched him for it but…he protected me when he didn’t have to. He helped Thor save my life…and he died saving Thor.” Pepper blinked in surprise. “The Loki in my dreams isn’t so angry. He’s confused, I think. Lonely. He has a wicked sense of humor when he uses it and he’s like a kid with a stick, poking at everything to see what will happen.” She laughed at herself and ran her fingers through her hair. “What does that say about me that I’m dissecting a figment of my own subconscious as if it weren’t really me?”

Pepper smiled gently. “That you’re compassionate.”

“And insane.”

Shrugging with a sigh. “I never met him so I can’t honestly say one way or another. I’m biased because Tony was fighting him. And obviously the way that people see him is bothering you or you wouldn’t have these dreams.”

Jane groaned and covered her face, mumbling through her fingers. “I have to keep reminding myself he’s dead.”

The fact that Loki was dead helped Pepper see past her own anger and fear to focus on her friend. “Strangeness aside, are they bad dreams?”

“No.” Jane was still mumbling, eyes downcast.

“Then why do they bother you?”

Jane whispered her response. “I shouldn’t—…”
“Who says?”

That caught Jane’s attention and her eyes lifted, surprised. “If I told anyone else they would lock me in a padded room.”

“Then don’t tell anyone else.” Pepper smiled serenely once more. “The Jane Foster that I know has never let popular opinion sway her on anything else. If these dreams with him as the starring role are a good thing, then screw what the rest of the world has to say.” Jane laughed before she slapped a hand over her mouth. “Better?”

Jane’s grin was bright and that had been Pepper’s goal. “Better.”

Pepper nodded in satisfaction. “Good. After brunch we’re going shopping.”

“Oh, no, I have to—…”

“Jane.” Jane stiffened at that no nonsense tone, Pepper eyeing her with an air of finality. “We’re going shopping. You’ve spent every waking hour in that lab, you are taking the afternoon off and I’m going to make sure you do.”

Her breath rushing out of her in awe. “I can see why Tony stops arguing with you once your mind is made up.”

A small, satisfied smile curled Pepper’s lip. “You’d better believe it.”

Author's Notes:

Unlike Hela, Mischief is not independent of Loki. He has his own personality. His own WILL, because that's the way Loki likes him, but his existence begins and ends with Loki.

Next:

We jump ahead in time. On Alfheim: Indel is now 1 and 1/2; Jane's dreams turn deadly
Chapter 11

ALFHEIM

Loki smiled with a deft tilt of his head, thankfully taking what Azni could offer in exchange for his services. Out of anyone, she always gave him the most practical ‘currency’, in this case a small wooden toy for Indel to play with. As soon as the villagers had learned of his proficiency with spell work he found they were all eager to offer him payment for his abilities. And they had all quickly discovered that the best bribes to give him were books. Wonderful, interesting, glorious books. History. Folklore. Poetry. All of the best light elf authors. Forgotten tomes that analyzed and delved into the craftsmanship abilities of the dwarves. Battle strategies. Forgotten weapons and long lost races. And then of course, anything and everything to do with magic. Spells. Potions. Scepters and daggers forged by it. Tyrants felled by it.

He’d accumulated so many books by now he’d added a modest library to the cottage, filled from floor to ceiling with shelves for them all. He been working diligently under G’dath for a year and a half now, learning from her but this was light work outside of his apprentice duties. Something as simple as fixing a door to as complex as reinforcing the armor in the guard’s uniforms. He found himself quite content by it.

Here he wasn’t a prince or even a noble who had the weight and responsibilities of maintaining the family honor. Nor was he the Liesmith, the God of Chaos, or the trickster. He performed pranks, of course, but his goal was to enjoy them without getting caught. He was just ‘Lokhi’, a simple light elf who kept to himself and raised his child. No aspiration to come into power. The highest authority here was the town elder and looking after Indel was enough of a headache without having to tend to an entire village. He honestly couldn’t imagine how his mother had been queen and mother.

“Dada! Dada!”

A wide grin spread across his face. It did every time Indel called him that. He felt more important and powerful from that title than he ever had as a prince. Just a toddler with a shock of white hair that curled at the ends, but he’d started talking early and that was one of his two favorite words.

“Up! Up.”

And that would be the other one. He scooped Indel up, shooing the small verins with his free hand who ran back into the garden now that Indel wasn’t enticing them with small roots. Such a small boy, but Loki knew he was going to grow into a powerful mage like himself. His magic could sense the magic in Indel, different than his own and yet the same.

With a wicked gleam in his eyes he tossed his boy carefully in the air. Just a few inches, and caught him as Indel squealed happily. “Gain!” Lifting his eyebrow, Loki obeyed once more before tucking him against his side, chuckling when mischievous fingers found a lank of ebony hair and playfully tugged.

“Ouch.”

Indel clapped and let go, the ritual greeting game complete. Slender fingers danced lightly along the boy’s ribs, Loki smirking as peals of laughter responded before the elfling tried to bend over backwards to escape, knowing he wouldn’t be dropped. Finally the demi-god relented,
smoothing down the soft curls in Indel’s white hair. It was curious. He’d never seen an elf with naturally curly hair. It was remarkably similar to his own if he left it to dry naturally.

His son had managed in less than two years what Asgard hadn’t been able to in a 1000. He’d been tamed, now as clawless as a domesticated house cat. Well, perhaps that assessment wasn’t quite right since his temper hadn’t changed and he would never set aside his silver tongue. But he’d certainly been broken in for hugs and kisses, for tickles and stories. He changed his shape for his son’s amusement, played with him as often as possible, and was not opposed to cuddling with his boy at night when Indel decided his bed was scary.

Indel giggled, then sneezed, and three neon butterflies popped into existence from the accidental burst of magic. Loki watched with amusement as they fluttered about the boy’s head, one of them landing on his nose. Indel babbled and tried to catch it, the spelled creation disintegrating into a sprinkle of blue dust. The elfling pouted and Loki opened his palm, a green butterfly appearing in his palm. The boy squealed happily and reached for it, the fantasy creature ducking and evading his grip with the skill of a hawk.

“Lokhi.”

Loki turned and raised his hand in greeting, closing the gate to Azni’s garden behind him. “Elder Trax.”

Trax paused to give him a glare before shaking his head. “Just Trax, Lokhi.”

Shrugging lightly, mentally grinning with mischief. “I see nothing wrong in acknowledging a title you earned.”

Trax sighed before smiling at his boy. “Hello, Indel.”

Indel’s thumb slowly inched up towards his mouth. Loki reached up to stop the thumb, whispering gently. “Indel, what do we say?”

Those wide green eyes darted to his own before whispering softly. “Hello.” Loki inclined his head a little towards Trax who was patiently quiet. It was well known Indel was extremely shy. The toddler pulled in a big courageous breath before blurtting out ‘hello’ and hiding his face against Loki’s neck.

Loki smiled and patted his back, shifting him slightly so Indel’s arms could wrap around his neck. “What do you require of me, Elder Trax?”

Trax rolled his eyes and Loki bit the end of his tongue to keep from childishly sticking it out. His amusement faded as Trax spoke hesitantly. “I…I do not wish to pry, Lokhi, but have you ever been to any of the other realms?”

Loki felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. No one had ever questioned his vague responses as to his origins and it wasn’t as if Trax were outright asking him if he was a fraud but the question still made him cautious. He was a masterful liar and he had no problem teaching Indel to be exactly like him in that regard. At the same time, right now Indel was too young to understand the game and too much conflicting information would only confuse him. Keeping in mind that Indel was right there and being intentionally vague. “My voyages were few and far between but I have visited a few. Why if I may ask?”

An invisible, building tension seemed to fade. It wasn’t between himself and Trax, it was outside of that. He couldn’t explain it, but it was almost as if this were a test from an outside source.
Such a curious feeling. “I was wondering if you might take a look at this.”

Feigning nonchalance and silently building his magical stores just in case, he followed Trax into the community room to a series of scrolls and parchments spread out on a worktable. On the wall were very carefully maintained star charts with constellations and the world tree drawn in by freehand. Putting Indel on the floor near the table and handing him a toy to play with, he skipped over the scrolls to look over the map.

His eyes silently charted the unmarked dark paths he could follow to hop from realm to realm and even planet to planet. He was the only one that Yggdrasil had taught the winding branches that time had forgotten. There was quite a large path that would take him from here to Midgard directly in front of his house…then he frowned. There were several small planets missing in different realms and he glanced over his shoulder to see Trax nodding silently. “We do not know why, but whole planets are disappearing, as are some of the moons…none of the realms are threatened as of yet, but can you think of anything you have ever seen that could cause that?”

Pursing his lips, Loki tapped them with two fingers and thought carefully. There were several reasons. One planet gone could be a singularity or black hole. He’d seen plenty of creatures capable of creating such technology. A series in the same realm was probably a supernova and since no race had ever wanted to destroy themselves along with their enemy, those had always been natural phenomenon. This many in several different realms was something else, but he was hesitant to consider it a reality.

“What is the pattern?” Trax looked confused and Loki sighed, realizing Trax may have the map but he wasn’t the one who put it together. As pleasant a man as Trax was, he wasn’t overtly smart and it was tiring. “When did each orb disappear?”

Confusion clearing. “Oh, uh…” He rifled through the parchments before picking up a few and started rattling off places and times. With each one Loki would highlight a specific color next to where the planet used to be. He took a step back and felt his breath catch. Trax came up next to him and hissed. “You don’t think…”

The color coding made it painfully obvious. It was random and circular in the beginning but the course now was direct. They were coming here. He could think of one race that could do it, particularly from that region of the universe…and one creature that commanded them. Loki rattled off a vague possibility to Trax, “Perhaps the realms have gone to war?”

Trax frowned a little, eyes reflecting a disappointment that somehow Loki felt he was responsible for. “Perhaps.”

The AEsir had a word for it. A world eater. But there was no common language word for it. If he said it, it would lend suspicion to who he was and he didn’t owe anyone on this planet enough to allow them to discover the former Loki of Asgard was still alive. It was bad enough he and Indel were going to lose their safe haven in a short amount of time. It would be even worse if Asgard or Thanos had confirmation of his whereabouts before he was ready to disappear for a few centuries.

But it still left the question of why. Except he already knew the answer and it only took him a moment longer to realize it. Most of his secrets had been kept from Thanos, but not all of them. At the time he didn’t see any importance in handing his knowledge of the dark passages over. He could find them with magic. Thanos could find them with technology. But neither plotted the destination. To find out, one had to go through. Except he had explored the dark tunnels as a child and told Thanos of the one from this point to Midgard.
Spinning on his heels and reaching down for Indel, something else occurred to him and he sighed. “You might also try to reach out to Asgard.”

“Oh?”

Ignoring what had almost sounded like hope in Trax’s voice. If a world eater was truly coming here, this planet was doomed and that hope a fool’s dream. “The Bi-frost if used maliciously can wipe out whole planets. Perhaps they know something.” He teleported away before Trax could make a reply.

Loki looked around the healing room in surprise, not even consciously deciding to come here. But Indel was wiggling excitedly so he gave into the hint. He put Indel down, his son toddling up to G’dath with a happy grin. The elf bent down and hoisted him into the air, grinning when the boy squealed excitedly. She sent him a questioning look, settling the elfling on her hip. It wasn’t time for the boy’s checkup and the father didn’t look ill.

Loki started speaking hesitantly, certain the reason he was here would come to him as they talked. “I had a question…and as you seem to be the most educated person here I thought you might have the answer.”

She smirked just a little. “Hmm…fluffy flattery before the request, interesting.”

He huffed a little and sat down in one of the visitor’s chairs as she diverted her attention to Indel, whispering to him before sending him to the small play area in the corner. She took a neighboring chair and leaned back to get comfortable. Long minutes passed, a peaceful silence between them and then suddenly he knew what he wanted to know. “You called me a changeling, once.”

Expression thoughtful. “I did.”

Frowning. “Why? I am a mage so I use spells to change my form when I wish. And there is a glamor on me cast by the All-Father to appear AEsir.”

She could see there was a reason for the question. A reason that was at the very edge of his conscious thought and she worried what memory was hiding from him with the answer. But he was strong, stronger than even he knew. “Would you say that you can change your form easily?”

Loki shrugged. “Yes, but I usually master spells quickly.”

G’dath thought to herself before changing tactics. “How did you discover you were Jötunn?”

He blinked at the sudden switch of topics but answered honestly. “I-I was touched by a Frost Giant in battle.” Narrowing his eyes a little. “Why?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “You should know by now my questions lead to the answer.”

He raised his own eyebrow back at her. “I also know that your questions sometimes lead nowhere except to your weak attempts to humiliate me.”

Her lip quirked in amusement. “True, but this is not one of those times. If you will indulge me a little longer?”
Loki sighed and waved his hand, “Very well, this will be my attempt at indulging you.”

"My humblest thanks, kind sir.” He scowled at her and her lip quirked, ignoring his attitude. “The Jötunn touching you…it did not burn.”

He flinched just a little at the memory. A memory painful enough that it had started his madness induced rage. Adopted. Brought home like a war trophy and not even told all this time that the reason he could never measure up to Thor wasn’t even his fault. He was the weakling son of an enemy, not even the same species as his once-family, born to be a monster. “No…it turned my arm…blue.”

“And then with the touch gone the blue faded.”

Loki flexed his right arm and looked down, almost surprised it didn’t change. “Yes.”

G’dath forced her features to soften, just enough that the almost invisible tension in his shoulders eased. “I have no doubt that your father put spells on you to ensure your AEsir appearance, but such spells are countermanded whenever you change shape with another spell.”

Surprised he hadn’t thought of that. “You are correct.”

“Your father found you in Jötunheim, yes?”

Loki nodded in reply before expanding on what he hypothesized had occurred. “Yes, and changed me to look AEsir before taking me h-to Asgard.”

“As an infant?” Loki slowly nodded. She paused for a moment but kept her tone calm and even. “You do realize those appearance spells do not work on infants with their own magic.” Loki paled in realization. He had forgotten. How could he forget something so basic? But with that realization came the other that was even more distressing. G’dath continued describing her own conclusion. “I would suspect with one touch you changed yourself to appear AEsir and that is what made your father decide to take you home. I also suspect that when you heal in battle, it is not magic spells that heal you but your ability to reknit damaged tissue.”

Loki shook his head. “I cannot be a changeling.”

Her eyebrow quirked in amusement, not realizing the level of his distress. “Why not?”

“I-…” He winced and his hand pressed against his abdomen. G’dath frowned, hands moving to weave a spell but his hand caught her wrist. “No.” His voice was rough even if his hold wasn’t. He released her with a softer ‘no’. She tilted her head a little inquiringly as she obeyed but he shook his head and stood up, collecting Indel. He couldn’t think of it, not now. “Thank you, G’dath.”

She said nothing as he left, hands folded in her lap and lips pressed together. It was the first time since she’d met him that he’d seemed hollowed out and fragile. Grief and pain were dancing in his eyes, the source he wasn’t even aware of yet. She’d seen it before. She’d lived long enough to see a terrible war that an entire generation had that kind of pain suppressed. But no matter how devastating, those kinds of memories never stay buried forever. Tonight he would remember whatever he’d forced himself to forget, she was positive.

MIDGARD

Jane silently studied her reflection in the mirror. The gown hugged her curves and flowed
to the floor like spilled moonlight. Her caramel locks were wrapped in loosely curled tendrils and held in place by gems that winked and sparkled in the candlelight. She touched the delicate band of diamonds that hung around her neck and paused to stare at the band of silver and gold on her left finger.

I’m married?

Turning with grace, hand automatically grasping the dress to keep it out of the way, she flowed across the stone floor with an assurance that she’d never had a day in her life.

Am I dreaming?

The doors opened for her and she felt her breath catch in her throat. Asgard. Of course. But there was something strange. The table to the great hall overflowed with food and drink, but it was empty. She walked along the table, noticing that there were pieces of armor and weapons left behind, but nothing more. Turning towards the high table, Odin’s seat was empty with only his scepter leaning against the chair. The queen’s seat held nothing and no food was before it. To the right of her spot, two chairs where her children would sit. Thor’s seat was empty with Mjolnir resting there but the farthest seat, Loki’s seat, held a small dark-haired boy of perhaps six with bright green eyes.

While he bore a strong resemblance to Loki, his skin tone was more golden than the trickster’s pale peach. He grinned shyly and ducked his head, sliding out of his chair and slipping away with a shower of giggles. Jane blinked and started forward. “Wait!”

He paused at the balcony, turning to wink before disappearing outside, a trail of sparkling golden dust left behind. She didn’t even think, running after him and pausing to gasp in horror. Dead. They were all dead. They were felled where they stood as if none of them had time to react. Odin. Thor. Sif. Bodies thrown along the grounds, bloody and broken. Skin drying like November leaves in the sun. Death. Decay.

She turned away from the sight, feeling her insides turn to liquid and what was left of her stomach threatening to rebel. “Jane?” She felt him come up behind her and felt her body shiver. Fear. For the first time in a while she was actually afraid of him. Something about the way he spoke her name. A hint of malevolent cruelty. His cool breath whispered in his ear. “You didn’t really think you could save him, did you?”

Wrong voice. She whipped around, startled to see Loki’s face, but those strangely colored blue eyes from her other nightmares. She remembered them. The image of Loki shattered like glass, leaving behind the figure with deep grey skin that was almost purple. Who was he—what was he?

“I see why he protected you from me, little mortal.”

He shoved her and she went flying back into a stone pillar, gasping in pain as her back connected and this creature moved to tower over her. Jane found the strength to ask, “Who are you?”

He smiled down at her cruelly. “I am beyond your comprehension, little girl. I am infinite and absolute power. I will cause your skies to rain blood when I have decided you will be permitted to die at my feet as a tribute to death. I am Thanos, you disgusting mortal.”

He just grew taller and taller, towering above her by at least an extra five feet. Just a dream. This is just a dream. Her eyes flashed amber defiantly as she asked bluntly. “What do you want?”
His tone was so casual she shivered. “Such a simplistic, inane question. So predictable. I want death. Every life that I take and offer is one step closer to my lady death. And very soon, I will earn her favor when I topple the nine realms into nothingness.” He was absolutely insane and she shuddered. With a single finger of his gloved hand he stroked her chin and mockingly laughed when she jerked away from his touch. “And I shall tell you who you are. You are a perversity, distorted by my infinity gem...you are nothing.”

What the hell is an infinity gem? The Aether?

A huge hand wrapped around her neck entirely and squeezed. Jane’s eyes flew open in shock, the pain and suffocation too real, hands scrambling to beat against the clenching hand, legs kicking as he pushed her higher up on the column until he was supporting all her weight with her neck. She didn’t have the ability to scream. And the longer he strangled her, the weaker her struggles.

She choked and gasped for air she couldn’t take in. Pain. Fear. She was going to die. He was going to kill her in her sleep and no one would ever be the wiser.

No.

NO.

He laughed maniacally and squeezed just that much harder, Jane seeing stars burst in front of her eyes as her struggles weakened. She had a handful of breaths left, her heart pounding so hard against her ribs she felt her chest bruising and she panicked, one name burning through her throat.

"Loki...help..."

His hand suddenly released from her neck, grunting as he went flying past her to slam into the wall. Jane crumpled to the ground and coughed violently, holding her aching neck and unable to stand. Thanos turned to snarl as the little six year old with green eyes came up to her side and stared the other down coldly. The child’s eyes flashed gold, tone strange. “You have no right to trespass here and I cast you out, never to return.”

Growling as he stood back up. He knew Loki was still alive. Such a pathetically clever trickster, Thanos thought. Sneering at the boy before him. “You have not the capability, Jötunn runt. You are nothing but a weak-...”

The smirk didn’t belong on a face so young, voice correcting. “I am his magic, foolish Titan, not the man himself. I am all things and nothing. Yggdrasil will not allow your mad love of death to destroy the foundation of life.”

Thanos lost all semblance of eloquence in his rage. “Yggdrasil is not sentient! Who are you??”

A childish laugh, loud and clear that blended with other voices. Young and old. Male and female. Those green eyes glowed a brilliant gold. “Such a silly creature...I am as sentient as any of my children are.” The child of before may have been an image of Loki’s magic but that was not who was speaking now. But as intelligent as Thanos was, his knowledge lay in the realm of technology, not magic. “There is much I am capable of...ironic that the man you look down on understands more than you.”

A gesture and Thanos turned into a puddle, screaming before vanishing. The gold slowly
faded and those green eyes turned to Jane and held her captive. Her hand slowly slipped from around her neck. He slowly smiled and the familiarity of it shocked her.

That was my father’s smile. Why would Loki as a child have my father’s smile?

Her heart gave a painful thud. She knew. She couldn’t even think it but she suddenly knew who this little boy was supposed to be. Her right hand moved to her left, fingers smoothing over the band there. He nodded once. “I cannot hide Thanos from your memories anymore, dear one, but you will be protected. You will not remember this now, but you will with time. It is for you to decide, Jane. His life is in your hands…”

Jane gasped and jerked awake, blinking and staring at the ceiling with a slow frown before touching her forehead as the memories turned to golden dust and the words faded from her mind. She swallowed and winced before freezing. But she remembered something and she ran to a mirror, gasping to see large bruises forming around her neck. Not even with both hands could this have been her choking herself. Her heart stuttered in her chest as a name tumbled past trembling lips. “Thanos.”

She would not forget that name. She closed her eyes and ducked her head down to calm her breathing, laying her hands flat on the dresser as she breathed slowly in and out. Opening her eyes, she frowned as she glanced at her left hand. Something was missing but she didn’t know what. There was nothing in her memory. All that was left was a sense of longing as she glanced at the bare expanse on the ring finger of her left hand.

Author notes:

And the plot thickens.

To put this into context I wrote about half of this before I saw TDW.

I didn’t see Guardians until wa-ay later so everything I’ve developed for Thanos was purely based on speculation and internet research.

Next:

Thor ponders; Thanos plots; and Loki remembers
Chapter 12

ASGARD

Odin walked quietly out of the palace and stopped to gaze down the three paths before him. The main path that led into the villages still held flower tributes to his dear wife and he allowed himself a weary sigh. Death was never easy, but her death was even harder. The woman and wife that had been by his side for thousands of years. As seriously as he took his duty, she knew how much he loved her. At the time, he had meant it. He would let rivers of blood flow to avenge her, but now he realized the price of such a statement and his eyes moved to the Bi-frost path.

His youngest, not by blood but by choice, had been the price for such blind arrogance and it made him realize that perhaps Thor had been right; he was becoming a foolish old man. He had always been a better king than a father, but when his temper ruled him he made devastating mistakes. So focused on anger. So focused on revenge, he had failed to protect what he held most dear. It was turning out alright in the end, the few times he had looked in on Loki showing him that his son’s heart was mending but still…it could have been a tragic ending if not for little Indel.

Loki’s rage had turned into a living thing. A rage terrible enough to destroy worlds and deep enough to nearly tear their family apart. He was thankful more than ever for Frigga and Thor, who had helped Loki to temper that violent storm. Odin had known from the start that his youngest didn’t trust him, hadn’t trusted him in centuries but he couldn’t place when it had started to fall apart. But Odin knew Thor, no matter what he said, would never be able to give up on Loki. And even to the day she died, Loki had loved his mother wholly and completely in spite of his words.

He walked the path to the Bi-frost, seeing that the flowers left in remembrance of Loki had increased since the day his death was announced. Two and a half months to everyone else in the universe and Asgard’s grief had not abated. Another regret. He was not blind to the feelings and reactions of the court and nobles, but he was also very aware of how much his son was loved by the commoners of the realm. He had, however, been blind to Loki’s misery. He wondered if his son was even aware of that love.

“Sire, I have not been able to perceive an area of Alfheim for some time.”

Odin nodded slightly to himself. Heimdall served him and his family faithfully, and would instantly lay down his life if it were asked of him. One of the finest, most noble of warriors who could see and perceive the world tree with his golden eyes. This was one Asgardian Odin offered nothing except truth, his loyalty to Asgard unshakeable. “Yes, a small moon I believe.” And because this was a man who would keep to his own counsel, did he speak of the moon that sheltered his youngest. “It is a rather remarkable sphere. A very small population but time moves so much more quickly there. Indeed, a few years there would be but perhaps a year here.”

“I also perceive a danger drawing near.”

Odin had as well. It was subtle, but a recent missive from Alfheim left him no doubt that something drew near. A world eater. Such a weapon couldn’t destroy a world as big as Alfheim, but the moon would be easily consumed. “As do I, but we must give as much time as possible. Only through growth can change occur.”

Heimdall seemed to consider his words carefully before speaking again. “I have seen this magic before.”
The only magician that had been able to cloak himself from Heimdall’s sight. A trickster in the truest sense. “Yes, you have.” Odin knew of Heimdall’s dream. It was hard not to when one took the time to listen. He still remembered a very small trickster sitting at the gatekeeper’s feet, listening attentively to tales about the worlds and the stars. “He left this world the first time a petulant child and an arrogant fool.” As had Thor, and look how much his eldest had changed and grown in such a short amount of time. “The second time he was truly lost…” Grief stricken and broken from his mother’s death. In pain and fearful of being recaptured and tortured. “…but now he has a man’s responsibilities on his shoulders and he is holding the burden. You must have faith that I know what is truly needed.”

Heimdall bowed his head, a fist pressed to his chest over his heart. “Always, my king.”

And because Heimdall did have faith did Odin offer more. “Both of our dreams may still come to pass, Heimdall. I may still live to see both my sons happy and whole once more…and you may still see a glorious Asgard ruled by not just one, but two worthy kings.”

Thor drank mead from the goblet to his right and picked at the meat on his plate. He couldn’t remember the occasion for this particular feast and he found he didn’t really care. He’d grown apathetic to a lot of matters that he used to find such joy in. Everything that he did now reminded him of Loki, or reminded him of his absence. The only times he wasn’t reminded were when he was in the training yard so he spent endless hours there every day, hoping to sweat out his grief and break his heart of this stagnant state.

But during meals he would look to his right and expect to see Loki sitting quietly next to him, smirking to himself as his grey-green eyes studied and calculated. It had been years since Loki had last been there, but now he never could be again. His brother was dead.

Every evening when Thor retired to his rooms he had to resist the urge to go into the neighboring suite next to his own. The one that had been Loki’s for almost a thousand years. He’d ordered the servants to keep it clean but locked, no one allowed to enter or remove any of his brother’s possessions. His father had surprised him by silently nodding in agreement.

Horseback riding.

The library.

The special balcony that they had discovered near the highest point of the palace.

“Fandral the Dashing!”

Thor looked up, distracted from thinking of all the many places emptiness now resided. The warriors were all getting quite drunk, the feast having progressed to the typical demands for tales of might and glory.

“Aye! Fandral, regale us with a tale of the warriors 3.”

“Aye!”

“And Sif.”

“And Thor!”

A chorus of “Thor” filled the large room and Thor nodded slightly to them all in thanks, raising his glass a little off the table. Fandral grinned to himself, stroking down his mustache with
two fingers as he considered. “Hm…well, I could regale you with tales of wine, women, and dancing…”

“Nay!”

“We need an adventure!”

Fandral polished off his hands of bread crumbs, standing and putting his foot on the chair seat, leaning in. “Then allow me to tell the tale of how the six of us defeated the immortals of Vanaheim.”

“And who is the sixth warrior of this tale?

“Aye!”

Fandral looked genuinely surprised. The tale had been told a hundred times by now, the adventure itself more than two hundred years old. “Prince Loki, of course.”

“Aick, not a trickster’s tale!”

“Aye, we need a warrior’s tale and more mead-…”

There were times when fury had to be expressed but Thor was not eloquent and he never would. He was a man of action and he wasn’t even aware of that action until the table in front of him was overturned and he was standing with dangerous anger in his eyes. They were all quiet, even his father, who was sitting at the high table and rarely stayed so long into the feast. The words poured out of him, a growl in his voice and blue eyes flashing like lightning. “My brother was a warrior, and I will kill any man who ever says differently.” Slowly he looked up and down the table, less than sober eyes meeting his gaze and listening. “Any of you who are here tonight who have heard a tale of Thor, it was Loki’s tale as well for he was always there. Thor, Sif, the warriors 3…and Loki.”

Fandral swallowed something stuck in his throat, sitting down and no longer interested in telling tales. “He was my shield brother. My brother. And any man that disparage his memory makes a mockery of a man worthy of Valhalla.”

Thor left, having more than his fill of their company for the evening.

Thor stared out at the night sky with his arms crossed. The boy that had dragged his brother and friends to Jötunheim had been prone to raging and upturning tables in fits of anger. He wasn’t that boy anymore but sometimes the habits of a lifetime were difficult to break. He was the first born son of a king and sometime soon he would be king himself. His broad shoulders slumped almost imperceptively. He wasn’t ready. With Loki at his side he had felt ready. With Loki he had felt invincible, because his brother would have been the one to best advise him.

But then everything had gone to Hel and he’d lost almost everything. He blinked with the realization that he didn’t want to be king. It was an obligation, now. A duty. A burden. If it came down to a choice of having Frigga and Loki back at the cost of the throne he’d gladly give it. He almost sighed when his door opened. But he knew who it was without turning. “I apologize for this evening.”

Odin said nothing as he crossed the distance and joined him on the balcony, face unreadable. He knew if Thor realized Loki was alive, nothing would stop him from going to his brother’s side, which would do nothing but hinder his youngest’s development. But he hated seeing his eldest in such pain.
His tone filled with gruff authority. “It is unbecoming behavior of a future king…” But then Odin softened his tone slightly. “…but these have been trying times, and tempers are easily frayed as of late.”

Thor clenched a fist in remembered anger. “They would dare to insult his memory…”

Odin cut Thor off, barely stopping himself from sighing. “You have to stop fighting your brother’s battles, Thor.”

Thor took no notice of his father using the present tense. “If I had stood up to shield him sooner none of this would have happened.”

Odin simply couldn’t understand why his eldest continued to think of his brother as nothing more than a misbehaving child who needed to be taken in hand. “Thor. Your brother is not helpless. He never was. Nor is he a child that requires your guiding hand.”

“Yet he doubted we ever loved him, does that not say anything to you?” Odin blinked slowly, frowning slightly and listening as Thor continued. “Never has the house of Odin stood as a united front. Asgard looked to Loki as tolerated by you…and I was just as guilty in forgetting his value to me.”

Stunned and privately horrified. “Tolerated?” In court he had never shown favoritism. Had he? Contests and feats of strength were held and rewards were merited. Is it his fault that Thor had always won at those contests? Both of his sons were given placement at the high table, as only an acknowledged child of the king would be given. Both of his children had received the best in training, the same sized rooms, the same expenses for clothing and armor. They were given their pick of weapons, Loki had simply preferred throwing knives and handheld blades…

He blinked to himself, his blue eye landing on Mjolnir. No, he had forgotten something…and it troubled him greatly. After acknowledgement of their warrior status, a prince or princess was given several symbols over the years to show their worth of succession. Armor. Helmet. Weapon. How could he have forgotten such an important rite of passage for Loki? Even knowing that as the eldest lest Thor prove incompetent the throne would be his, his youngest should still have received his just due. Every AEsir knew the symbols of a prince’s worth. That he would not receive a weapon would have been perceived by the court as validation that Loki was not worthy of the throne.

This is my fault. Loki was fully grown and capable of deciding the course of his life but he was the catalyst.

Thor snarled, oblivious to his father’s inner turmoil. “I was hardly blameless of faults as a child, but what punishments I received were behind closed doors-Loki was punished before the court. He became a mockery to them, the less favored son.”

Now Odin sighed. “Because he never failed to involve half of Asgard in his mischief.” It was just an excuse, and he knew it as soon as he uttered it. He’d never known quite how to control Loki, his mischief taking an ominous turn as he grew older. And the harder that he tried, the more sly and slippery Loki had grown.

Thor knew only too well of Loki’s years after he’d been declared a warrior. Rebellion festered hotly in his brother’s blood for centuries.

“Brother, why??” Loki smirked a little, arms crossed as he stared out at the training
yards. “You are forcing father into this position, Loki. He would not react so harshly—"

A single digit was raised and wagged back and forth. “Stop asking questions you do not wish answered, Thor.”

Thor flinched a little, well used to his brother displaying a bit of his power in warning and seeing it’s utter lack hurt him. “Loki?”

Loki glanced at him over his shoulder and sighed. “Perhaps you should go train with the others.”

“But you are to be confined for a whole month! I do not wish to leave you alone.”

Raising an amused eyebrow, but the gray-green eyes hid pain and exhaustion. “So you intend to stay with me the entire time? Indoors? Idle and reading books?”

Thor was already dancing from foot to foot before looking guiltily at him. “I’m sorry, Loki.”

Loki shrugged lightly, the shoulders too tense for the movement to be casual. “The month will pass quickly. Better than having to muck stables for a week by hand.” He waved a hand at Thor, the smirk strained. “Go. Training is more your pastime than mine.”

Thor grinned and reached out to squeeze the back of his brother’s neck, oblivious to the tension under his palm. He didn’t see anything wrong, but whether it was that Thor simply didn’t wish to see or not was unknown. “I’ll be back to visit soon.” The thunderer gave a second wave before he walked out the doors, the wood closing behind him. Loki sighed in relief as soon as he was gone, idly scratching at the golden bands biting into his wrists, cutting off his magic. It was like someone had reached in and yanked his soul out, leaving him hollow and dead.

He couldn’t use magic, but he could still write runes and after he pushed his work table back he made a small circle of them before sitting in the center. It was more than exhaustion as he sat down heavily. He felt like the years that he’d lived, all 412 of them, were stacked on top of his body. He wouldn’t live a month like this. It wasn’t that he was being melodramatic, instinctively he knew what Odin didn’t. Being deprived of his magic would slowly kill him.

Although he was quite certain father wouldn’t care even if he tried to explain it. What was good for Asgard would always be more important than what was good for Loki. He curled into a ball as he felt the world slip away, suddenly someplace dark and dangerous. But he was safe, and smiled weakly as a young girl walked up to him swiftly. Her face was always so carefully blank in public, but her green eyes held concern. “Father?”

“Hela...”

She would free him of these damned constraints.

She would protect him.

His daughter cared.

Thor turned away, staring at the distant mountains. He wasn’t a man of words and he didn’t have enough of them to argue his point. Unknowingly they were both thinking of the times when Loki’s magic would be bound before the court, but only Thor knew of after. Because he had
returned from the training yards to find no Loki, just the runes drawn into his floor. He’d never said a word to anyone, merely set up a vigil in the shadows until Loki finally did return looking tired and drawn. The bracelets were placed carelessly on his work desk and Loki stumbled to his bed to sleep.

A day. A month. However long the punishment was announced Loki would stay quietly in his rooms and on the day when he was to return to the court to be released he would put back on the bracelets. Thor had never asked his brother why, but he was starting to think he should have.

What Thor had no knowledge of was the last time that Odin had ever attempted to stifle Loki’s magic in punishment. He couldn’t remember the reason he’d been walking down his children’s wing, just that he’d passed by Thor’s door, his eldest at the training yard, and paused at his youngest’s who was practicing spells in a book. Green magic drifted like smoke around his fingers, sparkling as it moved and conformed into different shapes with each word.

Loki turned and bowed his head slightly. “All-Father.”

Odin frowned to himself sternly, voice booming. “How have you done this, Loki? You were not to have your magic unbound until the morrow.”

Loki’s entire body stiffened before he pressed his lips together in an angry line for several seconds. When he did speak it was tightly controlled, head bowed so Odin couldn’t see the insolent fury flashing there. “Your scribe has marked your calendar incorrectly or else you have forgotten, yesterday was to be my release.”

He clasped his hands behind his back, his shoulders straightened in displeasure and Odin ignored the possibility that he was wrong. “So you have decided to defy me?”

The quiet reply ripped Odin with shock. “No, sire, my daughter has freed me. And since you have now proven your own words and edicts false, she has promised that the next time I go to her for aide she will not release me to you again.” Then those grey-green eyes looked up at him, pierced through him, and silently dared him to test her resolve. “Less you choose to cast me out of Asgard, you will have to discover a different way to give the court pleasure with my pain.”

What Thor was saying had been a nagging thought at the back of Odin’s mind for some time. Yes, Loki being punished away from the court might have made him look weaker as a king… but was that worth the doubt of Loki’s own worth that followed? Odin held pride with great importance. Pride he’d instilled in his sons…and it became the agent for their mistakes. He was starting to wonder if it was too important. His father Bor had drummed into him that a king was never wrong. That a king had only three things: pride, honor, strength. He’d kept those three things and had lost two-thirds of his family because of it.

Yet more mistakes and regrets. He understood what his son was trying to say, but for Loki’s sake he had to continue to play his part as if his youngest were dead and this argument were pointless.

Tone authoritative. “Thor, you need to do more than wander the grounds.”

“I train, father.”

Odin nodded slowly. “I know that you do…you need a purpose. Perhaps an inquiry as to the state of Midgard is in order.”
Thor shook his head after a moment. “I cannot go there yet, not unless there was peril.” Odin wasn’t certain what he saw crossing Thor’s face but he had a suspicion Thor’s resistance had to do with a certain mortal scientist. “Has Heimdall seen something?”

“Not as of yet.”

“And the Bi-frost?” Thor looked up, a hopeful spark in his eyes. Odin had to agree that some time away from Asgard would do his son some good and he had a quiet suspicion on where his eldest wished to go. But he wasn’t going to ask. Then he wouldn’t have to say ‘no’.

“The repairs are completed and will be announced in a week’s time.”

All that Thor could think is that those repairs would have gone so much more smoothly if Loki had been in charge of them. His brilliant, innovative brother. But he didn’t voice it. But it was giving him an idea. Perhaps a visit to another realm was in order once the opening of the Bi-frost was common knowledge. Nodding slowly. “Then I will tour our borders with Sif and the Warriors 3 until then.”

OUTSIDE THE NINE REALMS

“I am displeased, elf.”

Malekith stiffened but didn’t voice the outrage, choking on it instead. He had once been a king of the dark elves and the most powerful mage in the nine realms. But that was a long time ago, and there were so few left of his race it no longer mattered. His world was dying and his few remaining people scattered to the four winds. And even though he and Thanos worked towards a common goal of toppling the nine realms back into darkness, he didn’t doubt that Thanos would offer him up as tribute to death for retorting. So long as Thanos controlled the Infinity Gems in his possession, Malekith would do his bidding…until favor turned in his direction.

Thanos, the mad Titan as he was called, was quite powerful. Powerful enough with his intellect and technology to return Malekith’s limbs to him and snatch him away from death moments before it happened. Powerful enough to hold telepathic sway over the legions that swarmed around them. This was not a creature to underestimate.

Loki of Jötunheim...how clever of Asgard to raise a Jotunn to think of himself as AEsir. Malekith remembered him. From his point of view, the first time he’d met Loki had been on Svartalfheim...and the last had been when the Chitauri had dragged the half dead prince to an abandoned rock until he was more agreeable for invading Midgard. He was certainly not the same, broken creature in the clutches of the Other. Vicious and conniving...but still so breakable. “The loss of the runt is a minor setback...”

Thanos raised a hand slightly, dismissive for now. “The Jötunn runt is of no consequence, dead or alive. All that matters to me is the infinity stone that you lost to Asgard.”

The need of revenge burned like an ember in Malekith’s chest but he focused himself in a different direction for now. Thor would pay in blood and all of Asgard with him. “A minor problem but now yet another stone is in one place within your grasp. The mortal that joined with the Aether still lives. She could still be useful.” That she lived so long with the Aether inside of her was intriguing.

Thanos growled a deep rumble of anger. Her mind was not more powerful than his, and certainly not with the modifications in his helmet to amplify his telepathy. Something magical was
preventing him, protecting her, and it stank of the trickster prince. “I am aware, but something helps her mind to elude me. Now I can merely sense her, her mind occluded to my influence.”

Malekith frowned slightly before moving the conversation forward. “Our forces-…”

“Our?”

Smoothly correcting himself. “Your forces gather. The Chitauri swarm grow near to Midgard and will soon destroy it.”

Thanos nodded in satisfaction. The Chitauri were such useful creatures. The Other and those within the world eater all that remained of their race. Not that it mattered to him. More tributes to his beloved. “Good. How long?”

Malekith easily calculated the time and wondered if Thanos truly didn’t know or was simply toying with him. “Without a direct portal they make for the dark passage of Alfheim, a matter of months, but your goal will soon be within sight.”

The titan spoke quickly, eagerly. “And the Mind Gem, has my servant discovered where the mortals have secreted it?”

Personally Malekith thought Thanos had been an idiotic fool for giving it to Loki in the first place but he held his tongue. The Jötunn runt had barely been cognizant enough to follow the Other’s plan, which had been weak in his opinion. And that Thanos had put so much trust in it he just gave the Mind Gem for Loki to utilize to subdue a few human minions, rampant stupidity. But it wasn’t yet time for him to express his true feelings concerning this titan’s insanity. “He has not seen it for himself but it is in a desert location the humans call…New Mexico.”

Thanos flexed his gloves, arm resting on his throne. “I want the gem in his possession before the swarm is upon Midgard.”

Malekith nodded slightly. “Of course.”

Thanos smiled cruelly as he watched the dark elf walk away. He smoothed his hand over the arm rest as if caressing his lover, murmuring to himself as he imagined finally possessing the power of a god. “Soon my Lady Death…soon I will have a fitting tribute for you…and finally have your favor.”

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ALFHEIM

There was but one image before him when he opened his eyes and Loki sighed to himself. It annoyed him when his mind and his magic teamed up against him, for he was firmly convinced at times his mind did things completely without his consent. There would be no choice in how he would be spending his sleeping hours tonight. He walked forward into the image of his dream, frowning to see he was surrounded by almost complete darkness.

There were vague shapes in the background, but it was like a distant tree or bush, inconsequential. He looked up to see the stars in an unfamiliar pattern. Whatever he was seeing, it was not a location he was familiar with even if it was his memory. The rock under his boots seemed vaguely familiar and as his eyes adjusted to the dimness around him he felt cold fear grip at his spine.

It was him. Himself.
Just a memory.

Just a distant...ugly memory.

He was tied down, his wrists and ankles restrained to give him just enough room to twist and scream but not enough give to break free. Not that he’d had any strength left after months of torture. They’d tried to get every scrap of useful information he had about Asgard, Odin, and Thor but he’d given them nothing. His anger at Odin’s betrayal of his trust had turned on his capturers. Information that he would have given freely if they’d had the intelligence to woo him he now hoarded and guarded as his own secrets. He gave them nothing, locking anything they could use in the maze of his own mind and only provided outdated information or complete fictions when the pain became too much.

He’d barely survived his journey with the Tesseract from here to Midgard after they’d gotten through with him. To this day his time on Midgard was still hazy at best. Moments in time. He remembered emerging from the Tesseract and fighting for his life, but he couldn’t remember the why. Instinct perhaps.

The Other had laid out a plan and he followed it, not really caring if it succeeded or not. Thor. Thor was his next vivid memory and for a moment he’d been happy to see him. But with the realization that they weren’t really brothers and the thunderer probably didn’t even know that the brother he claimed to love was really just a Jötunn runt his hazy state returned.

The Black Widow.

Iron Man.

The green menace had been a vivid memory, and the pain that followed had left him shocked to the core. At the time he’d wondered how a planet full of ants had managed what Thor alone had not. Now that he had a background of their science, he was starting to appreciate how grossly ignorant he had been. Not that Thor had been trying particularly hard to defeat him, his punches tempered by his love for him. There was no haziness from that point on, as if the beating had knocked the sense back into him. He’d put up no further resistance, thankful though his pride would never let him admit it, that he would finally be going home.

He took another look around. The Other was here, he remembered that, but he forced away his other memories to focus on this apparently important moment he’d forgotten. One of the Other’s minions was poised with a blade over his abdomen, his armor cut away and he helpless to protect himself in his prone state.

Loki blinked slowly, brow furrowed and confused by what he was seeing. Something was out of place.

Wrong.

Not right, but it was so confusing he couldn’t even give the wrongness a label. He was obviously in the clutches of the Chitauri, after his fall from the Bi-frost but before his attack on New York. He just didn’t remember this. Why? Why would he forget this and not all the rest done to him? And why in the name of Hel would I choose now to remember?

The image became a moment in time. The figures assuming natural shapes. He could smell stale blood and ash. He could hear things slithering in the distance. He could feel the cold of this barren asteroid trying to leach the warmth out of him and he shivered. The Other walked into view, a staff used as a guide as well as a power source and cloth over his eyes. He nodded
sightlessly to the minion. “It is time.” The words were hissed, bloody teeth bared and the knife descended.

As the blade slowly slipped through flesh screams of pain from the bound figure chorused with the singing of the blade. Loki became detached from it, not hearing but unable to look away. Bright red blood beaded, dripped and finally poured along the alabaster flesh, coating the body before him. A moment later. An eternity later, the blade was removed. Fingers pried open flesh. Shivers of pain shook the form as shock took hold and Loki watched with detached interest as bloody flesh was removed from the swollen abdomen.

Loki felt like he was in shock. Had they dissected him, taken out all of his insides? Not even an AEsir could survive that. Had he died, is that what this was? Was he some perverse echo of the prince he had once been and he was just now remembering this. No, that couldn’t be it. He dreamed. He lived. Indel, he loved Indel. These were not the emotions of a fiction.

But as he watched the bound figure’s insides were sealed and sloppily healed, leaving behind a long scar and Loki frowned, reflexively pressing a hand to his own abdomen. He had this scar. How had he forgotten how he’d received it? Why?

A cry drew his attention, no longer focused on the bound form of himself who was slowly slipping into unconsciousness. A cry of a newborn being passed to the Other and he felt ice course through his veins like a lightning strike.

At the core of him he was magic, and magic was the foundation of life.

His honor had been taken from him, only once, but once had been enough.

“NO!” The image swirled and started to fade, Loki reaching out a beseeching hand towards the tiny infant he’d forgotten as his mind fractured and broke, a whisper from trembling lips. “…no…”

In a detached manner Loki knew that it was morning. Other than it being a fact, it didn’t hold much bearing to him. Instead his fractured mind drifted to a memory from long ago.

Changeling – a creature born of a singular species capable of imitating a completely different species on a biological level.

Shape shifter – a magician that imitates the exterior structure of another species

Loki blinked slowly before looking up from the book he was holding out to his mother with a small frown. “Then what is the difference, mother?”

Frigga smiled gently, reaching out to smooth his wild hair obscuring his green eyes. “It is a subtle difference my son, but important.”

He shrugged and pouted. “But the tutor couldn’t explain it.”

Her smile grew just a little as she imagined the blush on the tutor’s face. Her little one had grown to the stage of asking sometimes embarrassingly awkward questions in the most inappropriate places. Odin had been adamant that he was not having this conversation at the feast.
and left their youngest in her hands.

She picked him up and pulled him into her lap, content as he curled back against her.

“Then I will give you an example. A little elf boy is born, but he is a changeling. A second little elf boy is born but he is a shapeshifter.”

“Oka-ay.”

Frigga nodded and tapped his nose with a finger. “The two little elf boys decide they want to be Vanir today, so they change their shape...are they the same?”

“Yes!”

She shook her head slightly. “No. The first little elf boy is different, on the inside.”

Loki scrunched up his nose in confusion. “How is he different?”

Frigga thought carefully, knowing that Loki was very curious, but her son was also young enough that a simple explanation would be better for now. “Because changelings can be a boy or a girl. So even though they both look like Vanir boys, on the inside the first boy is different. He’s special.”

His frown deepened. Loki knew from his books the body parts that made boys and girls different but that was about it. “How is he special?”

Frigga patted his back. “Because on the inside since he is pretending to be Vanir, he is both a girl and a boy. So, if he wanted he could have a baby.”

He wrinkled his nose, not able to imagine why people wanted babies. “Why would he want a baby?”

She wrapped him in a cuddle. “Because if I could have a million more babies just like you I would.”

Loki turned his face to press against her neck, little fingers grasping for the soft material of her dress. “Love you, mumma.”

Kissing the top of his head. “And I love you, my little trickster.”

Loki wished he could just sleep and dream forever. Stay wrapped up in that dream that was a memory of a happier childhood and never remember anything else. But he couldn’t. He couldn’t remember why but he knew he had to wake up. He slowly opened his eyes, feeling eyes on him and blinking slowly. It was morning.

I don’t care.

He forced himself to care. He forced himself to keep breathing, in and out. He knew what this was. This curiously lost, detached state of being. He’d lost himself once completely, broken and pliant, it had been a slow process to remember who he was. Days. Weeks. Months.

Tired. Need to sleep. Want to sleep-

He didn’t have that luxury now. Someone needed his care and protection. Someone important. He knew what he had to do. He had to remind himself of who he was and he recited the
words that had become a mantra.

He was Loki, of Asgard. He had been a prince.

Prince?

Yes, he had been a prince. He had—he was a son. He was a brother. He remembered what had been lost, but he couldn’t dwell on it. He forced himself not to. He forced himself to evaluate his present.

He was on Alfheim’s moon, in the cottage he had built with his magic. He was no longer under their control, he was no longer under Asgard’s control. He was, in a fashion, free. He fanned out his senses just to be sure, his coiled muscles relaxing to confirm what his mind believed.

His magic tentatively spread from his fingertips, from his mind, from his heart, and brushed against the fledgling magic of his son. Indel. The boy that needed him. The boy that loved him. He’d saved a child, not the child of his blood but the child of his heart, just as important and just as deeply loved. It soothed him. It reassured him. He was safe, now. He was home. It helped him to pull himself back together again.

His eyes moved to take in the figure next to him. Green eyes were peering back at him from his bedside, little fingers toying with the covers and innocent face grinning. “Dada?”

Loki took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He’d forgotten what he couldn’t protect. No doubt the infant was long dead and no matter how the child had been conceived, it was HIS. His blood. His choice. And they’d stolen that choice from him, as they’d stolen everything else. There would be no forgiveness to be found. Thor had stopped him once from destroying Jötunheim, for the sins of his sire, but this the Chitauri would pay for in blood and no one would stop him. It was time they remembered what the nine realms had forgotten.

Loki, the conqueror of Helheim.

While a part of him mourned and howled, the rest began to plan. There were three that were responsible. The Chitauri he already had something special for the few that remained but three specific wastes of life that would fear his name. Three that would pay the price for taking from him.

They were wrong to underestimate him. Malekith had been wounded and defeated by Thor but not destroyed. Loki had felt him slip through the fabric of reality. He’d lost control of the Aether but not his life. The dark elf’s death would be a very personal affair he would take great pleasure in. The Other, he knew where he was. His tentacles were already stretching out to spread discord…and quite frankly it was insulting. And Thanos. He was so certain of the trickster’s limits and his weaknesses. So certain that he would be an easy kill. Fool.

He smiled softly, his face stretching to assume the emotion of happiness that was sluggish to respond and pulled Indel into his arms. The little boy let out a happy exhale and rested the side of his face on his chest. Running his fingers through white hair, he allowed the plan to drift. Indel was too little, for now. But one day soon, he would set the heavens ablaze to avenge the child that he had lost…and hopefully his little elfling would be old enough to help.

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Author’s Notes:

A lot going on in this chapter and I didn't give any warnings just because I felt the warning in the
summary was enough.

That's about as graphic as I get when it comes to such things. I much prefer to write the hurt/comfort in the aftermath.

Next:

Thor and Hela chat; Loki lives in denial; and Jane dreams
Chapter 13

HELHEIM

The dark palace of Helheim stood grandly against the eternal twilight of the skies. It was comfortable for the dead and demons that lived here to not be plagued with sunlight and it suited the occupant of the palace just fine. She wore her traditional gossamer robes, cinched tightly in a bodice, the right side of her body pale and ethereal beauty while the left a decay of skeletal flesh. Atop her head, a pronged crown. Queen Hela. The goddess of the underworld and ruler of Hel.

Once the demons of Helheim had run wildly and rampant across the planet, but that was before they had been conquered and tamed. There were no pretty words of surrender. No previous king or queen to usurp. Power and might had been required, she and Loki accepting the challenge. She would never know how many legions they fought, but with each success they would become part of their army, forced to fight for them rather than against them. It was the cleverest spell she’d ever seen Loki use, and it was one he’d made up.

As the queen she was now the living embodiment of death, and would remain as such, never aging again until Ragnarok took them all. She was content with her existence since she was under the rule of no one, save perhaps father. But he didn’t give orders, he made silky requests that she was all too eager to complete on his behalf. Her existence confused and befuddled Asgard but she’d never had a hard time accepting that she was unique. An unexplained. An aberration. But she’d never been unwanted by Loki, which allowed her to accept and move on. She was a creature of the present, not the past, so she didn’t dwell.

Another clang filled the air and she frowned to herself. By Hel what was that infernal racket? Sighing, she ignored the few souls drifting in their ghostly way in the court room bowing, and swept through the halls towards the entrance to Helheim. To Gnipa-cave where Garm guarded the entrance.

Her one eyebrow lifted, since the left side of her face had none, to see a group of Asgardians fighting with the monstrous hound who guarded the realm of the dead. Slowly, she let her head fall into her hands, muttering under her breath about idiotic uncles.

Thor was swinging Mjolnir, grinning as he dodged the large hound with four eyes, Sif swearing as more blood from the animal’s chest smeared on her armor. “Thor! This isn’t working!” Hogun continued to mirror her movements, face set grimly and silent as ever.

Ignoring Sif, Thor stayed focused as his blue eyes narrowed. “I will have audience with Hela, Garm, you shall not impede me forever.”

Garm barked a laugh. “I cannot die until Ragnarok, foolish creatures.” He bared a double set of fangs. “You can, however.”

Fandral yelled as he used Volstagg as a springboard, leaping on the creature’s back before immediately getting tossed off. He landed in a heap next to Hela who raised an amused eyebrow, expression unreadable. Fandral paused to bow to her slightly as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Milady.”

Tilting her head slightly in greeting. “Fandral.”

He leaned in a little towards her, looking her in the eyes and unaffected by her appearance.
“You look as delightfully ravishing as ever, Queen Hela.”

Crossing her arms, then damning herself when she did it because she knew it was a defensive move both she and Loki were guilty of committing. “Do you know how many pieces father would slice you into were he to hear you flirting with me?”

Reaching out to kiss her hand, she damning herself again for blushing. “It would be well worth it, fair maiden.”

Sif growled. “FANDRAL.”

He grinned at Hela charmingly before throwing himself back into the thick of things. Garm lunged for Thor who swung his hammer again. TWANG. Garm shook his head and backed up. Well, that explained all the noise. Dark energy crackled around Hela, voice thundering. “ENOUGH.”

All of them paused, Thor turning before grinning. “Niece!”

Eyebrow still raised, Hela’s tone unimpressed. “Am I? How many centuries since last we met?”

Thor’s face fell with guilt. Sif slowly shook her head. “With only one sentence she can gut you with guilt, definitely Loki’s daughter.”

If it was possible Hela’s expression grew colder. “And you must be Sif.” The dark haired warrioress blinked in surprise at the icy tone that matched the expression. “Yes, father mentioned you. I have been hoping for quite some time now that someone will foolishly say my name on Asgard so that I might chat with you.”

Sif was shocked at Hela’s reception. Even when Hela had been on Asgard, she was always at Loki’s side so she had never had proper introductions with the warriors. “We have never officially met.”

A skeletal hand stroked through her own dark locks. “I know what happened. My advice, get over it.”

Sif’s jaw firmed at the reminder of her lost golden hair. “You would take the word of a trickster as truth?”

Hela smirked in delight at such a question. “Since I am also a trickster, yes. I would.”

Fandral looked at Volstagg and sighed. “Is she not divine?”

Volstagg shook his head. “Loki would hang you up by your heels.”

Hela sighed and turned to Thor. “What do you want, uncle, I grow weary of your friends.” Her eyes flashed at Sif. “They irritate me.”

Thor looked uncomfortable, something secretive in his eyes. “I would speak with you of a family matter.”

The fleshy lips on the right side pursed for a fraction of a second. “Garm, return to your post. I am pleased.” She turned around to face her palace. “You may enter, your friends may not…” She paused to look over her shoulder, her eyes flashing emerald green. “…unless they wish to never leave again.” Fandral winked at her and she growled as she blushed yet again. Damn him.
Sif shook head. “Thor—”

Thor smiled. “Fear not, Hela would no more kill me than Loki would.”

She argued insistently. “He tried to kill you! Several times.” Her tone turned somber, thinking of Midgard. “He even succeeded once.”

His mirth faded but not his resolve. There were many things he held Loki accountable for but not necessarily for that act. He was known to forget his own strength in the heat of battle. He’d never asked but it was possible Loki forgot he was dealing with a mortal Thor at the time. It was a question that would rest dormant in his heart, to be asked when they were reunited again. “Then I will fight my way out of Hel. Remain here.” He turned to follow Hela, sounding excited at the prospect while Sif clenched her fists silently.

Hela sighed up at him once he caught up. “Such drama.”

“Are you well, n—?”

She hissed the words at him under her breath. “Shut up.” He blinked in surprise but obeyed, following her down a winding corridor before entering after her into a set of rooms. Once the door closed behind them with a shudder she shifted her form, her changeling ability leaving her to appear the pale girl she truly was, without the guise of half her body decomposing. Shaking her head and flopping gracefully into a chair, setting her horned crown aside. “Father’s right, you’re an idiot.”

Thor frowned down at her. “What have I said?” He paused to look over the runes carved in a circular pattern in the floor. It was a very familiar set. In fact, he was almost positive something similar was carved under the work table in Loki’s room.

She huffed at him as if it were obvious. “Do you think I advertise our familial ties to the dead? I appear that way in court for a reason. There are plenty of foes you have vanquished who would take advantage of such knowledge. You have a great many enemies, uncle, and not the cunning to protect yourself from your vulnerabilities.”

Thor was so focused on the runes he didn’t even hear what she had said. “I have seen this before.”

Hela rolled her eyes, cursing herself for even bothering. “Of course you have. Father would visit me quite often as a young warrior when Odin was being unreasonable.”

His tone disapproving. “Unreasonable?” She stared at him coldly and he growled the words softly. “Do not insult the All-Father, niece.” Hela made a snatching gesture and Thor gasped as he fell to his knees, Mjolnir impossibly heavy at his belt. He felt as weak as he did as a human, but as he stared at her the feeling grew worse, not better. It was like his skin was stretching thin, the years coming down on his shoulders like boulders. “N-niece?”

A golden bracelet clinked as it hit the floor and rolled towards him. He recognized it. It was the band put on Loki’s wrists as punishment when he’d been younger. She hissed in restrained fury. “Describe that sensation to Odin for me, for that is what he subjected father to when he cut off his powers…only this would have eventually killed him in but a few days time.”

Her clenched fist relaxed and strength rushed back to the thunderer in a tidal wave. It took him a few moments to get his bearings, and even then he still felt shaky. All those times Loki had been in that kind of pain and not once had he spoken. “He never told me—…”
Hela snapped at him. “He shouldn’t have had to. Even were I not a mage I could see the pain in his eyes. You chose to see only what you wished to see. You always have, Uncle.”

Thor pulled himself to his feet, scooping up the bracelet. “I need to speak with Loki.”

A bitter smile curled her lip, unable to keep her tone even. “Ah, so not here to seek my company, then.”

Thor blinked slowly, seeing Loki in that expression. His brother was a walking contradiction but even when he was spitting poison, sometimes his suppressed emotions bled through. He set down Mjolnir and crossed the distance, picking her up and hugging her, ignoring her squeak as much as he’d always ignored Loki trying to wiggle loose. “It is good to see you, niece.”

She didn’t reply until he set her back on her feet, her green eyes flashing and looking like a riled cat. “Do NOT do that again.” He grinned at her fondly and with a snarl she stomped to the mirror to fix her hair before she sighed with a huff. “Why do you need to see father?”

His expression became woeful. “So he is here. He was not granted an honorable death.”

She studied herself for a long moment, something secretive passing in her eyes before she turned. “No. He is not.”

Thor looked horrified before thundering. “I will free him from Niflheim!”

She waived her hand to keep him rooted to the spot and crossed her arms. The last thing she needed was for him to go charging through Niflheim. She had several projects the dishonorable dead were undertaking for her that didn’t need interference. “No, he is not, stop overreacting.”

“But you said he is not here.”

Hela rolled her eyes, tone clipped. “First of all, I would never permit leaving him to the torment of Niflheim. I would return his life before I would allow it, no matter what he wished. Secondly, I am the Queen of Death, Thor, but I am not the guardian of every realm.”

Thor spoke softly, even for a normal person. “But, I looked for him. He was not in Valhalla.”

“How do you know?” He gave her a perplexed look and her lip quirked. “From Asgard you can see the great feasting hall…do you truly think that is all that there is?”

He breathed the words. “You have been…”

She shrugged dismissively. “It is not difficult for me. I am not like any of you anymore. I exist until Helheim is no more, until the ending of all things. I cannot influence who is there and who may leave but I may visit.” She smiled slightly, fondly. “I was there to welcome grandmother.”

“Mother…”

Her smile brightened. “She has a little house that expands as the family joins her. It is already prepared with three sets of rooms if that tells you anything of what is to come. All of your favorite types of weapons… enough books to keep even father entertained until Ragnarok.”

Thor nodded slowly. “Then he is happy.”

Hela spoke cryptically. “Father is happier than he has been in a very long time.”
Thor sagged a little, but a burden had been lifted. “Then I will strive to be content until we are reunited.”

They sat together and they talked, catching up on adventures before Hela asked coyly. “I have heard a rumor that you have been avoiding Midgard recently.” Thor grimaced. “A particular reason?”

Thor looked away. “My comrades have not needed me as of late.”

Hela laughed and shook her head. “You really cannot lie. That was horrible. Please, don’t do that again, it was almost too painful to hear.” He scowled at her and she smirked. “Might your avoidance have to do with a certain Midgardian…perhaps?”

The way she said it left him wary. “What have you heard?”

Shrugging. “Me? Nothing…okay, so father might have mentioned your fascination with a mortal woman. I gather it will not be love.”

His tone was insistent. “I value her friendship.”

Hela nodded knowingly since his answer said everything. “But you don’t want to lead her on.”

“I…what?”

She waved a dismissive hand. “Oh, a human colloquialism. It means that you do not want her to misinterpret your attention with more affection than what will be given. It’s just much easier to say.”

Thor nodded with approval. “Aye. That. And if I were to go to the tower of Howardson, she would be injured if I were not to notify her of my presence.”

Hela flicked out her fingers and studied her nails, forcing her lips not to twitch. “Perhaps your cosmic voyeur could tell you if she still waits for you.”

Thor made a choking sound. “That—…that is not an appropriate title for Heimdall.”

Shrugging, her tone and expression both indicated she could care less. “But accurate. Ask him. Maybe she decided she’d prefer you for a friend as well.” After a moment he nodded to her and she nodded as well. “I will escort you back. Your friends grow impatient for your return.”

Thor nodded again and followed her. “I wish that we could visit more.”

A secretive smile pulled at her lip. “Who is to say how the future moves? Perhaps you will.” She waved off Garm and saw them off. Once they were swept away by the Bi-frost back into Asgard her form changed again to the appearance of a mortal in a tight black dress with red boots and a red coat.

Garm whined at her and she winked, reassuring him of where she intended to go. “I travel to Midgard.”

He huffed at her, as much as a wolf was capable of doing. “A human form?”

She shrugged dismissively. “For now, my lovely pet.”

He growled, a tinge of jealousy in his voice. “This is for him is it not?”
Hela smirked. There were many things she did for Loki, but as with most there was more than one reason. “Yes…and no. It is for Yggdrasil.” His massive head tilted and she smirked. “Father is going to save the nine realms.” She laughed and turned to the left, disappearing into a dark passage.

ALFHEIM

There is nothing quite so disconcerting as to suddenly feel a pair of eyes watching you. Loki looked up warily before sitting back in his chair. He hadn’t even heard her enter, having been riding a dark mood for days now, ever since he remembered the child stolen from him. He forced himself to remain, at least in appearance, cool and detached. His temptation to jump through a dark portal with Indel and run far away was only mildly distracting.

G’dath slowly shook her head to herself. Her eyes appraised him in an instant before she snarled at him. “I have no idea how you managed to lose weight but it stops now.”

He had been thin enough as it was, now he was gaunt and his cheeks hollow. He stared back coldly, dark smudges under his eyes. “And how is this your concern?”

Her eyes glinted and he resisted the urge to squirm. He knew that look. He’d grown up around a woman who could carry that exact same look in her blue eyes when she set her mind to it. It was a look that his mother could achieve from him with silence what his father couldn’t after spending an hour screaming at him. It was the kind of look that if Frigga had utilized it during Thor’s exile he would have spilled his guts of every wrong he’d committed, up to and including the Destroyer killing Thor, renounced his claim to the throne, begged her pathetically for forgiveness and banished himself to his own rooms, schemes abandoned. “Because right now this is between us. I am giving you an opportunity to correct this on your own.”

He forced himself to grow a backbone, raising an eyebrow. “Perhaps you mistake me for a lost foundling you adopted and may order at your leisure.”

Her amusement faded, her look just as cold and he became spineless once more. “You do not want me to involve Azni in this.”

He grimaced and looked away, crossed his arms with a huff before he threw them up and snarled. “Fine.” No, he didn’t want Azni involved. She wasn’t scarier than G’dath, she was gentle and kind and it made him feel queasy that he could disappoint her. And he not taking care of himself would disappoint her.

G’dath rolled her blue eyes to herself, rummaging around in her bag and muttering. “…like dealing with a five year old…”


G’dath plunked a collection of elven books in front of him. He knew both written and verbal forms of light elvish so it wouldn’t be hard for him to read but it intrigued him. He raised an eyebrow and she gestured as she sat back. “Your next assignment.”

“Meow.”

Without shifting his gaze from her Loki reached down and picked up Indel who was crawling around under his chair, pretending to be a cat. The only difference was his son had conjured a pair of blue cat ears on top of his head and a long striped tail of greens and blues. Loki had helped a little with the tail, that bit of magic trickier than his son was capable of. Indel purred and
nudged his chin with a grin. Loki grinned in spite of himself and rubbed a flicking ear with one finger as the boy curled into his lap and the purrs deepened even as he yawned.

G’dath fought to keep a straight face. “That is the cutest thing I have ever seen.”

His tone almost droll. “Just wait until he wants me to play, too.” She slapped a hand over her mouth but she couldn’t stop the giggles and he grinned a little, his dark mood lifting. His eyes moved back to the books before he waved to several other piles. “Perhaps you should take the others back before giving me more.”

Amusement was still dancing in her eyes as she replied. “Do you think I only give you books on loan? They are yours, copies or older editions I have no use of anymore.” She could see the instant delight leap in his eyes. “Do with them as you like…just as these are yours.”

His look turned thoughtful as he nodded slightly to her in gratitude. He turned his attention to the far wall. As his skill of details had improved, he’d remodeled the cottage until it could rival some of the finer constructions of Asgard. He’d even added a stairwell to a second floor, most of his potion ingredients now upstairs to keep away from Indel’s curious fingers. The library was already filled to the rafters and since these were all books that he actively referenced it made sense to have another bookcase out here. He took in the far wall and thought to himself of what he wanted. With a few precise gestures he created a grand bookcase. A flick of the wrist and the books moved to stock it in alphabetical order.

G’dath’s eyebrow rose at him. “Now…that is impressive.”

He shrugged. “Just carpentry—…”

She shook her head and stood up, ducking under a floating book and running fingers over the mahogany that had intricate Asgardian and Elvish details. Clean lines with protection spells already woven into the framework. Finely polished with no hint of a split or warp. This could easily last a thousand years and not many could boast to make an equal. “No. Loki, this is beautiful. The detailing…the protections spells…and you did it all at once.”

He flushed in pleasure at the praise even as he grabbed for the first book without looking at her. He cleared his throat. “…so what is my focus?”

She smirked knowingly, passing by him on the way back to her chair and made sure to squeeze the back of his neck lightly as she did so. He did much better with nonverbal praise but that sort of mastery demanded a verbal acknowledgement. It wasn’t that he was shy, it was that he didn’t know how to handle praise that he knew she meant. At first opportunity she was going to verbally eviscerate Odin.

Indel started kneading at his leg, head pressed into his arm. “Meow?”

Loki still didn’t know how Indel knew about cats since there were none on Alfheim. He could only guess that Mischief must have told him. He glanced down at his son. “Does Kitty-Indel want a nap?”

*Hiss*

His lip twitched as he pretended to think. “Hmm…a bath?”

Indel growled and swatted at his arm with a hand. Loki chuckled and started running his fingers through his son’s hair, ear flicking as his son settled back down and started purring. A lick to the back of his small hand, mussing through his bangs before repeating as his tail curled up around
“I may have cavities soon.”

Loki purred at her, still looking over the text. “I know just the spell to yank those evil teeth out.” G’dath rolled her eyes at him since it was a spell she taught him. He leaned back as his brow furrowed before he looked up. “What is this?”

G’dath shrugged lightly. “A theory. Several theories really. I wanted to get into your head that mortals did deserve the right to live before I brought it to your attention.”

He frowned suspiciously. “Why?”

She shrugged again. “Because you like them. Humans.” His lips formed a sneer. “Or at least they intrigue you.” He tilted his head just a little and decided that was a more accurate description. “What do you see in terms of potential?”

He huffed before begrudgingly he admitted. “Not all of them are idiots.”

She ignored that answer and asked again. “But what do you see for potential?”

Loki sighed this time and shrugged himself. “Honestly they do not live long enough to have true potential.”

“Really? Have you not heard of humans that can manipulate magic?” He gave a very reluctant nod and she continued. “I have seen factions with all sorts of abilities to manipulate their own bodies as well as their environment. And it accelerates. The more they learn, the quicker the assimilation.”

Loki reached up to rub at the bridge of his nose with one finger. “What is your point?

Instead of answering directly, G’dath asked a different question. “Why do you think Odin offered AE’sir protection over Midgard?”

“It is as I’ve said, they are a child race and father was feeling compassionate.”

G’dath kept the fact that his slip of referring to Odin as ‘father’ happened more frequently to herself. Instead she smirked knowingly. “But is he that sort of king? Does he rule by compassion, or by practicality?”

His head tilted slightly, considering that. Odin was the picture of stern power on the throne. He was the king of a race of warriors, it only made sense that he would embody that on the throne. Yet another reason he may have wanted the acknowledgment that he and Thor were equals but he hadn’t truly wanted the throne of Asgard. “Might and practicality.”

“And does extending his forces to watching over another realm make sense?”

Loki frowned to mull that over for a moment before he shook his head. “No. No, it spreads AE’sir forces thin and offers a vulnerable point.”

“Which from a certain perspective makes Asgard look weaker.” Loki glanced up in surprise but not disagreement. She shrugged a single shoulder. “Then why? He has never offered this to any other race, not ever.” He glanced back down at the books. “Perhaps, Odin sees their potential, and not just for the positive. Perhaps, he is afraid of the kind of threat that potential could be to Asgard if it were focused by the wrong force.”
Loki mumbled to himself. “Protect them while influencing them...make them a part of the world tree since destroying them would tear Yggdrasil down...”

“Read the books and we’ll talk more, this has been a theory that has been going on for generations.”

His eyes narrowed, having deduced quite some time ago that G’dath never did anything without there being a point. He just wasn’t sure what she was trying to connect for him. “You’re dancing around the point.”

She sighed but stubbornly refused to supply him the point just yet. “Without appreciating their right to exist, would you have even entertained reading these books?”

His voice blunt. “No.” He didn’t despise mortals, he simply didn’t really care about them.

G’dath tilted her head towards him, blue eyes amused. “Then you’ll have to grant me this small amount of trust that you’re not ready for my point yet. Read. We will discuss in a few days... unless you’re still underweight.”

He stuck his tongue out at her and she smirked. He glanced back down at the books but his curiosity had certainly been tapped. What sort of potential did a mortal have that would make Asgard nervous? “G’dath. Which ones do you think have the most potential?”

Her smirk turned knowing. “Your mortal would be a prime candidate. Intelligent. A scholar...and a dreamer.”

Loki stammered, red creeping up his neck. “I-I do not have a mortal.” She didn’t say anything and she didn’t have to, the knowing look in her eyes said it all. He buried his nose in the book with a soft growl.

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MIDGARD

Jane opened the left oak door cautiously, staring at row upon row of books. It was a grand library, quiet, but with plenty of light from tall windows. The floor before her held two study tables and several smaller bookshelves, then a short dual staircase that stretched back into the bookshelf aisles. She heard soft humming from within the stacks, a now familiar figure coming into view with a book opened before pausing. Grey-green eyes quickly assessed her before approaching. Instead of taking the stairs down to her, he chose a chair near the windows and settled himself into it.

“Is it a good book?” Jane asked with gentle curiosity.

He smirked to himself as he turned the page. “I must have read this tale a thousand times by now.”

Her lip quirked in amusement. “Mhmm...you’re a bookworm.”

He looked up over the pages, eyes flashing green. “Meaning?”

She waved her hand and resisted the urge to sigh. “You’re too sensitive.” His eyes narrowed before bringing the book a little closer to his face and making no reply. Jane rolled her eyes as she pulled over a chair and plopped in it. “It means you enjoy books like I do.” Apparently he felt a grunt was reply enough and she huffed with a shake of her head, muttering under her breath as she went to find a book. “…the biggest baby I have ever met...”
She yelped to find herself pressed against the stacks by a looming Loki. “Do not think I will abide by your insults, mortal.”

Jane growled and shoved at his chest, shocking him enough that he stepped back. “Stop bullying me!”

He pulled back further, horrified. “Bully?”

Snorting at him, her eyes flashing in anger. “Yes. You’re a bully. You shove and push and growl and do everything you can to make people do what you want.” Without thinking she lightly slapped his shoulder. “Maybe if you could just talk like a normal person you’d get more accomplished.”

She turned her back on him, eyes moving over the titles and having no idea what any of them said, the language unfamiliar. A high pitched childish voice shouted his reply. “I’m not a bully-they bully me!” She spun back around to see a very small Loki looking up at her woefully. He couldn’t have been more than five and he was absolutely adorable.

Sighing, she walked up to him and without even thinking about it picked him up and turned so he was sitting in her lap. He squeaked in surprise but was quick to snuggle into her once she had settled back. Jane ran a hand through his dark hair and wondering idly if anyone on Asgard had ever been kind to him. “Let me ask you this question...when have I ever bullied you? Ever?”

His brow furrowed before his head ducked down further and hid in her shoulder, voice muffled. “...never...”

Nodding and relieved that was his answer, hating to think he thought she was a bully and pushing the reminder that this was just a dream firmly from her mind. “So maybe if you talk nicely to me, I’ll be nice back.”

“Where is the fun in that?” She blinked and looked down as a very adult voice asked his question. His head was still curled into her shoulder, tucked against her and their hips side by side in the chair. Was it wrong that she didn’t even have the smallest inclination to push him away?

Nope. This was her dream. She could do whatever she wanted.

Jane slid her hand through his silky hair again. “So you like making me mad?”

He shrugged just a little, eyes closed. “You don’t retaliate with useless threats and obtuse reasoning. It’s fun to argue with you.”

She raised an eyebrow and shook her head before mentally shrugging. Why the hell not, it’s not like he can kill me.

She ran her fingers purposefully along his side and was rewarded with a high-pitched shriek before he jumped away from her, clutching his side protectively so she couldn’t tickle him further. He spun around, hand out to ward her off and a slow, predatory grin spread across her face. “Don’t you da-are!”

He ran and ducked into the stacks, she in hot pursuit. She lost him down the third aisle, frowning and listening but not hearing him. She paused and closed her eyes, waiting to hear a creak and was rewarded with soft panting breaths. She tilted her head just a little before frowning and looking up to see him curled into a small cubby on top of the shelves that had probably fit him as a child but was too small for him now.
A swirl of green magic and he shrunk down to a small black fox with a splash of crème across his face, grey-green eyes flashing. “Catch me if you can.”

He was off like a shot, racing down the stairs and running through the wood of the closed door. Jane stormed after him and threw open the door, yelling, “That’s cheating, Loki!”

His cackling laughter, which sounded sadly rusty, echoed around her.

She looked around curiously but saw no sign of him. In the distance, she heard the sound of metal hitting stone and wandered over to investigate. Through an endless corridor she walked that suddenly ended and she was in a grand throne room. Except where she would expect Odin to sit, Loki sat but with a golden eye patch over one eye. He wore the golden armor that she remembered Odin wearing and frowned to herself. What kind of dream is this?

His expression was cold and calculating. There was a glint of dark madness to his eyes. This was the man she remembered seeing in New York, only worse. He held Odin’s scepter, stained with blood. At his feet, Thor’s hammer was also stained with blood. The great room was empty, a bitter cold sweeping through and the golden city quiet and lifeless.

The little fox was suddenly at her feet and sighed. “I despise this dream.”

Jane frowned down at him. “Do you see this often?” She blinked to herself. What?

He shook his head, then used his foreleg to scratch under his chin. “No, not in quite a while. Not since Svartalfheim.” He snarled to himself. “Yggdrasil is never subtle when warning of what the future could hold.”

Jane frowned further. What the heck is Yggdrasil? Was this her subconscious or some weird magic thing because she’d gotten involved with a couple of demi-gods? “But… but you’re dead.”

The fox looked up at her a little more closely before all the fur on his body stood on end, puffed up and snarling. “…no…”

Jane frowned. “What?”

He shook his head and backed away. “Not POSSIBLE!” Brow furrowing, she opened her mouth but stumbled back when his anger seemed to escalate towards hysteria, scratching at the sides of his furry face as if to scrub at his brain. “Get… no! Get out of my head. Get out of my head!”

Not again. Never again. He was never being controlled again. He had to get out. He had to get away from her. It. Them. Wake up! Wakeupwakeupwakeup…

Jane knelt down, voice soothing. “Loki…” He backed up and found himself in a corner, the throne room gone and no way to escape her. His eyes darted around, pupils dilated and panicked, searching for an escape but there was nowhere to go. The corridor behind her was gone, nothing but another set of corners now. They were trapped in a box with an endless ceiling. A cage. A cell, just like under Asgard.

He shivered and curled up into a ball, trembling and tense as her hand ghosted over his head, waiting for her touch to turn cruel. She repeated the movement over and over again, inching closer as his trembling faded and he looked up at her miserably. Her eyes. Beautiful brown with little specks of amber. Honest eyes. Gentle eyes.
Petting him softly, marveling at how luxurious his fur felt. “It’s okay.” She smiled sadly. “I have no idea why I’m comforting a dream but it’s okay.”

She doesn’t know. He didn’t know how this was even possible. Until a thought occurred to him. His magic would always act outside of his control if it was in his best interest to do so. He couldn’t imagine why Jane Foster was so important…yes he could. It was more than just intrigue that drew him to her. It was more than just Thor’s request that had caused him to risk his life to save her. He wasn’t enough of a sentimental fool to believe that he loved her. Such weak emotions for anyone but his son were beyond him now. He was a broken, depraved creature who was no longer capable of forming such attachments. But he felt a curious…protectiveness for her and that is as far as he allowed himself to dwell.

Did he trust her? No. He trusted no one. Almost no one. Could he trust her? …he wasn’t so sure of that answer anymore. Another searching look before he cautiously ventured closer, curling up against her leg as her petting went a long way towards soothing him.

She had no idea he was really here, yet she still offered comfort and compassion. This beautiful little mortal who wouldn’t even live a fraction of his lifespan was more alive than he had ever been. There was a word for her and until now he’d thought of it as a weakness. But for her it was a strength. It was a word he had not been able to honestly describe of himself since he’d been a very small boy. He murmured softly to himself, turning to rest his chin on her leg. “…because you’re kind…” His eyes slowly closed. “I wish I could remember being kind.”

ASGARD

Heimdall had seen much as the gatekeeper between realms. It was his duty to protect Asgard. He had seen enough that it was so easy to forget that he didn’t always understand what he was seeing. Loki as a child had been mischief but loyal to his family, and so Heimdall had held onto the hope of one day seeing two mighty leaders over Asgard. And then Hela had been torn from Loki and the darker prince started to spiral in a different direction. Heimdall hadn’t liked where he knew Loki was heading, and so had hardened himself against ever trusting the trickster.

He had never hated Loki, he simply had not liked the man he had become.

Heimdall turned as Thor quietly approached the observatory. It was late, but the gatekeeper was always on watch. It had been quite a while since the prince had requested what Heimdall already knew was going to be requested of him. He’d made it a point to check on the mortal scientist just in case the question was asked.

With his seeing eyes he’d seen many things. Civilizations rise and fall in the blink of an eye. Lives begin and end. Stars implode and collide. Yet he always spared a moment each evening to glance at one small mortal that had captured a prince’s heart. But he knew there was a change of heart. The request was different now and he felt tension ease from his spine. She had no outward ability for magic, yet a very familiar signature of magic had wrapped around her. A gentle connection that linked her seemingly fragile mind to another and it was through her that he could see their shared dreams.

He watched and he listened, surprised to see a steadily changing Loki. His hope was starting to renew that all was not lost with the second son. This seemingly unimportant human woman was steadily capturing another prince’s heart, and for the good of Asgard it would be better if love was only needed in one direction.
“Heimdall.”

He nodded slowly to Thor, looking over the world tree. “My prince.”

Thor swallowed once, unsure that he wanted to even ask. He didn’t fear his choices. He didn’t fear much at all. But he feared hurting others, and as much as he wished it were different what had started between them had faded in his heart. He’d lost too much. He’d learned too much. He wasn’t right for her anymore and he knew it. “Can you see her?”

Heimdall kept his gaze forward, his sword in his hand and nodded. “As ever…I see her.”

Thor closed his eyes. “Does she wait for me?”

The barest tilt of his lip in amusement. “She speaks with another, my prince, and she dreams of him.”

The tension in Thor’s shoulders eased, breathing more freely. He even smiled as he nodded. Above all else, he wanted Jane happy. After all, she was the woman who made him worthy to be a prince once more, she deserved everything she wanted. “Is he worthy?”

Heimdall’s tilt broadened just a little more as his own hope in a dream almost lost grew. “He will be, my prince. He will be.”

Author's Notes:

And yes, there will be lots more Hela 'cause I just find her such fun to write.

Next:

Loki visits Jotunheim; Indel is just full of surprises
Chapter 14

JOTUNHEIM

The icy peaks were just as cold and foreboding as he remembered. The ice and snow on the ground were harder than stone, he remembered that as well. This was where his life had officially changed. He’d discovered his true origins, and completely lost his mind. He might never admit it out loud, but he suspected he might have overreacted a little bit.

Loki silently looked over the devastating crater of Jötunheim. A crater so large he couldn’t see to the other side of it and so deep he imagined it went all the way to the center of the planet. This was new and he had caused this. He was responsible. He wasn’t sure that he felt regret but he did feel the weight that these were his actions. How many were killed? How many survived? Or had Jötunheim become a barren rock with no life left to support?

“I am surprised at your presence, Liesmith.”

Nope.

His luck, positive or negative, was never to his expectation. This was outside of his norm. He never returned to see the effects of his actions. He came. He did, and of course enjoyed in the initial reactions. He moved on. But the need, the curiosity had become overwhelmingly irresistible. But there was a different feeling now. This was true devastation, not against an army but against a realm. This wasn’t him. They were his actions but they were foreign to his nature. He had never needlessly destroyed. Was it needless? Thanos would greatly approve and it made him shudder. It left a bitter, acidic taste in his mouth that he didn’t like. Would returning to New York feel the same? Those weren’t exactly his actions but he still remembered some of them as if they were.

He was seeing this without being here. Just another trick he’d picked up from G’dath. His body was in his home in Alfheim. When he spoke, he spoke out loud but just as anyone else in the room could hear him, so could the Jötunn approaching. This was just a test run, to see if he could actually accomplish a projection this far. It had never been done before, after all. But he had plans to set in motion and a more solid version of himself in Midgard was needed.

He glanced at the frost giant that had spoken. That this creature from a race supposedly cut off from the nine realms knew him just by sight wasn’t surprising. Merchants may not venture here but smugglers would…and he was well known by that name. He allowed the visual projection to flicker, a shadow sprite sent a great distance to satisfy his curiosity. “I’m not.”

The frost giant nodded in understanding as he stepped next to him. At least nine feet tall, not as tall as most Jötunn but certainly tall enough to tower over his 6’2” stature. His blue skin a shade darker than Loki’s natural form, but the same deep red eyes that glowed in the dark. Loki studied him just long enough to notice markings on him, much as he had. Birth marks or ritual scars? Did they mean something? He wasn’t familiar enough with Jötunns that he could actually decipher a facial expression. He knew how to fight them and how to kill them, but little else. Perhaps they didn’t have any, just walking ice monsters.

“I may not have your gift for magic, Silvertongue, but I felt you nonetheless.” Another of his many nicknames. The wind whistled and blew cold for several minutes and Loki turned his gaze to the horizon. He couldn’t imagine a place like this ever being beautiful. “I gather you are not here to be the hand of mercy.”
Loki’s brow furrowed. “Mercy?”

Laughter that sounded like broken glass filled the air before the Jötunn spoke again. “When the devastation came upon us, we were filled with hope that finally Odin One-Eye was finished with torturing us and would allow us the peace of death. And then nothing. We were left to pick up the pieces yet again and limp along. We were sent emissaries of Asgard explaining that your actions were not at his behest and inquired if we would allow your exile here for a time to learn regret and humility. I laughed and said I would kill you on sight. He has sent no missives since then.”

Loki shivered at the thought. Odin had actually considered banishing him here. It was everything he’d feared…but then he paused mid-panic. Hearing a threat to his existence changed the All-Father’s mind. Why? He dismissed the thought before it even formed, his mother no doubt convincing Odin otherwise.

A pang of sadness hit his heart. He’d mocked her in court. And later, in the dungeons he’d rejected her. He hadn’t deserved her as a mother, he only wished she’d given up on him as Thor and Odin had. Then he could have slipped away from Asgard and all knowledge, guilt free, and no one would have cared.

Loki shook himself out of his past regrets, refocusing on his unexpected companion and frowning. “Who are you?” Not that it really mattered, but his curiosity was piqued.

“King Helblindi, second born of Laufey-king.”

He kept it all off his face. The flinch. The grimace. Loki buried the hiss of pain, the need to lash out at any monster from Laufey’s line. He was the biggest monster of all and he knew it. He’d proven it for all the realms to see but the maddening drive to eradicate every last trace of the monster in his blood was almost too powerful to control. But then he thought about Indel. If he continued on the course of being a monster, would he ever be able to look that innocent boy in the eyes ever again?

No. No, I wouldn’t. He forced the monster back into his cage and felt the calm clarity of logic return.

So then this Helblindi was his younger brother by blood. He wanted to say he was sorry for killing Laufey, but he wasn’t and he never could be. Laufey had been a monster and not just for abandoning him in the snow as an infant to die but for the…no.

Cold realization for the first time filled him. Laufey had been defeated by Odin for trying to subjugate Midgard. Thanos had helped turn him into Laufey. Loki’s stomach dropped, his skin turned clammy, and he felt like he might throw up. But beyond that horrifying thought was the rage that burned deep and true. He would make Thanos and the Other suffer for this.

Nodding slightly in return, voice hoarse. “Loki.”

A cold mist surrounded Helblindi briefly, his tone obviously taking offense that no last name was offered. But the truth was he didn’t know who he was anymore. “Are you not a son of Odin?”

Looking back out at the crater. “I doubt it.” He never had been. A pet foundling that bit the hand that fed him. A political tool that had grown rusted and useless. What use was a second son of Asgard compared to someone like Thor? Anger. Bitterness. Jealousy. It rose in him, strangling him before subsiding to sadness and longing.
He looked back to the Jötunn king to take his leave, surprised to see understanding in those crimson eyes. As if he knew what it was to try to please an impossible father. Helblindi nodded to him slightly. “Return, in this form or as yourself…I think there is much you need to see.”

Smirking bitterly. “I thought you wanted to kill me.”

Helblindi didn’t move for several moments, but he wasn’t looking at him anymore. “I thought I did, too.” A slight shrug as he turned. “I was wrong.” Loki blinked once in surprise, before leaving.

ALFHEIM

Loki rubbed both hands over his face in irritation. He’d read through those damn books three times and each time he just got more and more confused. What did it matter if humans had potential? So what? Not that the books had been clear in that regard. It had talked about theories that they were all budding mages, laughable. That with the actualization of that ability they had the capability to be immortal, absurd. The most ludicrous of all had been that they were genetic castoffs from Asgard.

Indel started giggling in glee before tipping over backwards, staring up at the ceiling and still laughing. Lifting an eyebrow down at him. “What is so hilarious?”

The boy pointed and laughed. “Gain!” Loki shook his head at his silly offspring and he picked up a book. Indel stopped giggling to pout before letting his left sock-clad foot stomp on the ground. “Gain, dada!” Lower lip trembling when he was ignored, he pulled himself into a sit and crawled over to tug on Loki’s pants. “Dada!”

Loki glanced down at him, lip twitching at the adorable pout. “Yes?”

Indel huffed. “Gain!”

Closing his book and setting it aside. “Indel, I am not going to needlessly irritate my skin for your amusement.”

The toddler used his grip on Loki’s pants to pull himself to his feet, large green eyes filled with a dangerous amount of tears and voice a teeny, tiny whisper. “Gain?”

Loki mentally groaned. “Indel-…”

With a howl Indel carefully threw himself to the ground and started crying in earnest, fat crocodile tears rolling down his chubby cheeks, kicking and wind-milling his arms. Loki shook his head but he’d already been through this enough, refusing to raise a spoiled son. Thor had been just like this as a toddler, which he supposed is what comes of an only child not competing with another sibling for attention. Indel would never be deprived of time and attention, Loki would always make the time for him, but he wasn’t putting up with this.

He scooped Indel up and ignored his kicks, little fists beating lightly against his arm, he walked into the bedroom designated as his son’s and carefully plopped him on his bed before walking back outside, door open. It might be Indel’s room but his boy only slept in there half the time and Loki wasn’t of a mind to make him sleep alone more consistently.

Within 30 seconds Indel hustled out with a few true tears and arms raised to be held. Loki was already sitting again and settled Indel on his lap, thumb in his mouth and free hand clutching his tunic tightly. Loki ran his fingers gently over the tips of each ear, thumbs brushing lightly along his
temples. Indel leaned against his chest, opening his mouth to yawn before he snuggled more firmly.

By the time G’dath sat down across from Loki Indel was passed out on a blanket, having spent an hour screaming happily and running around the dining table, chasing a pair of squirrels Loki had created to tire the boy out. The two squirrels perched on the table chittered at her in eerie unison, bobbing their heads like birds. She stared at them, perplexed. Were they mocking her?

With a wave of her hand they disappeared in a puff of green smoke. She sent him an unimpressed look and he shrugged at her. “I create them, I do not have complete control over the personality they develop.”

She smirked a little before it faded and she focused on the topic at hand. “Midgard.”

He sighed softly. “The theories all contradict themselves.”

“Not if you take little grains of truth from each one.” He raised an eyebrow and she continued. “One theory is that all humans are born with the potential to be a mage—…”

Loki interrupted her, voice filled with contempt. “Which is absurd.”

“Why?”

He made a dismissive gesture. “It is impossible for an entire species to be magic bound, let alone for them all to be that limitless.”

“I said potential, not actuality.” His brow furrowed. It was the same thing. A creature may not live up to that expectation but potential was readily available. G’dath’s tone turned leading. “Let us assume for the moment that all humans have a magic core around their inner self.”

Loki shook his head while crossing his arms. “Fine, we shall assume that for this exercise.”

G’dath paused to give him a look. “The older you get, the worse you get.” For the briefest of seconds he crossed his eyes at her and she snorted before continuing. “Now imagine if something were to unlock that potential. Something a long time ago, thousands of years buried and forgotten. Like say…a Tesseract.” Loki frowned thoughtfully. “Enough exposure to an object of that magnitude could change the biology of a simple creature…like a human.”

Still frowning in concentration. “Turning unobtainable potential into an actual reality?”

Her eyebrow quirked thoughtfully. “The mortals have been increasingly evolving as of late, a whole host of abilities appearing on a changeling level.”

Suspicion in his eyes as they narrowed. “When was the last time you went to Midgard?”

G’dath shrugged casually. “You are not the only spell caster in the nine realms capable of glancing off of reflective surfaces.”

Loki glanced back at the mirror that was now a permanent addition to his wall. “Ah.”

Though he hated to admit it that thought intrigued him. Evolved humans.

“Now let us take an examination of your mortal.” Loki sucked in a breath but she waived him off before he could even get started. “Enough with your denial. I am not debating it with you further. Would you say her intelligence could rival your own?”

A loud sigh filled the room before his expression turned thoughtful. “Yes.”
“There is no such creature as a dumb magician.” The way she was looking at him he suddenly felt like he was being lumped into the same category. “Foolish. Childish, but not from a lack of intellect.”

He sneered at her, partly for the name calling but also because there was one very important point concerning Jane Foster. “She is not a mage.”

G’dath shrugged and countered. “How do you know? Have you ever tested her?”

“She’s a mortal, of course not!” He sputtered his reply, looking indignant.

She tapped one of the books in reminder. “Was that perhaps an oversight?”

His sputters died as he thoughtfully assessed. Jane had been capable of housing the destructive forces of the Aether without instantly dying or losing her sanity. She was brilliant and driven. “Perhaps.”

“Did you know that Odin put a cap on your abilities when you were a child?”

Well that was a non-sequitur if he’d ever heard one. “I-…wh-what? What in Hel is a cap?”

G’dath chose her words carefully. “A magical restraint if you will, one that the caster cannot feel, to only release a small portion of your powers until you were older.”

His entire expression darkened. No, he hadn’t known that. But if he had it wouldn’t have been a good day for the rest of Asgard. Loki could easily admit he had a temper and when he was caught off guard he was worse than Thor when it came to controlling that temper. “What?”

“Inspired by the council, no doubt, it was the last time I visited Asgard. Odin and I exchanged a few words on the subject, and the fact that he’d hidden your heritage from you, and I haven’t returned since.” Her tone turned innocent, her expression anything but. “I may or may not have cursed him out in high elvish, I can’t remember.”

Loki burst out laughing before he could help himself, but it was a light, infectious laugh that pulled a grin out of G’dath. “You cursed at the All-Father??”

She smirked. “You’re not the only one scared of me.”

He snorted at the very idea of Odin being scared of G’dath. He grinned and shook his head, his mirth slowly fading as he thought about this cap. “Does the cap still remain?”

Her shaking her head brought instantly relief. “Of course not, I sensed its rather explosive release when you created Hela.”

Loki was surprised yet again and it showed in his voice. “You know about her?”

G’dath paused before pursing her lips, irritation in her voice. “Odin begged me to assess you and Hela.” Loki raised a single eyebrow when she said begged but didn’t commend. “I told him yes on the provision he send the two of you to Alfheim. He has yet to reply.”

“I thought you said you haven’t returned to Asgard.” She nodded and waited for a question. “Then how did you feel the spell that created Hela?”

She studied him for a long minute before slowly nodding. “You have no idea how powerful you are, do you?” His brow furrowed. “I have multiple millennia of experience which
grants me an artful finesse but you have raw power. You and I, we banter and exchange sarcastic quips. I have a strong personality that you yield to, but I am under no illusion. If you truly focused the raw force of your magic against me I’d be very dead.”

Loki immediately threw up his hands. “Raw force is only useful in a fight and except for illusions and replicating throwing knives it’s worthless to me. Only with a scepter can I muster it and it drains me too quickly to be effective.”

Slowly G’dath frowned. “How often have you really tried?”

He didn’t even have to consider, knowing the exact times. “Twice. Father’s scepter almost crippled me against Laufey and Thanos’ scepter was only good for short bursts…not to mention the damnable thing was controlling me almost as much as it controlled my minions.”

Her jaw dropped open, voice rising an octave. “You wielded Gungnir?”

“I just said that, I believe.” His brow slowly furrowed, not certain where her surprise came from.

She stared at him, eyes huge and unmoving. He started to fidget uncomfortably when she didn’t move further for a full minute before blinking suddenly and holding her head. “Fuck.” He blinked in shock but she stood up, crossed over to the hearth and grabbed the flask of mead he kept out of Indel’s reach. He opened his mouth to object and closed it when she didn’t wait for a cup, drinking until it was drained before shakily putting the flask down. Not even on a full stomach would he drink that much mead at once. Still turned away from him, the back of her hand touching her lip. “You do realize that no one may wield Gungnir until Odin’s death, do you not?”

“I already have—…”

She cut him off with an agitated shake of her head. “But you shouldn’t have been able to. The scepter is sentient to only recognize Odin. Not even Thor, even if he had magical talent, could do so as his first born. You used so much concentrated force the excess bled through and…I assume killed your target.” Loki nodded silently. She turned with a frown. “What scepter does Thanos possess? He’s never utilized one.”

Loki shrugged a single shoulder. “A scepter he created to hold the gem to control my human minions.”

Both of her eyebrows hiked towards her hairline. “Gem…the mind gem? One of the Infinity Gems?”

Both shoulders shrugged this time but he’d already decided to look into those gems. “He didn’t call it such but it had a strange sentience to it.”

She sat back down and shook her head. “I am not even going to discuss the impossibility of how you used that gem. You need a scepter, but one attuned to your magical signature. With some honest practice you will be amazed how devastatingly effective you will be as a warrior.”

Loki ran fingers through his hair, mentally debating if it was time for a haircut. All of Asgard’s men may prefer to grow their hair out but he’d never been partial to it, particularly with as unruly as his became the longer it was. “That is what doesn’t make any sense. Asgard’s focus is to train and house the best warriors in the nine realms. Why would something like this be hidden from me? What would be the point in stifling my…potential…” He glanced back down at the books again, and the universe suddenly became very clear. “Father has Midgard under Asgard’s protection,
but he’s also capping their potential.”

Smiling, happy he finally made the connection. “To keep the fear of them at bay until they are old enough to fend for themselves.”

His grey-green eyes looked back up. “You want me to unlock it for them.”

She leaned back in her chair, tone casual. “I think you could, but not that you will. It will be up to you. It is not simply a matter of saying a few words and gestures…you have to form a bond of understanding, with them as a species and on an individual level. It requires empathy which, let’s face facts, you need to work on.”

He made a face at her which made her bite back a grin before his expression turned thoughtful. She wondered if he even realized how much of his guard he dropped around her.

“Why me, G’dath? No, truly, why me? Why are you focusing on this with me? What are you hoping to achieve?”

She sighed before nodding. “I will be blunt. The last time you grew restless and bored you nearly killed your brother, tried to subjugate Midgard and destroy Jötunheim. I am doing the nine realms a favor by giving you a project that you can focus on for the rest of your very long life.”

He snarled defensively, hurt lurking under the anger. “I wasn’t restless and bored!”

“Weren’t you?” She didn’t flinch from his glare, a challenging gleam in her blue eyes.

His tone remained insistent. “There was much more going on than merely being restless and bored.”

She tapped a finger to her lips as she maintained eye contact. “Why did you let the Jötunn in during Thor’s coronation?”

He gestured broadly as if the answer were obvious. “To show father and everyone how he would react!”

“Would his reaction not have been the same the day before if they had broken into the vault during court?”

Loki’s eyes widened almost imperceptively. “Er-No! There was no guarantee he would even care.”

Amusement colored her voice, a knowing look in her eyes. “So you didn’t invite them because you were curious to see how he and the rest of Asgard would react AND you would have the excuse for a front row seat without drawing suspicion?”

She had never seen anyone blush and turn slightly green at the same time but somehow Loki managed it. He sputtered and deflected away from the question, as good as confirming her suspicion. Loki jabbed a finger in Indel’s direction. “And you do not think he is going to be enough of a project for me??”

“Dada?”

They both turned just as there was an audible pop and standing in Indel’s place was a very tiny white kitten. G’dath blinked with large eyes, glancing back at Loki whose eyebrows were raised and very slowly brought two of his fingers to his lips. “Uh…hmm…”
The little kitten with big green eyes looked up at Loki and cried once, sitting down. G’dath’s jaw dropped before shaking her head. “You’re right…for once. He may be more than enough to keep you occupied.” Loki was too focused on the current problem to feel smug. “Please tell me he’s done this before.”

Gingerly Loki picked Indel up, placing him in his lap before deflating. “Until I was six I’ve never done this before. I spent six months as a fox before I figured out how to change back. Thor was the biggest annoyance, he made me a collar and begged father to let me sleep at the end of his bed.”

There was something in Loki’s tone that begged her to probe further. “And what did you do?”

He grinned nastily. “As soon as I was AEsir I set fire to his bed.” She raised an eyebrow and he sighed. Opening his palm, an old leather collar that might have fit a young fox appeared. She grinned and it disappeared back into dimensional storage again. “Yes, I slept in his bed until then.” Another small cry from Indel and Loki frowned down at his son. “No, I will not give you a collar, you are not a cat, Indel.”

“You understand him?”

Loki looked thoughtful before he nodded slowly. “I claimed him as mine by magic when he was an infant… I always understand him.” Those big green eyes liquefied and with a huff the mage gestured. A small blue collar wrapped around Indel’s neck, already with a spell in place to grow when the boy changed back. Glowering down at his son. “Do not think that I will capitulate to your every whim, I shall not raise a spoiled brat.”

G’dath raised an eyebrow at him again. He glared and just dared her to say what she was clearly thinking. She slumped suddenly. “This wasn’t a spell, was it?”

Slowly he shook his head. “No, no this is…”

“He’s a changeling.”

He sent her a look and corrected her. “You said it yourself that his ears indicate a dual race heritage or a dark elf with light elf ancestry. Changelings, rare as they are, are always from a singular race. He is a shape shifter.”

She blinked at him in surprise. “I’m impressed.” He smirked, though his brow furrowed as he stared back down at Indel. He couldn’t think of anything to say so he chose silence. With a sigh G’dath rose, “I’ll contact Alfheim for some research.”

His fingers stroked along Indel’s head and down his spine but he didn’t stop her. He knew from experience there was no rushing Indel to change back. He would be a cat until he was tired of it. There were ways to force him, of course, and all of them painful. Loki had promised himself long ago he would never utilize them on anyone. “Well, my son, you wanted to be a cat for a while.” Shaking his head. “Wish granted.”

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**Author's Notes:**

One of my favorite peeps loves Loki-fox so kitty-Indel was all for her. Don't worry, it's not permanent. I'm not that evil.
Next:

We're jumping forward a few months.

We meet Anya, the personal maid of the God of Mischief; Jane meets a sexy scientist called William; Amora spices up Odin's life
Anyaw counted herself more fortunate than most. She wasn’t gorgeous, just pretty with blond hair and blue eyes, typical for an AEsir. She was granted the rare perspective of living the life of a servant but seeing first-hand the life of an aristocrat. At the appropriate age she’d started to seek work outside of her village, her father having died in battle when she was young and she with no prospects for a husband at the time. The queen had taken an unusual shine to her considering her lack of connections. She worked as one of her lady’s maids for decades before the first son was born.

Young prince Thor had been a loud child, but loving to all and happy. Queen Frigga had shifted Anya’s duties from servicing her chambers to looking after Thor and she’d gladly taken her duty with pride. Soon the young prince could easily look after himself, not wanting a personal maid nor requesting a specific servant to look after his room. Anya was left to wonder what she would do next. Then late one night King Odin had returned from war with an eye patch and a wiggling babe wrapped in cloth.

The queen had fallen in love with her new son instantly and in court it was announced the ‘birth’ of the second son of Asgard. She and a few of the maids knew better but they would never question the will of their king and queen. So the Jötunn prince became Loki, the second son of Asgard.

Anya curtseyed as she entered the royal quarters, Frigga looking a little harried as she paced with a small, whimpering bundle in her arms. She’d already seen the other servants swiftly departing, two of them with burns on their hands. “You sent for me, milady?”

Frigga paused, still swaying her arms slightly as she gave the young woman an assessing look. Nodding slowly to herself. “I would like you to try to hold my son.”

Since Anya knew for a fact that Prince Thor was much too old to be so small, she could only assume that the whispers amongst the servants of their wise king bringing home a Jötunn child to raise were true. Not that anyone would ever say anything to the aristocracy and such talk would never be more than a whisper amongst the commoners. She approached slowly, not fearful but respectful. He wasn’t blue and she gasped softly at how beautiful he was. Different, for she had never seen an AEsir with such dark hair, but beautiful nonetheless. Instead of immediately grasping for the infant she paused, her own blue eyes widening in wonder at being studied so thoughtfully by vibrant emerald eyes.

Cautious, knowing, wary eyes.

Green flashed in those eyes and she felt wonder fill her. A tiny little mage. Reaching out tentatively, Loki’s whimpers subsided as he was transferred to Anya. He blinked and yawned, making a babbling sound against his fingers but there was no magical backlash. Then he grinned at her and his eyes crinkled happily. Frigga looked absolutely ecstatic. “He likes you.” Leaning down she kissed the top of his head and smoothed a hand over the fuzzy curls that hinted of ebony. Nodding with finality to herself. “Not to worry, my little imp, you shall have what you want.”
Unlike Thor, Loki had been very particular about who was and was not allowed to hold him. Those he disliked found out just how powerful infant magic was, burns and rashes on their skin the least of their problems, and it was after little success with everyone else that it was obvious he had taken a liking to her. The queen had decreed that she would remain his personal servant and Anya had been just fine with that.

A solemn little face preceded her into his rooms. His newly appointed rooms now that Loki was deemed old enough to no longer stay in the nursery adjacent to his parent’s rooms. It was simply decorated, shelving with children’s books but many more empty and waiting to be filled. A desk for writing. A large, double set armoire filled with clothes. Simple tapestries on the walls to give the room character until more personal items could fill it. A large bed tucked between two windows that led to a walk out balcony. A set of doors on the opposite side of the room to the bathing chamber. Anya curtseyed. “I hope it is all to your liking, Prince.”

Whipping around, bright green eyes assessing her before smirking. “Mischief.”

Anya’s eyes widened as a second Loki, more than twice his age in appearance, appeared next to him. “Can you keep a secret, Anya?”

She looked to the older child who had spoken, before glancing back at those wary eyes. Blinking slowly. “I-I am afraid it is above my station to lie to aristocracy, sire, the penalty is most… severe.” Both boys looked disappointed an instant before she grinned. “But I of course cannot report what I have no knowledge of.”

The two boys shared a look before Loki smirked with a decisive nod. “I’m keeping you.”

A thousand years as the servant and personal maid of the God of Mischief and you pick up a few things. She knew how to keep her ears tuned while seeming to be thoroughly engrossed in her duties. The orders of her duties had been directly from the queen and since no servant discussed their duties of a specific noble with anyone else, no one questioned what she did to occupy herself. She read. She kept his quarters immaculate. She oiled and sharpened his knives. She did all the tasks that she normally did, as if the prince were simply on an adventure and would return any day.

And every day, when the very last of the dust had been banished and she’d checked to make sure none of his potion ingredients were spoiling, she glanced at the Midgardian clock he’d rescued a century or so ago. It was still ticking, charmed that way since there wasn’t electricity or batteries here. And just as she locked the door she would smirk, since that particular spell would no longer function if the young prince was truly dead.

MIDGARD

Jane and Bruce glanced at one another before the latter sighed in disappointment, both of them sitting in an auditorium teaming with some of the finest minds in the world. Physicists. Astronomers. Dozens of other scientists not directly in the field but interested. Dr. Charles Henrickson was supposedly the foremost authority on exotic matter. Five minutes into this lecture and the pair of them realized the man was a pompous idiot with an overinflated ego. The trip to Norway hadn’t been a complete waste of time but this lecture certainly was.

“Absolute drivel!” Heads turned as a man at the back walked confidently down the aisle.
He was a strikingly tall figure at a glance in a black suit and vibrantly green shirt, chestnut hair cut short and grey-green eyes flashing in outrage. “Where did you gather these facts? Certainly not from a peer review. Do you know anything at all, other than how to successfully waste these good people’s time and attention? First of all, to propose that a tachyon merely travels at the speed of sound is laughably ignorant since it is the proposed theory that tachyons travel faster than the speed of light. Secondly, the faulted tests of tau neutrinos infers a link between they and tachyons, not evidence of their existence. And third of all, if this is all that you have to say then I could have wasted my quarter of an hour reading Wikipedia with more accurate data.” He growled and watched Henrickson slink down behind the podium, stabbing a finger in his direction. “Expect a personal call from me to the academic board of your university by the end of the week.”

With a derisive snort of contempt the man turned and walked through the back doors, Jane not even thinking as she scrambled out of her chair after him. Ducking past the other scientists deciding their time was also being wasted, she barreled down the corridor. “Wait!”

He stopped a little ways away, turning gracefully and a polite, bland smile curling his lip. Her heart gave a little jump when their eyes met. It was strange but there was something so familiar about him. But it was more than that. It was like an instant connection. A million and one thoughts collided in her mind all at once but the one that made her cheeks burn involved his lips and chocolate sauce.

*No! BAD JANE. What the hell is wrong with me?* She was a scientist for crying out loud. She had an academic reputation, in tatters thanks to SHIELD and her own inability to compromise her theories but there was a decorum to follow amongst her peers.

He nodded his head towards her politely, unaware of her inner struggle not to drool. “Yes, Dr. Foster?”

She paused to gape. “How-how did you know my name?”

He leaned forward a little and she found herself mimicking him, his gaze hypnotizing. “Your name tag.”

Jerking down to stare at the badge on her shirt, she grimaced sheepishly. “Ah…oops.”

He smiled slightly and offered her a slight bow of his head. “I’m William Norland, how may I help you?”

Tucking a lank of caramel colored hair behind her ear, brown eyes curious and earnest. “I-I’m sorry, it’s just, you seem to be very well informed about exotic matter…did you gain your research from a specific source?”

William smiled easily if a little blandly, as if he were slipping on a mask. “I used to work at Fermilab and I collaborated on what we lovingly called the DONUT experiment.”

Jane gaped again. “The research of tau neutrinos was your research??”

He shrugged lightly if a little modestly. “It was a collaboration. I have since moved on to other projects but I was not about to stand idly by and allow that idiot to besmirch our work.”

She grinned brightly.

“Dr. Foster?” Glancing behind her to see Bruce standing uneasily a few feet away.

She scrambled through her pockets, holding up a finger. “Just a second, Dr. Banner.”
Pulling out her phone. “Can I have your email, I need your insight.” He provided it easily and she bit her lip as she slipped her phone back into her pocket. “Thank you so much, Dr. Norland.”

William tipped his head to her again. “Please, call me William.”

Echoing his gesture with a shy smile. “Jane.”

Reluctantly she turned to follow Bruce, the other scientist nodding to William quietly, before they and their assistants left. He waited until they were long gone before Loki dropped his ‘William’ disguise with a flash of green, crossing his arms and looking contemplative. But then that expression vanished from his face as a voice oozed around him.

“I knew you were still amongst the living, Liesmith.”

Loki hated rushing his plans but there had been little choice. It was either interfere or pull Hela from her own project and as much as he hated to give himself away, what she was doing was more beneficial to his plans than his exposure was damaging. He would have his revenge, he would simply have to be more careful to slip in and then away when the time came. Jaw tightening, Loki turned to see the Other walk out of the lecture hall. The idiot lecturer trailed behind him, expression distressingly blank. “Playing with puppets, I see.”

The Other hissed through bloody teeth. “You will not succeed in stopping his plans.”

Smirking cruelly. “I succeeded in thwarting your plans today, did I not?” The plans that he had concocted in his half lucid state while still in the clutches of the Chitauri. The Other had been up to other things, making SHIELD paranoid and nervous only one of them. He had been planning to kill all of those brilliant minds in that room, sharpening that paranoia until the glue that held SHIELD and the Avengers together unraveled. Not that Loki cared all that much about them. But since Jane had been idiotic enough to come here Loki had been forced to intervene.

The Other sneered. “Crawl back into hiding, little prince, Midgard does not concern you.”

Loki shrugged dismissively. “It honestly doesn’t, I am merely entertaining myself.”

There was contempt in his voice, but there was something beneath it that was absolutely delicious. Fear. “Maintain your distance, Loki of Asgard, or your pet human may find herself in Thanos’ embrace as you once were.”

Effecting a bored tone, all the while silently wondering how in Hel the Other knew about Jane. “All humans are nothing more than pets so I care not for your threats.”

A sultry laugh filled the corridor as an amazon of a woman stepped into the light. Beautiful blond hair spilled down her back, her green eyes sparkling of wicked humor and her stature an inch taller than Loki. Her trailing hand passed through Loki, distorting his image for a moment. “Do you like my new trick?”

“This is your creation?”

Loki forced his expression to go blank and froze in place. He knew how to play a part, even if he hadn’t deduced just yet why she was intervening. “I am called the Enchantress. I find mortals to be amusing and…well, they hated him in life. Why not continue to allow him to take the blame for my tricks? I apologize for interfering with Lord Thanos’ plot, it shall not happen again.”

The Other seemed to accept readily enough, not even considering that Amora by nature was just as slippery with truth as Loki. “He will accept this one time, but perhaps you would be
interested in joining my lord’s army.”

“Regretfully I must remain neutral, coward that I am, but please accept my sincere hope for a successful campaign nonetheless.” She disappeared in a sparkle of green glitter, reappearing in a park a few blocks away. Loki appeared right next to her and stared at Amora. She grinned wickedly. “I was channeling you a bit there towards the end.”

Loki just stared at Amora, unamused. “Why the interference, Amora?”

She grinned overly brightly. “Is that not what friends do?”

He just slowly raised an eyebrow. “We have never been friends.”

Her smile turned conspiring. “We may have had our differences, trickster, but we have joined forces from time to time.”

Not for even a millisecond did Loki consider that Amora was being altruistic. Her selfish ambition was legendary. There was always an angle for her, because she was too much like him for there to be any other way. “For mutually beneficial causes, not for a spontaneous feeling of protection.”

Batting her eyelashes at him. “Perhaps the news of your death caused me to mourn and I am simply overjoyed that they are false.” He blinked at her, face blank. “No?” Pouting her lips. “Alright, I want you to convince your daughter to go home, she is spoiling all of my fun.”

A smirk curled his lip. Closer to the truth, but Amora wasn’t afraid of Hela and would simply work around her. “You know better than any Hela answers to no one. However, I believe her current sport will run its course soon. And since we both know that I remain for as long as I choose, alone, will you now tell me your reason or shall we play some more?”

Amora purred seductively, hungrily. “So deliciously clever, prince.” And since she did find his intelligence so attractive it made absolutely no sense why she had a wicked crush on Thor. Not that Loki would reciprocate. He, too, valued intelligence in a mate and while she was clever, she wasn’t smart. “Our cause is mutually beneficial. Thanos was a fool to make an enemy of you and since he will destroy everything if he wins the infinity gauntlet it is in my best interest that he loses, ergo, we need you alive.”

He wasn’t even surprised that she knew Thanos’ end game. But still not the complete truth. Sighing through his nose. Why do people bother lying to me?

“If this were simply a matter concerning Thanos you would be pestering him, or inspiring him to kill himself. If this were a matter that you have determined my existence of importance you would have returned to Asgard sooner, or intervened when Malekith threatened it. However, I do not think you knew I was alive and here until you arrived so I ask again…what are you up to, Amora?”

She tried to look innocent. “Me?”

Loki growled in annoyance. “Why are you here, in Norway?”

Blinking quickly. “It’s lovely here.”

He bared his teeth, irritation flashing in his eyes and through with her. “Stop. Lying.”

She snapped at him defensively. “That’s rich coming from you.”
“You lie as effectively as I do…when I was two.” She pouted and brought her arms together just a little bit to emphasize her impressive cleavage as a means to distract him. While a lovely view, it did nothing for him since he found Jane’s more demure stature lovelier. He snapped his fingers. “And Jane Foster is here, the mortal Thor is smitten with.”

She put more emphasis into her pout. “You’re no fun anymore.”

Loki waved his hand, mind thinking quickly. Amora going after Jane would destroy everything. He had to get her redirected without making it seem as if Jane was important to him. Mentally he cackled. He knew the perfect way to get Amora back to Asgard and pay Thor back for being an idiot. “I was only going to point out that they’ve parted ways… I believe he’s back to panting after Sif.”

Amora looked positively indignant. “Sif?? He could do so much better!”

“Like yourself, perhaps?” Her pout enhanced a few degrees more and she batted her eyes at him again. He smirked devilishly, knowing he could use this to his advantage. It had been ever so long since he’d been able to wreak proper mischief through Asgard and he did owe his father at least one good prank for lying to him about his heritage. “I might even exchange some information with you for a favor.”

ASGARD

Odin stared down at the bottom of his wardrobe with a perplexed expression. There wasn’t a single pair of shoes anywhere in his rooms. Even the simple slippers that were always kept by his bedside were missing. Sighing and closing the wooden door, he winced as he stepped into the corridor of cold stone and flagged down the nearest servant. “I require my boots immediately.”

The servant’s eyes widened before he bowed and scurried away. “Yes, sire, right away.”

He noticed Loki’s personal servant, Anya, peak her head out of a side corridor before hurrying over, a quick curtsey presented to him before she placed a pair of boots at his feet. They weren’t his but they were the right size. “Milord.”

“Asgard, is it not?”

Her head ducked down respectfully, hands folded in front. “Yes, sire.”

He slipped the boots on, thinking to himself. Frigga had been exactly right when it came to Thor and Loki. He’d dismissed her input at the time and he was regretting it. Perhaps it was just a unique perspective that she’d had of her boys but he had a feeling it had more to do with gender. In either case, obtaining the observations of a servant who had spent countless hours in Loki’s presence might give him insight into the true feelings of his wayward son. “You might be able to offer a perspective I desire. You were Loki’s servant, were you not?”

“Yes, sire, I maintain the prince’s rooms.”

Curious, was all he could think. There was something in the way she phrased her answer that felt familiar. “Would your impression be that my son wanted for anything?”

“It would be far too impertinent and above my station to make such assumptions about the prince’s desires, sire. Nor to infer in any way that the fulfilling of your duties as a father lacked, sire.” She kept her eyes on the floor as she spoke.
Odin felt his spine stiffen. There was no hint of disapproval, not in her tone nor her body language…but the words said otherwise and it was no mere slip of the tongue. But he had asked for it, and apparently Loki’s Silvertongue had been a good teacher to Anya.

He refocused on her when she continued speaking. “However…if I were of a noble blood and took an examination from that perspective, I would see that the princes were gifted of material wants and possessions equally. The finest of all things in Asgard were at the princes’ requests. After all…” Her blue eyes looked up, a spark of fire in their depths. “…it is all that a child craves, is it not, milord? Things in place of time and attention. The latter are trifle by comparison and have no measure.” Then she bowed again. “Sire.”

Loki. His puzzle of a boy who measured love not by what was given, but by the attention he gained. Yet again Frigga had been right and he wished he’d listened to her sooner. But there was no point in wallowing when he more than intended to make it up to his son when he finally came home. Mentally he decided he would have to speak with Anya more often, turning his attention to his missing wardrobe. “I gather my boots will not be found.”

“No, sire.”

Familiarity again resurfaced as he probed further. “Will any foot apparel be found in Asgard, other than what is on my own feet?”

“None for those that reside in the palace, sire.”

Which would mean those of the Advisory Council and the nobles. It took him a moment to remember why this felt like it had happened before. Years upon years ago, after Loki had been given his own rooms but prior to Hela being born. Centuries of innocent pranks that were all mischief and good fun, annoying and infuriating at times but no lasting harm. “Has someone claimed responsibility?”

Her lip twitched dangerously. “Prince Thor was gifted with some very generous tidings from the Lady Amora this morn, I believe. I have never seen the prince sneeze so mightily since he was quite small.” Which meant Amora had given him copious clippings of roses, the one flower guaranteed to garner the reaction. He would not be surprised if she stole the shoes in exchange for what she thought was sound advice for wooing him.

And there were scarce few people who knew of Thor’s reactions to roses, since they had been a childhood problem. Which meant the information and the request for the prank came from a trickster source. He would also not be surprised to learn that all the missing shoes were mysteriously given to the less prosperous of the common citizens. It was one of the reasons that Loki had been the favored prince amongst the lower class citizens of Asgard. The nobility suffered the inconvenience of his pranks but the less fortunate always prospered from it.

Thor’s booming voice echoed up and down the family wing. “WHO HAS STOLEN MY BOOTS?”

Studying her for a moment, the carefully concealed mirth, he decided today might be a good day to NOT hold court.

ALFHEIM

“Indel, get out from under there this instant!” G’dath raised both eyebrows, fist poised to knock on the closed door. The choices were now before her: knock and find out what latest
catastrophe had occurred or run far, far away and pretend she heard nothing. Strapping some forgotten steel into her spine she swung open the door at the same time Loki whipped around and shouted at her. “No!” She looked down as a giggling two and a half year old ran past her with some impressive evading skills. The only thing covering his bare behind were a few suds and those were quickly dashed as he happily plopped down in a rather large mud puddle with a delighted squeal. Loki glared at her from the doorway. “I hate you.”

“I gather he is having a less than shy moment?” She felt her lip twitch traitorously but tried to keep her amusement out of her voice.

Loki ground his teeth, hissing a reply. “He has been like this all week! No matter what clothes I put on him he is determined to take them off.”

G’dart struggled not to laugh, “You cannot tell me you didn’t-…”

He cut her off swiftly, firm assurance in his tone. “No, I truly can. I was never less than fully dressed in the palace. By Hel-I barely said more than two words at one time to anyone until I was twice his age.”

She shrugged slightly at the frustrated father, explaining a universal truth. “You cannot expect him to be like you in all respects. You were simply shyer than he was, or he is outgrowing it faster than you did.”

He raised an eyebrow as he asked curiously. “You don’t think I’m shy?”


Instead of addressing her observation he bared his teeth, his tone sweet but his eyes flashing dangerously, “Why are you here?”

She sniffed and pretended to be insulted. “Well, I was going to gift you with something but now I’m not so sure.” He didn’t say anything, not in words nor in his expression. But those eyes gave everything away. Looking at him, she suddenly felt like she’d spent the morning kicking puppies. G’dath struggled not to just melt. Grumbling softly, “Fine.” He grinned in victory and stepped to the side with a slight bounce in his step, sending a shadow out to keep an eye on his mud covered son before following her in.

Pulling the messenger bag off her shoulder, she carefully pulled out a thick grimoire obviously made thousands of years ago in spite of the preservation spells on it. The outer shell was solid wood, finely polished elf oak and silver inlaid in the detailing. She smoothed her hand over the surface before presenting it to him. He made no move to touch it. Grimoire’s were highly personal books with not just magical knowledge but all the notes, reminders and diagrams that told a story of a mage’s private journey through their lifelong pursuit. She smiled just a little when he didn’t venture to accept it and took a step closer. “This is not mine. It is a family grimoire passed down through the generations. My son doesn’t have the gift and since my mate is departed I will never have a child with it. Among the elvish it is customary for apprentices to receive a grimoire from their master and…I would be honored if you could continue that tradition for my family.”

Loki murmured softly. “I have a grimoire.”

“This is not a personal grimoire but a family one. It keeps a recording of what is learned but not the journey.” G’dath corrected him as she opened the book before explaining further. “There are spells in here dating all the way back to my great-great grandfather, down the line to me…” Moving to halfway through the book. “…and plenty of room for your own discoveries.” Seeing that
there was even more meaning and emotion behind the gesture, he accepted the book without further protest, offering her a respectful bow of thanks before running his hand along the carved outside. She smirked. “Now that that’s out of the way, for your other present.” His head jerked up in surprise as she pulled a small box out of the bag and held it out to him.

Frowning slightly, he took it and opened it…and almost dropped it and the book. He stared down at the thin golden bracelet with intricate elven script before his eyes shot back to her face. “Is-…”

Her smirk grew as she confirmed. “Yep.”

“But-…that-…” He scowled suddenly before sputtering. “You’re not allowed to shock me!”

“Shock? Try stun.” Her lip twitched again, continuing cheekily. “Then I suppose I will have to ask for forgiveness since I obviously already have.”

Loki dropped the box, carefully put the grimoire on his worktable and held the bracelet with both hands. “This is a library card.”

“Yes.” G’dath confirmed this with a slight nod.

He put emphasis on the word, “This is an Alfheim library card.”

“That would also be correct.”

Loki started sputtering again. “I’m not an elf, how can I even be holding it??”

G’dath was tempted to pinch his cheek because he was being absolutely adorable when he was flustered, but she had a feeling he might set her on fire if she did. Instead she shrugged lightly. “I know people.”

The octave of his voice rose. “I have to be a citizen of Alfheim, acknowledged by the Senate to have access to the Great Hall of Knowledge.”

She’d been wondering if he would even appreciate the magnitude of such a gift. G’dath realized that not only did he appreciate it, that it had been something he’d wished for centuries ago. “And how does one become a citizen of Alfheim?”

He studied her, perplexed. “Being born a light elf.”

“Or?”

His brow furrowed slightly as his confusion grew. “…being married to one.”

“Or?” He just blinked at her, completely confused and she explained the third possibility. “If you have an advocate petition for citizenship.”

“You advocated for me?” Because it wouldn’t make any sense for her to petition for a light elf called Lokhi to gain citizenship.

“Azni did, actually.”

His knees gave out and he sat down on the floor, staring in shock. Azni knows who I am?

She moved to sit down next to him, tone soothing. “And before you ask, it was a true
petition with true citizenship. We stood as advocate for Loki and it was approved, under a sealed court so it will not be common knowledge unless you tell others.”

Loki shook himself and decided he would have to ponder this later once the shock wore off because right now he simple couldn’t grasp the repercussions. Besides right now he really wanted to see the Great Hall. “…how does one get to the library from here?”

“Put it on.” He did so without hesitation and she turned it slightly on his wrist. “Pressing down here and here activates it.” He raised an eyebrow but pressed down on the two symbols before glancing at her again. “Go open a door.”

“A door?”

G’dath nodded, “Any door.” Mentally shrugging but unable to hide his excitement, he almost bounced over to the front door and opened it. His jaw dropped to see the endless sea of shelves, thousands of rows of books, in a building more than four stories tall and larger than even the most populated cities in Midgard. The Great Hall of Knowledge. A collection of every book from every realm. His entire being itched to step across the threshold and explore, but Indel needed minding so with a small pout he closed the door and tapped the two symbols again, knowing it would shut down the gateway spell.

The magic wasn’t in the door, it was in the bracelet itself. And only because the moon was in perfect alignment to Alfheim did it even work. Usually the ‘library card’ only worked between the eight other main planets of the nine realms and Alfheim. She had no idea what kind of gift this was for him. NO ONE understood him so well. She was watching him, reclining back with an arm propped on her bent knee, silently enjoying the pleasure he struggled not to show. He still didn’t understand why she’d taken such an unusual shine to him. He had no idea why she even put up with him. She wasn’t one to be kind just for the sake of it and he knew he tested the full extent of her patience at any given time.

She and Azni knew he had no world to call his own, so they’d given him theirs. Such remarkable women, who deserved whatever he could give them in return. He had nothing of a material nature to gift in return, nothing except himself. Decision made, he stepped to her and bent, kissing her silently on the temple in thanks before turning to wrestle Indel into an early bath. He’d still tease and torment her because they both enjoyed it. She’d still try to intimidate and scare him because his ego needed that. But when it came down to need, she had his protection.

G’dath silently watched him slip outside, and while outwardly she portrayed shock, inside she wasn’t surprised at all. Azni was right, once you understood him you couldn’t help but love him.

Author's Notes:

I know. I know. The Other's dead. We're going to close our eyes, put our fingers in our ears, and pretend Guardians of the Galaxy didn't happen because I wrote this way before.

Next:

Loki causes mischief; Thanos courts death
When Jane had come to New York, her one and only focus was to create a way to see the stars. Seven months later and she was still trying to achieve her goal, but now with a very big distraction in front of her. A very handsome, engaging, funny, sarcastic and unexpectedly welcome distraction. She peered over the edge of her cup, taking in the man across from her. She couldn’t remember anymore exactly why she’d gone out for ‘just coffee’ with him but it had felt seamless and natural. Although he seemed to prefer to drink out of his own cup and there was always honeyed tea waiting for her. He reminded her of someone, but she couldn’t figure out who it was.

William Norland was an attractive man (very attractive, almost drool worthy) without being flashy and he didn’t seem to be conceited about it. When it was a topic he loved, there was a brilliant sparkle to his grey-green eyes and when he was finding something particularly amusing he had a wicked smirk. And a wicked tongue when he was offended, as well as being very, very opinionated. Their talks ranged from her work to theories on exotic matter to book discussions. His apparent genius was what had first caught her eye.

She was attending a conference in Norway on exotic matter with Bruce and three of their assistants a couple of months ago. The material itself was nothing innovative but she was hoping to get some of her questions verified with the host. She’d gotten her questions answered, just from this new and exciting source and since then they had daily ‘coffee’. William apparently was very transient, currently working on his own project in New York, so it all worked perfectly. She looked forward to seeing him, hoping he might at some point ask her for more than just ‘coffee’. But she wasn’t confident enough in the whole dating scene to know how to drop a hint without being horribly awkward. She’d even been toying with the idea of asking him out instead, but like always she chickened out and left it for next time. He toyed with his cup now, eyebrow quirking slightly.

“Something is on your mind.”

She grinned awkwardly. “Frustration with myself, mostly.”

“Why? Still the same question?”

She stuck her tongue out at him and sighed, missing his startled expression. Of course it was the same question. There were a million theories about exotic matter but that’s all they were, no reality on how to make it. The calculations said that it was possible to exist, but there was no actual proof of it. And the problem was she didn’t just need proof, she needed to actually use it to further her own creation. Two impossibilities to create a stunning reality. “Easy for you to say, your life’s work doesn’t hang in the balance.”

Not that he was allowed to tell her his life’s work. Apparently there were patent issues and he had yet to be cleared to discuss it with anyone. William gestured lazily as he leaned back in his chair, his tone changed to be more instructive. “What is exotic matter?”

“What?”

He lifted an eyebrow, refusing to repeat himself. “You heard me.” Her mouth dropped open and he smirked.

Damn him, she always felt a thrill when he did that.
He continued with the topic, unaware of the detour her mind took. “You are looking for matter to fit the parameters of your calculations. Perhaps instead of creating it, you should look for a source.”

Now Jane sighed. “I tried that first and that’s an old argument.”

He wagged a finger at her nose. “The correct argument is never old.” He leaned forward, eyes hard. “Look, theory aside and let us dispense that I know about SHIELD, I shall be blunt…how did Loki get to earth?”

Her eyes widened, voice going higher. “How did you-…”

Shrugging dismissively. “You have enough money, you find out anything you want to know. The point, how did he get here? Where was he? Did he just use magic or did he use some type-…”

“He used the Tesseract!”

William gestured with his hands. “The name aside, he used ‘something’ and turned it into a traversable wormhole. These…Asgardians call it a Tesseract. So…what is it?”

Jane threw her arms up in the air. “No one knows that!”

He smirked again, as if amused. “Of course you know, Jane. Think about it, it is not so difficult. In a universe of like pulling and being attracted to like…if this cube can punch a hole through physical space to pull a mage instantly from point to point…”

Pulling her notepad closer, scribbling for a second before chewing on the end of her pen. “Magic users use magic…”

He nodded slowly, an encouraging gleam in his eyes. “Every action creates an equal and opposite reaction…to produce that much magic, that much energy, it has to come from somewhere…”

Jane’s head jerked back up. “They get it from their surroundings, too.”

“But perhaps they do not just use it…”

Her eyes widened, “They’re covered in it.”

William smirked and purred his words, “Potentially, a very powerful mage could be perceived as made by it so they are in a very physical sense magic.”

Nibbling on her bottom lip, talking faster. “Exotic matter is vital for the stabilization…like pulled to like-magic pulled magic! Exotic matter is tangible magic.” The universe suddenly expanded around her. Of course. Loki had been able to summon energy, bend light with illusions, why couldn’t magic manifest in a solid form? She was on the cusp of a discovery that could change everything about the human condition. But she also felt melancholy because SHIELD would stomp on this research as much as it did her previous attempts. But that was a worry for later, for the practical side Tony would see that it happened. “Well how do I get my hands on that??”

His smirk grew dangerously. “Remember Jane, money talks. If you tell me how much to
acquire for you, I can handle that.”

She shook her head. “How? Wha-…how??”

His smirk softened with amusement. “My own research took a similar path recently. We decided to use a different avenue so now I’m free to discuss it but I happen to know a mage here who will…for the right price… supply what you need.”

Her expression turned wary. “This won’t have anything to do with Dr. Doom, right?”

He barked a laugh. “Furthest possible source. She wants nothing to do with him, finding him 2-dimensional and idiotic.”

Jane grinned. “Good, then. I-I’m sure Stark Industries can pay you back…”

He leaned forward, eyes gleaming. “Think of it as an investment and do with it as you will.”

Smiling shyly. “Okay. Um, thank you. Just…thank you, William.”

A flicker of annoyance lit his eyes, there and hidden before she could notice it. Instead he growled softly. “Think nothing of it, dear Jane.” They both looked up as Iron Man went flying past them at subsonic speed. There was a rumble in the distance, a sure sign of an eminent battle. They both locked eyes again and stood, “Go, Jane, you’ll be safer in Stark Towers.”

Grabbing her purse. “Come with me.”

He shook his head a little. “I cannot, but I assure you I will be fine.” Her jaw started to tighten, her brown eyes sparking with stubbornness and he knew he’d have to do more than simply ask her. Such a spirited little thing. Yes, G’dath was right, definite potential. His tone deepened, turning persuasive that had everything to do with magic and nothing to do with his words. “Go.”

She nodded slowly, before nodding more quickly, and turning. “O-okay, um, tomorrow then.” He nodded silently and waited until she disappeared in the building before flashing out of the café, reappearing on the roof to get a better vantage point. He was really starting to hate his alias’s name. He craved hearing his real name come from her lips.

A wicked smirk crossed his face, the guise on his appearance fading and his Asgardian green and gold armor sliding into place. He leapt from roof to roof as if walking on the clouds themselves, ducking down into the shadow of a rooftop air conditioner of an industrial building to see the Avengers tackling something large and slimy.

Stark was flying around it, commenting as he moved. “Okay, who let Slimer out of the Containment Field? Really? Nobody got that?”

The Hulk bellowed and threw things at it, everyone else ignoring Tony. As a creature of slime and no substance the objects just passed right through. Captain America kept flinging his shield at it, even though his method was just as effective as Hulk’s. He shook his head. “We need a new strategy.”

The two assassins had taken up positions but neither bullets nor arrows were fazing it. Romanoff glanced back at him, face blank. “I’m willing to take suggestions.”

Hulk roared and hit the ground with twin fists, the street cracking under the force. Loki winced in sympathy, remembering how it felt to get tossed around by that green beast. Having the
wind knocked out of him by being smashed repeatedly into the floor was not the ending to that nightmare he’d been hoping for.

The creature bellowed, a rain of putrid smelling foulness pouring down on them. Even Loki curled his nose in disgust and he’d faced his fair share of distasteful creatures…Thor eating being one of the worst.

Stark lifted his visor and laughed. “Man, sucks being you-…” He yelped and ducked out of the way of an arrow half-heartedly aimed at him. “Hey! You didn’t get slimed, bird-brain.”

Clint aimed another shot at the slime creature, this arrow tipped with explosives. “We need a better plan before this thing hits central park.” The arrow sailed through the air, going through the creature and exploding as soon as it impacted pavement. The shock-wave shook the creature’s form but did nothing else.

He really shouldn’t. It was going to draw attention. Loki smirked. But when had he ever done what he was supposed to do? Besides, it was well worth the magical effort to cook their little minds with something they would never be able to explain. But what to do was the question? He could double it in size: that would be amusing. He could replicate a few of them: that would be devastating. But he frowned, just a little. Jane was near, he wouldn’t wish her harmed over a prank.

He pouted, if only to himself. His attachment to her was ruining all of his fun. Rubbing his fingers together, creating little green sparks on the fingertips, he moved his hands in a few patterns as he concentrated his gaze on it, eyes flashing deep green. He clapped, just once, and it echoed as if a roll of thunder. The creature bellowed as its skin started to vibrate before it lost all substance and liquefied.

Romanoff shrieked a swear as she was swept away in a wave of slime, tumbling into Rogers before both of them were able to grab onto a stop light. Tony landed on the street, Hulk grunting as he looked around before determining there were no further enemies. He started shrinking back into Bruce Banner without further prompting. Barton climbed down a drain pipe, the only one other than Tony marginally unscathed. Tony lifted his visor, looking completely perplexed.

“Okay…”

Loki was grinning like a madman, hand over his mouth to keep his laughter silent, laying on the asphalt roof before the visual illusion he was using flickered and faded, leaving the roof empty.

ALFHEIM

Loki slowly opened his eyes to see not just one, but two displeased women looking down at him with their arms crossed. This didn’t bode well, but he couldn’t think of what he could have said or done recently to upset both of them. His brow furrowed, grey-green eyes looking around to confirm that he was stretched out on the ground of his main room.

He tried to lift his arm but the limb didn’t even twitch. His eyes shot back to G’dath in panic and she snarled down at him, her eyes holding worry and… disappointment? Oh, this didn’t bode well at all.

“It’s called magical exhaustion, idiot child. You’ve drained yourself almost completely.”

His throat worked to try to talk but he couldn’t even pull his body together for that little bit of control and he started panicking. Azni put her anger on hold, crouching down to smooth her palm
across his forehead. “Shh, little one. It happens.” She smiled just a little, the concept having been explained to her by G’dath through clenched teeth while Loki had been unconscious. “I would also be willing to wager it is a mistake you will not make again.”

G’dath grumbled and went to find a chair. “I knew I should have started with the basics with him.”

An amused glint in Azni’s eyes, repeating what she’d been told but speaking as if tutoring him on an important subject. “It is a principle of magic: the higher the saturation, the more the effect. You are a very powerful mage, Loki, magic is not merely your defense.”

G’dath plunked down a chair and tossed a blanket at him, snapping. “It will mean your life if you drain yourself completely, idiot. And if after everything else that is the reason you die, I will make a trip to Helheim just to slap you upside the head.”

Azni moved the blanket over him and made a tutting noise. “G’dath, stop name calling.” Her brown eyes looked meaningfully at Indel who didn’t appear to be listening. As both women had been mothers neither was fooled. G’dath huffed and collapsed back into the chair. The older woman patted his chest lightly once the blanket was in place. “She rebukes you because she cares.”


“Is dada gonna wake up soon?”

G’dath opened her arms so the boy could crawl into them. In two years Indel had done an impressive amount of growing. Now at three and a half, he could climb just about any tree in the forest. “Your father did something very silly so now his magic is forcing him to rest.”

Indel frowned. “Is it because of the pretty lady?”

Loki made another strangled sound, turning red. G’dath lifted an eyebrow with interest. “Pretty lady?”

The boy nodded enthusiastically and pointed as he explained. “I saw her in the mirror bunches of times, she is very pretty. But he also visits her, too, to talk to her.” Indel rolled his eyes. “They talk about boring things.”

G’dath had a wicked sparkle in her eyes now, “And where is the pretty lady from?”

Indel shrugged, it not occurring to him that there would be a reason to lie. “Midgard.”

Loki made a growling sound. Both ladies shared a knowing look before G’dath nodded. “This isn’t the pretty lady’s fault, but your father used up too much of his magic because he doesn’t understand moderation. Midgard is a long distance from here and it takes a lot of effort to send a visual projection there.”

Instantly Indel looked worried. “But he’ll be okay?”

Azni smiled reassuringly. “Of course he will. He will sleep for a few hours and when he wakes up he’ll be all better. And since I know G’dath needs to attend to her patients I will stay with both of you in the meantime.”

Worry shifting to wariness. “Do I have to take a nap?”
Azni had a knowing look on her face as she asked, “Do you need to?” Indel vigorously shook his head, having already had one earlier. “Then no.”

Indel frowned down at his father thoughtfully. “But dada needs one?”

Azni nodded firmly, moving over to the bookcase to select a book to read to Indel. “Yes.”

Indel’s little face was scrunched up in concentration, thinking of all the times he’d been forced to nap by himself. “But I thought dasas and mammas didn’t take naps.”

G’dath passed the boy over to Azni, sent a last scowl at Loki, and slipped out the front door. Loki mentally sighed. She was going to rake him over the coals later. But they were right, this was one lesson he wasn’t going to forget. Azni’s curious tone distracted him from thinking about the unpleasantness to come, “Who told you that?”

Shrugging. “Dada.”

She smiled gently while nodding knowingly, taking a seat in the chair G’dath had sat in. “I see. Well, your father is right most of the time but even adults sometimes need naps. We just enjoy them more.” Indel made a face before snuggling in her lap and Azni laughed. “Now, how about I read you a story about how the light elves found Alfheim while your father closes his eyes…and if he doesn’t do as he’s told then I will have G’dath make him a potion.” The words were said lightly, the meaning behind them wasn’t and Loki took the hint, closing his eyes.

OUTSIDE OF THE NINE REALMS

Thanos watched with hungry eyes as the bodies were stacked up to the skies. Just a small planet, only a few million to offer to the altar of his lady. He felt the presence before he saw her, smiling and seeing a figure surrounded by shadow whispering at the very edge of sight. Crooning softly to her. “Does this not please you, my lady death? It is but a taste of what I wish to offer to your glory. Soon all of the realms will bow before you, groveling at your feet.” The shadow ventured just the slightest bit closer, the hint of an alabaster hand. The spark of a dark green eye. He was entirely entranced. “Might I have your favor now?”

Thanos was so insane he no longer remembered what he would gain to have death’s favor. The voice was a low purr of sound and thrills of pleasure trickled up his spine. She’d spoken before, but it was never long enough of a conversation. He’d become entranced with the image of death he had seen thousands of years ago, but in recent centuries the image had become a form and a seductive voice. He was positive the more attention he gained, the more real she would become. “You have added much to my army…yet you refuse to join me. Why?”

“As much as I wish to be at your side for all of eternity, I must first conquer the realms to create your kingdom, milady.”

Hela allowed the shadow spell to dissipate just a little bit more. Yes, the number of souls destined for Helheim had caught her attention but it was the fact that she could sense the infinity gems that drew her here. So many problems would be so easily solvable if she could gift them to Loki. She glanced up at his tribute and mentally sighed. *How insane could one person be?* She was the queen of the dead and even she found it slightly disturbing. “Am I not already the queen of death? Are I not the ruler over all things that have slipped the greedy hold of life? What need I of a throne in this realm when my own awaits me in the next? Come with me, titan, and leave all of these machinations to another.”
He took a step but paused when she retreated, becoming shadowy and flitting coyly to the other side of the mountain of creatures. She peaked at him from the other side and it stirred at his need to chase. “I beg you to wait, my love. You deserve all of this and more, a tribute worthy of you. I will give you Odin and his get for your pleasure—…”

Snapping, standing before him and nothing more than a pair of shadow encased green eyes. “They are not bound for me, how is their death of use to me?” Pulling back, her voice returning to a seductive purr as tendrils of shadow reached out and caressed him. Where is it? Where is it? “This is not for me. You do not love me. You do not conquer for me. You conquer for yourself.”

Losing all eloquence in his denial. “No!”

Her laugh was as sharp and cruel as she could be and he loved it. “Then prove this to me. Join me in death’s embrace. Abandon the living to rule the dead at my side.”

He watched her flit around him before returning to the dead. “Perhaps if I were to gift you someone special it might prove my devotion to you.”

Voice soft, nothing but a shadow. “And who will you give me?”

Watching her closely, a flare of jealousy striking his heart. “The Jötunn runt. He was always a favorite of yours. I felt you refuse to accept him, until my minion decided to use him instead.”

He was right in that fact, but if only she’d known what was going on at the time. She’d just thought that father was getting careless, not that he had been captured and tortured. She didn’t think anyone was powerful enough but one didn’t underestimate the devastating effects of the abyss on magic. If she’d known then what she now knew she would have released the full focus of her fury on the Other and wiped he and his Chitauri minions out. It wasn’t possible now. It wasn’t the game that father wanted to play, so she would abide and let him have his fun. “Merely a pet that has amused me on occasion, nothing more.”

The edge of her gossamer gown ghosted over a mechanical creation on the ground. The mad titan was many things. Insane. Hungry for power. Brilliant. He made all manner of devices to further his own plans… weapons, devices of untold destruction, constructs to enhance his telepathic and telekinetic abilities, chambers to suspend his soldiers in a moment of time…and tossed them aside as used junk once their purpose was complete. She glanced at the pile of the dead. The extinction of yet another race. More junk tossed to the side as far as he was concerned.

“Then he is not amongst your army.”

Her eyes flashed. Thanos should be thankful for that fact, the conceited idiot. He couldn’t even fathom what she would do to the creature than managed to permanently kill Loki. And she was irritated that she could sense the gems but not find them. He had no pockets, where in Hel else-eww.

Not even if father got down on his knees and begged would she retrieve them from… there. Turning her attention to the titan, her irritation in her voice. “Do not think that you are smarter than I, Thanos, or you will truly regret gaining my attention. His fate is not certain, it never was. He could be in Valhalla or he could be alive, I know not. And since it is now transparent that you have reduced me to nothing more than a bearer of information I must depart.”

Thanos cried out in denial but it was already too late, death slipping away as silently as she arrived.
Author's Notes:

For those concerned...no. Emphatically NO. This is not going to be on of those quick make-them-love-one-another-instantly-for-no-substantial-reason things. I am taking my time with this, I promise.

You will get to the point where you will almost be ready to ask WHEN before I finally give in. Trust me, I like a slow burn.

Next:

Amora plots; Loki hunts; Jane wishes
ASGARD

Thor frowned to himself and froze, feigning sleep. He was not a light sleeper, but a warrior’s instincts would always be honed and ready. He felt the lightest of touches caressing his muscular back and rolled, the body next to him squealing in shock as she was tossed to the floor, Thor looming over her with a scowl and hand around her throat. Growling the word, “Amora.”

The fact that he was gloriously naked, chiseled features, rippling abs, and impressive… stature, should have given her pleasure but in this moment she was truly afraid for her life. “P-prince-…”

Snarling menacingly in her face. “Who gave you leave to enter my rooms?” She wanted to purr in submission but the amount of anger in his eyes told her he was not in an accommodating mood. Mentally she sighed in disappointment.

His grip tightened just a fraction and she squealed. “No one, sire, no one! I-I wanted-…”

He growled and dragged her to her feet, shoving her to the setae which she sat on in a huff. She sent out a tendril of magic to fix her mussed hair and smooth the wrinkles in her dress. If only it were mussed for more passionate reasons. Silently she watched with a mournful gaze as he slipped on an under tunic and breeches. But she wasn’t idle, her mind scrambling for a plausible excuse that she knew he was going to demand. The prince had never been opposed to companionship, she was honestly surprised at his reaction. She supposed it was because she hadn’t allowed him the opportunity to invite her.

Thor stepped towards her. “Now. You will explain this intrusion or you will face the gallows.”

Whimpering softly, hurt that he was so serious about this. “I wanted to know if you appreciated my gift; that is all.”

Eyes narrowing. “Gift?”

She knew she should have approached him sooner, but some of the sorcerers on Alfheim had taken exception to a few things she might or might not have said at a gala and she’d spent the last couple of months hiding on Vanheim. Smiling weakly. “The flowers?”

Scowling. “Your gift vexed me for hours, even after their repugnant odor no longer infested my rooms.”

Sputtering with wide eyes. “B-but h-h-h…” She gave an inarticulate howl and covered her face with her hands. She couldn’t say the trickster’s name. Not only had Loki tricked her, and was she even surprised, but he’d put some sort of curse on her to prevent her from betraying his presence. Without knowing the words it could take her years to lift it. She had to admire him just a little for that. Nearly wailing the first thing that popped into her mind. “I was forced!”

Lifting his hand, Mjolnir flying into his waiting palm, before pointing it at her. “You will speak the truth, witch. Either you are to blame or you will name the one who is.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again and looked down in defeat. “He put a spell upon me, to enslave me.”
Thor slowly frowned at the enchantress. He personally was surprised she was still here. His brother had been living mischief but even he had known to vanish when a prank had gone too far. Still, Loki had had one advantage over Amora and it had everything to do with intelligence. It didn’t mean he wouldn’t make full use of her ignorance. “Who? What is the name of your master?”

There was nothing that she could say or do to point the finger to Loki. And honestly did she even want to? Of course she did, she would just have to find a different way to get her revenge. Then it came to her. It was perfect. It would allow her to slip back into Asgardian court with grace and perhaps earn the sympathetic protection of a certain god of thunder. Mentally hiding her grin, knowing this could work well to her advantage after all. “T-thanos.”

Scowling in disbelief. “The mad titan commanded you to assault me with roses?”

Well when he put it like that it sounded idiotic. Amora mentally winced and scrambled as a plan started forming. “Nay! Of course not, my prince, I merely meant t-that I was under duress and running from him after escaping his control. I gifted you the flowers in the hopes that you would grant me protection!”

Thor studied her for a moment. He knew she was lying, he just wasn’t sure if it was all fiction or just some of it. Thanos was enough of a threat to the nine realms that the truth of his involvement in anything needed to be determined. Normally he would have dragged her to Loki, who could have figured out in seconds truth from lie…but he couldn’t, so his father would have to do.

ALFHEIM

Loki walked silently along the thick branches of the trees. Hunting had never been his forte, in fact he’d abhorred it, but he was finding with some surprise that he actually looked forward to it now. Perhaps because an AEsr would never hunt this way. Just like in everything else, a grand production was made to find the largest, toughest kills. To run into the fray head first with sword and shield and slay the beast. A coward hunted from the trees. A non-warrior used a bow and arrow. Mentally he stuck his tongue out at each and every one of them.

Indel watched him from a safe distance, following when he moved on to the next tree. It was much easier to hunt from up here. Safer as well. And since the three and a half year old loved to climb it was a perfect arrangement. Most parents would have insisted on a child so young stay home but he had been raised a prince of Asgard, and he’d been taught these skills from a young age.

He crouched down, his bow slipping soundlessly into his hand before he took an arrow and smoothly pulled back. Breathing in controlled intervals, his fingers touched his lips and he waited for the perfect moment. He waited until the deer took a single step before raising its head. The arrow released and flew perfectly, finding the heart and their bounty crumpled to the ground.

Loki looked back and Indel grinned with a giggle. Pointing at him with a clear indication of ‘stay there’, he climbed down the tree and crossed the forest floor. A few gestures and a long wave of his hand, the meat disappeared into a dimensional pocket for later. Taking a look around, breathing in the cool morning air, he turned back to his tree and climbed back up to the branches. Indel leapt the distance and he easily caught him.

Little arms wrapped tightly around his neck. “Dada…” Fingers reached out to tug on his hair.

“Ouch.” Indel giggled, blue cat tail flicking lazily. Indel had spent nearly four months as a
white kitten before finally being coaxed into changing back, but the experience hadn’t traumatized him anymore than Loki’s abilities to change as a child had. Loki felt himself smile every time he saw the thing. His son had argued quite logically that it helped with his balance so Loki did nothing to dissuade him.

Loki grinned and bopped Indel’s nose with a finger, the smile fading as he felt something. He pressed his index finger to his son’s lips, the little boy immediately freezing. Turning, eyes and senses searching for something, Loki felt his lip curl in a snarl as three very familiar figures walked along the lake shore. He didn’t recognize them, necessarily, just their species. Chitauri. And they were following the path that would lead them to the elven village.

*Advanced scouts? Lost remnants?* It could just be an amazing coincidence they were here…but he’d stopped believing in coincidence a long time ago. The world eater was getting closer. It would still be a while. As a final kindness he had planned to warn the elves to leave before he and Indel disappeared…but what if there were more? What if one escaped and reported his whereabouts to Thanos?

Fear gripped his throat before he beat it into submission. *No. Never again.* He wouldn’t allow the coward in him to rule him but he wasn’t stupid. Only on his own terms, in his own time, would Thanos know he lived…just before he sent that monster to Niflheim.

With just three of them it would take time to slaughter the village, allowing for him to easily slip away. He was a trickster, after all, not a hero. He was no longer a son of Asgard and had no loyalties to anyone. But then that thought paused him. Alfheim was his home now. G’dath. Trax. Azni. G’dath trained him and he’d vowed to protect her. Trax befriended him. And Azni…no, he owed them more loyalty than that. He looked at Indel. A boy that learned by example. Damn. Damn. DAMN.

He held him close and kissed his hair. Ran a finger gently over the delicate points of his ears. Another kiss to his cheek before breathing the command in his ear. “…stay hidden…” Indel’s lower lip trembled but he nodded obediently, knowing that was a tone never to disobey, and soundlessly climbed higher up into the tree as soon as Loki released him.

Just like hunting a bear, Loki stalked his prey soundlessly. The difficulty was that these three would not separate. He would be forced to take them all on at once. He would have to start with the one in the middle. That one moved slightly ahead of the other two and carried the largest weapon. Either the pod commander or an advanced soldier.

He called in his throwing knives and hid the pouch on the inside of his jacket. Not enough time to call in armor, the sound of metal unmistakable. He didn’t like the idea of attacking without that protection but he couldn’t move like this in his Asgardian armor. In the back of his mind he made a plan to modify his battle gear again.

He slipped to the next branch, keeping pace with them as he planned out his moves. The right one was smarter, he would fire after assessing the situation. *Save him for last.* The left one had a weakened right knee: that would be to his advantage to incapacitate him.

He pulled out his hunting knife soundlessly from its sheath, tucking the familiar handle down so the sharp blade would impact flesh when he jumped. He felt himself grin and there was no denying it, he had *missed* this. He wasn’t an Asgardian warrior who needed constant blood and gore but his instincts were just as finely honed and three years without a challenging target left him eager to enter the fray. He ran through his entire plan in his mind, visualizing each move before he leapt.

Loki landed exactly where he intended, the blade lodging solidly in the lead’s cerebral
cortex. He twisted the blade and it collapsed. Dropping down, he spun his leg out and caught the left one at the knee, the creature screeching in pain. He lodged a throwing knife deep into its trachea, grabbing the head and jerking until there was a crack and the body went slack.

The smart one did the unexpected, it ran. And like all Chitauri, it ran fast. Loki growled and didn’t even think, leaping into the air and shifting form into a sleek panther. With a roar he gave chase, eating up the distance and easily evading the shot aimed back at him. Eyes narrowing to see his house up ahead, he mentally started cursing to see G’dath and Azni frozen in the path.

Loki’s magic snaked out ahead of him without a word of command being uttered. The ground under the Chitauri turned to quicksand, slowing him down. Vines snaked out of the ground and wrapped around the sinking creature, delaying its escape. Swiping with his left paw, the ground reverting back to firm dirt under his own four feet, the Chitauri gave an inhuman yell and fell forward in front of the two women. They backed up but Loki ignored them, letting both sets of claws sink into its shoulders and relishing the screams. Idly he wondered what else he could do to recreate it.

“Loki.” Slowly he raised his head, whiskers twitching and left ear turning slightly in G’dath’s direction. “Kill it, but do not let these monsters turn you cruel. You owe your son more than that.”

He looked back down before deciding she was right, shifting form halfway, black tail whipping around in agitation and snapping its neck dismissively with his clawed hands. Knowing his son as well as he did, all that he did was stand and turn with arms out. Indel, never one to stay behind, fell into his arms and wrapped his own tightly around his neck, legs around his waist. He rubbed the boy’s back, hesitantly meeting Azni’s appraising look.

His half transformation wasn’t a conscious choice, but a sign of his wariness of her reaction. His black tail continued to flick nervously. Seeing what he was capable of was sometimes too much. It led to fear which is why he sometimes took such pains to walk the knife’s edge between weak and powerful. The weakling prince of Asgard wasn’t respected, but the God of Chaos was feared. She seemed to nod to herself. “Well, are you going to invite an old lady in for tea?”

Both G’dath and Loki snorted in unison as he grinned around his fangs in relief. He bowed slightly and invited them in.

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**MIDGARD**

Whenever she picked up the slip of parchment, her mind immediately turned to Asgard. Jane missed it. It had been beautiful and intriguing, she could happily spend her entire life asking questions about anything and everything. Grand. Glorious.

*Was there a school there for little demi-godlings? Maybe somewhere else for little magicians to learn. Science? Astronomy? Wouldn’t it be epic to compare all that she knew with an astrologist who lived in Asgard? And they would be so much older than her, living possibly long enough to observe a star from birth to death. Well, perhaps that idea was a little farfetched but still, far longer than she would ever live.*

She wrote another translated word down.

But then her thoughts turned to the death of a queen. The funeral. So many of those brave warriors dying when the dark elves attacked. Her almost dying…and Loki dying. Her brow furrowed, wondering if Thor went back to find his body, to bring him home. She rubbed her
forehead lightly with her fingers and wrote down the last word.

Svartalfheim. *Were all the other planets in the universe like that one? So desolate and barren. Lifeless.* She never had asked why it was like that. But now she wondered. *Was it just the way the elven planet was, or had something happened? Natural disaster? Pollution? War?* Considering the people, she was leaning towards the last possibility.

Jane frowned to herself, slowly putting down the pen as she looked over the completed letter. It had been slipped in amongst her clothing and she’d recently stumbled across it. It had been written in Norse runes, a string tied around it and tethered to two objects. It had taken quite a bit of time for her to translate. Now that she had the translated product she was no less mystified. Apparently it was a note from Frigga, but why the late queen paid her the least bit of attention mystified her.

*Lady Jane,*

*As you read and understand the words, let me first express my relief that my sons were successful. And if my vision is correct, I am no more. Do not harbor any sorrow, for death is but a part of life, a lesson I have striven to instill in my children.*

*I urge you, my dear, to not confuse your love for my home to equate love for my eldest… but I feel certain by now you have realized that for yourself. Keep your eyes focused on the stars and do not allow your doubts to sway you from your path.*

*It is customary in my world that all my possessions left behind are passed on to my children, but I chose for these two items to be given to you. You are not required to return them, but I do ask that you keep them safe. The necklace is similar to a Midgardian locket. While holding it in your palm, speaking ‘Odinson’ will reveal the picture within. Wear the ring in good health.*

*You might consider the name Vili for your son’s name, I was always partial to it.*

*Queen Frigga of Asgard*

She smiled to herself, even as she was puzzled by the last part. Picking up the necklace, she examined it closely. Smooth and clear, almost as thin as glass and oval shaped. She held it in her palm. “Odinson.” She gasped in delight as an image appeared. She blinked in surprise. It moved. Two figures stood side by side, familiar and yet completely unknown to her, obviously younger than when she’d known them. One man an inch taller than the other, blond hair but no beard and smiling freely with an arm thrown over the shoulders of the slightly shorter man. The dark-haired man rolled his eyes for effect but stood still, his smile was smaller. Shyer. They were both dressed in tunics, hair shorter than she’d seen on either of them. Loki was saying something to Thor, though there was no sound, slyness tugging at the corner of his lips. Thor tipped his head back to laugh and Loki’s smile brightened slightly, apparently happy to have made his older brother laugh.

The image faded and after smoothing her finger over the crystal, she put the gold chain around her neck. She took the white and gold band and twirled it on her fingers. It was beautiful, even for a keepsake. Tomorrow they were going to test her worm hole and she was anxious to see its success. Her dream of visiting Asgard had faded over time, but the burning desire to see other planets no human had ever traveled had only increased. Standing up to go get ready for bed, she absently
slipped the ring on the ring finger of her left hand.

ASGARD

Thor walked with Amora casually at his side, she smirking at scandalized courtiers and scowling warriors. If it were possible, she was even less liked than Loki had been by the court in life. Now in death he was remembered more for the positive than the negative, leaving Amora severely lacking. The double doors to the throne room opened, the pair of them walking down the runner to Odin’s throne.

Thor took a knee before his father. “All-father.”

Amora was quick to offer a kneeled curtsey, slightly delayed since she was busy primping for her audience. Odin nodded in acknowledgement to his son. “Thor.” Remaining as rigid in court as ever as he addressed Amora. “I seem to recall an event seventy-five years ago.”

Amora felt her face flush. Odin was still mad about that?

Odin continued, unaware of her thoughts. “And I also recall that you, Lady Amora, took it upon yourself to remove your presence from Asgard, rather than face honorable judgment.”

It was an unspoken rule. She was free to wander Asgard if she chose to maintain her self-exile but now that she was officially before the throne any outstanding punishments could and would be brought forward. It had just been a little bit of fun and she’d always delighted in making royalty look like idiots. So it may have started a minor war between Asgard and Vanaheim that took Thor’s might and Loki’s Silvertongue to subdue. Oh. So that’s why the trickster’s annoyed with me.

Swallowing and ducking her head in forced humbleness. “Was it really only 75 years ago, sire?”

His blue eye narrowed. “I have the date down to the second if you wish it to be offered considering the number of fine warriors that died as a result of your jest.” The warriors present grumbled, all of them remembering the resulting war. They delighted in war, of course, but didn’t condone the way it was instigated.

She murmured, eyes on the stone floor. “No, sire, but I thank you for the offer.” Then Amora looked up with a pout. “You would not have punished your youngest for a similar crime.”

Thor sucked in a pained breath and Amora almost felt bad for speaking. The courtier’s shifted warily at speaking of the departed second son, but Amora dismissed them from thought. But when the All-father’s voice thundered through the throne room she found regret. “You, Lady Amora, are not Loki and never will be. You are fortunate your past misdeeds have not earned you the executioner’s block and I strongly suggest you never again mention my son in my presence.” Silence from everyone. Odin growled to himself but turned his attention to his son. “Thor?”

Odin was silently praying his son hadn’t taken an interest in the Enchantress. He’d prefer his oldest go back to courting the mortal Jane Foster than that. Thor stood. “The Lady Amora has indicated that a new enemy may have interests in Asgard.”

The warriors stood up a little straighter and shuffled. Odin leaned back just a little. She was a strong magician, it was true, but she was a truly selfish creature who would never endanger her own life for the betterment of Asgard. “And who is this new foe that requires vanquishing?”

Thor nodded to Amora who tried to look innocent and demure…it didn’t work. “The
There were murmurs and whispers but Odin didn’t even twitch. “I see…and just where did you encounter such a creature, Lady Amora?”

Her eyes widened for the briefest of seconds before filling with tears. She knew the legends of Thanos. She may not know where he was right now but she knew where he came from. “He…he exists o-on Titan…in Midgard’s realm…”

Odin nodded slowly to himself. “Thanos is indeed a powerful foe. One can never underestimate his abilities in seidr for he is almost impossible to defeat. However did you escape?”

Closing her eyes for just as moment, swaying on her feet as if swooning. Thor automatically reached out to steady her and she almost purred in delight. “I-It all h-happened so fast, milord, and I barely remember the how.”

Odin spoke quietly, almost gentle. “I really do insist, lady.”

Amora nodded bravely. “I remember Vanahem. Then I was waking up. I was brought before him, trapped and after h-he t-t-tortured me…he said I c-could be useful and locked me in a cell. B-but he forgot to seal it.” She put the back of her hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. “I barely had the magical strength to slip past the guards and I…I sensed a dark passage for I was suddenly on Midgard. Yes, that was it, and of course the way back to Asgard from there is easy for one such as myself.”

Thor stiffened as he stared at her. He might have believed her walking the golden branches of Yggdrasil, although he wasn’t sure if she was powerful enough, but only Loki knew the dark passages. Odin looked at her more intently. “Intriguing. I was not aware there were any dark passages between Titan and Midgard. In fact, I do believe my youngest made a statement as such and you will forgive me lady if I take his word over yours.”

Squeaking. “Sire?”

Continuing on as if he hadn’t been interrupted, Odin’s voice turned angrier as he spoke. “Then of course, there was the very neat trap that has sprung around your lie, since Thanos has absolutely no magical ability, of which I know from personal experience.” Amora squeaked again as a pair of magic restraining cuffs were slapped on her wrists by Thor, who was staring down at her coldly. She looked from the thunderer to the king. “I raised an artful liar, lady, you would do well to remember that he rarely fooled me.” Odin offered himself the luxury of leaning back slightly as he drank in the full picture of her current plight. He would need to visit her separately, away from the court setting because he did believe she had answers to a few of his questions but not just yet. Best to let her wallow for a while. Loki could spend 10 years in the dungeons and barely blink with true remorse but Amora lacked the mental discipline and would break easily enough. “But I am not an unreasonable monarch, Lady Amora. Perhaps a few days to consider the merits of truth before your king will be enough for you to be more forthcoming. Take her to the dungeons. Seven days.”

Pouting at Thor, she slumped and let the guards escort her down to the lower level. Thor caught the barest of amused gleams in his father’s eye and wondered just what it was that Odin found so amusing.

Author's Notes:
Big. Big things are about to happen. I'm about to start the blender. Hang on tight.

Next:

Tony chats with Gorgeous; Jane becomes a damsel in distress
MIDGARD

Tony Stark was practically seething and it took a lot to crack through his nonchalant shell. He hadn’t been this pissed off since his house in Malibu had been destroyed (thank you Mandarin). Snarling, “No security clearance, are you fucking kidding me??”

He ran both hands through his dark hair and threw himself into his chair. He was a man of his word and he took it seriously. How was he supposed to tell such a sweet girl who had trusted him that she was being shut out of her own research? He stared at the computer screen, the clear glass staring back at him and mocking him. How the hell had they found out he was planning to sneak Janie in for the testing? He hadn’t even created the fake badge for her yet. His scowl deepened as his thoughts turned the puzzle over and over again. They were going to yank it out of his hands, he could already feel it. Rhodes wouldn’t, he wouldn’t dare. And Fury wouldn’t for fear of losing his support and his financial backing to SHIELD but somebody out there was pulling strings and he didn’t like it.

On a whim that felt as right as it felt strange, he pulled up a video conference and silently hoped she was within easy reach. There was a connection, an unfamiliar face appearing on the screen. “Hold.”

A few more random faces before a dark haired vixen with deep green eyes appeared on the screen. He grinned and greeted her. “Hello, Gorgeous.”

She was a high profile enigma. She worked for no organization and held no loyalties, except that what cooperation that could be coaxed from her caused no damage and no body count. She dismantled spells and hexes, and talked in riddles the rest of the time. No one knew who she was, not even a name. But whatever she was, when she agreed to help she had a gift for magic Dr. Strange and Dr. Doom combined couldn’t touch.

The eyes rolled even as a coy grin tugged at her lips. “Mr. Stark.”

Tony wagged a finger and chidingly corrected her. “Ah, ah…Tony, remember?”

She sighed while chuckling. “What do you want, Tony?”

He shrugged good-naturedly. “Do I have to have a reason to want to talk to beauty?”

Her grin widened. “Does that make you beast, then?” He playfully growled and she tittered in soft amusement, eyes flashing before turning serious. “If this is your invitation for sexting I shall leave you wanting. What do you want?”

He offered her another shrug. “Just wondering if there’s anything new out there the Avengers haven’t heard of yet.”

Her eyes narrowed, the sound of fingers on a keyboard in the background as she asked. “In what context?”

That had him blinking in surprise. “Meaning?” She wasn’t normally this cautious in talking with him.

She sighed softly and countered with another one of her own. “Are you interested in
something SHIELD would be concerned about, or just the rest of us?”

Tony sat up straighter, face contorting in confusion. “Okay, even I can get a bit slow sometimes but—what concerns you concerns the Avengers.”

She made a pondering sound, her eyes narrowing further as she studied him, as if searching for an answer by dissecting him with her eyes. Nodding slowly. “This is not a conversation we can have here. Just a moment.”

The screen went blank and Tony blinked in surprise. “She just hung up on me.” He yelped and jumped to his feet as the shadows in the corner of his office jumped and molded, a second before a woman in a tight black dress and red boots walked out of them. A pale amazon with a red coat thrown over, black hair handing in loose tendrils almost to her waist. Tony held a hand over his chest. “I have a heart condition, dammit.”

She smirked, murmuring to herself as she frowned and looked around. “Most amusing.” She clapped her hands and for an instant a brilliant white light filled the space.

Tony blinked, a little dazed. “And now that I’m blind…” As the white spots receded he noticed she was sitting on his desk, a muscular thigh exposed. She leaned over and let a small device fall onto his desk. Frowning and picking it up curiously. “What is that?”

“A hardwired listening device. I’ve also taken the liberty of taking your AI offline until you can do a thorough search.” Tony sputtered. “This is why we can’t have a conversation over the airwaves. Whoever they are, they’re persistent and consistent. I’ve found similar ‘problems’ in every facility I’ve worked with recently, from SHIELD to Professor Xavier’s school.”

“They?” Tony frowned as he asked, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end.

She shrugged slightly even though her eyes were knowing. “No one knows, except perhaps themselves.”

Tony looked down at the device. “Spying on the spies, not surprising. Why haven’t we heard about this?”

She shrugged, “Because you are human.”

He pointed a finger in her direction. “So are you.”

Her green eyes sparkled of secrecy. “But not like you. You are special because of your genius…you were not born different. And unfortunately, none of ‘us’ knows who to trust anymore.”

“You trust me.” He puffed up his chest a bit, feeling privileged.

Her laugh was full-bodied and deflated him. “If I trusted you, Tony, you would know my name.” He tried to pull off looking hurt but didn’t succeed. “There is a reason I give away nothing of myself. It’s nothing personal, but now has never been a more dangerous time for those who are different.”

His humor vanished, focusing on what must have happened to trigger this withdrawal. “Why? What happened?”

She pursed her lips and studied her nails for a minute before nodding to herself and beginning the tale. “There are two main factions of mutants, I am sure you are aware. One of the girls under Magneto…I forget the name…anyway, she decided to act a bit rashly. Deaths in Russia.
And she suddenly dies from a single dart to the shoulder. This girl who was supposedly indestructible dies from a serum specifically, specifically designed to kill her. A virus that turns her own mutation against her. Her internal organs turned to stone instead of just her indestructible skin.” Tony paled at that visual while she continued on, “There have been other actions, other seemingly random events but no word as to an instigator. Ranks are closing because no organization knows who to trust…my advice is for you to do the same.” Looking at her fingernails again. “Is the exotic matter functioning well for you?”

Tony stiffened, going on the defense. “What exotic matter?”

She smirked over her shoulder. “I was requested to provide a large sample for your project.”

The stuff wasn’t radioactive or he wouldn’t have it in his building, but it was a material that he didn’t quite understand and it made him nervous. Not to mention from what he read on it, it was impossible and yet Jane had wandered into the building one day with it ready to go. He sputtered. “And you just…just gave….what??”

She smiled, teeth gleaming. “Tony, the man that requested such a favor of me knows my name. That should tell you something.” Her humor vanished, tone full of warning. “Be careful with such a project. There are fail safes in place so it can never fall into the wrong hands but be wary for your people’s sakes. Someone is going to a lot of trouble to gather as effective a weapon against us as possible…I should worry about your tower’s occupants when the Avengers leave it unprotected.”

Hela knew it was underhanded to stoke his paranoia but she needed him wary. The Other was going to an awful lot of trouble to keep the different factions at odds with one another. She wouldn’t be surprised if he tried to steal the exotic matter for his own purposes.

Tony knew the answer before he even asked the question. It was the perfect time to attack, when they were distracted saving the world. Especially since only he and Bruce lived here full-time. “Why?”

She leaned in which intensified her words. “Because if these people are as clever as I think they are, they will kill everyone in this city to get their hands on a substance capable of leveling a planet in enough quantity.”

Tony paled. “It-…”

The lights flickered, neither of them paying attention as she shrugged dismissively. “As I said, I trust him. For no one else would I provide it.” They both looked up as the power cut off, the consistent hum of technology silencing. “Interesting.”

“The hell?” She raised an eyebrow at him but Tony didn’t pay her any attention, his eyes scanning his surroundings. “That’s-that’s impossible.”

“I told you…they’re clever.” Tony paled and raced out of his office for the stairs. She stood there and slowly nodded to herself. Idly she glanced at her hand and the red paint on her nails. This was one of her least favorite forms but she mentally shrugged. If all went to plan, in less than a year father would be home and she would have no need for it anymore.

Jane stared with wide eyes at the arched entrance. Her hard work, realized and in front of her. Tony had promised her she’d have a front row seat for when they activated it. A test first. A computerized robot, remote controlled, would be used in the first experiment. It was practical, after
all, even if she was suddenly having flashbacks to Stargate. If the coordinates were off by just one
degree the other side of the worm hole could be in the dead of space instead of Asgard.

The outer arch was charged with an electrical field to keep the exotic matter in place and
calibrated precisely. A secondary arch in place purely to provide a visible cue as to where the
wormhole would appear. There was no telling if more would have to be acquired after this first test
or if it would last forever. She could understand wanting a test run in that case, even if she wished it
were her.

She ran her hands lovingly just above the exotic matter fused into the silver metal, both
provided by William. She would have to make sure he received credit. Maybe Tony could hire him
as an additional consultant. She frowned to herself suddenly. Why didn’t I suggest that sooner? That
didn’t feel like something she’d do at all. She wanted credit for her work but she was never one for
not making sure that every source, every assistant, received their full due. Her frown deepened. She
was going to have to take a raincheck for coffee until tomorrow.

She turned her head as her phone rang and put it to her ear, recognizing the ringtone.
“Hello Pepper.”

“And what are you up to, Doctor Foster?”

Jane grinned at the formal title that was all tease. “Just taking a look before the big debut.”

“Mhmm, excited?”

She hopped on the balls of her feet. “I can’t wait! I wish—well, this is close enough.”

“Jane.”

Wincing at the warning tone. “I wish I could tell Erik. I love her but Darcy wouldn’t get
it…Erik would flip out and die happy.”

“Once there’s a successful run I’m sure Tony can use this as leverage. Now…lunch?”

Jane nodded slowly, brown eyes still looking around. “Sure we can. After this it just
comes down to fine tuning.”

“Alright, I’ll make the reservation for 1pm since, knowing Tony, he’s going to take his
time.”

Grinning at what sounded like a pleasant afternoon. “Sounds great. See you at 1.”

Jane turned and put her phone down on the table, pulling up the computer program, the
questions falling from her mind like used tissue, discarded and forgotten. < She was just curious.
She just wanted to see. Yes, that was it. >

Her gaze became lost as she stared at the screen, the program a sophisticated creation Tony
put together in two hours. The lights flickered and she looked around. A glint caught her attention
and she moved back to the arch, frowning to see just a fleck of the exotic matter moving away from
the metal as if it were sentient. Why was it doing that?

She glanced down at her arm as the hairs started standing on end. Something was
happening. It was like a static charge was in the air. She knew this feeling, having felt it before. Her
memory was distorted but this felt like all those months ago on Svartalfheim, being in a spell-charged
atmosphere like when Lok-
The power cut off, the entire building going dark and she whipped around in surprise. No sound in the corridor. The comforting hum of fluorescents ceasing. A few seconds later and an emergency generator must have kicked in, the computers and the emergency lights flaring back to life. The program flashed across the screen. One word flashing over and over again. ENGAGED.

An alarm sounded. The doors all sealed and pressurized. Her eyes widened but she was given no time to react as she was yanked off her feet, only to grab the border of the arch as a roaring whoosh filled the air and a vacuum tried to suck her insides out through her feet. She screamed and held on tightly. It felt like hands were grabbing at her, dragging her in, part of her body disappearing in a swirling, black vortex. What’s happening? Why is it activating? She watched in horror as more and more exotic matter danced away from the metal as if it were unbinding from the surface and she grit her teeth and screamed, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. The electrical field keeping it in place was off. It’s not connected to the backup generator. She didn’t know why but she knew the result. The arch would be useless. This was going to be a one-way trip and if she was off by even the tiniest bit.

The metal bit into her palms, a sob in her throat to realize she was slipping. The more ground she lost, the harder it was to hold on. No. She couldn’t die like this. She had so much left to do. So many things to discover…she wanted coffee just one more time.

Time slowed down, as if everything were suddenly moving one single moment by moment. Enough for her to consider all of her accomplishments. What had she done with her life? Was this the end of Jane Foster? She tried so hard but had she really achieved anything? Scorn. Mockery by the academic community. Who would remember her? Who would mourn her? Would she do it all over again? Would she change her life for just one more chance?

She screamed.

She fell.

Tony grunted when he ran into the doors, slamming them with his fist and growling under his breath. “You had to dismantle JARVIS now!”

Hela stood beside him as if she had never left his side and snapped her fingers, the door sliding open. “Temper, temper.” Tony raced over to the system, paling to see ENGAGED constantly flashing on the screen. He spun to the arch, not sure what to expect but there wasn’t a wormhole that he could see. Huffing to herself, moving her hands. “As if your AI would function without power.”

He snapped a reply. “JARVIS works on backups of the backups.”

Gorgeous frowned to herself. She knew that scent. Magic. It was potent and recently executed, and it didn’t have anything to do with the exotic matter. Her eyes moved from the computer screen to the arch. Whoever it was had a lot of power at their disposal. It was familiar…familiar and golden. Why would he do this? He wouldn’t cut off the power, much too direct, but this seeming accident would be perfect for his brand of interference. She held something in her hand, a glowing sphere, and her lips pursed as realization flashed in her eyes. “Oh dear.”

Tony ran a hand through his hair in relief that the building was still intact. “What?”

Her head tilted a little as she studied the images. “I do hope she wasn’t terribly important.”

Tony jerked up and stared at the globe in horror, an image of Jane getting sucked into the
arch just before the dark vortex closed behind her. “FUC-…”

A weapon engaged and Tony instinctively dove to the ground, body flexing impossibly to avoid being hit before shooting an annoyed look to the three figures in the opened doorway. They looked human, or at least humanoid, but made nothing more than a series of clicks and hisses. She raised an eyebrow, unimpressed and clearly understanding them. “I do as I please and you will leave this planet now.” Smirking. “Or face the consequences.”

She studied them over the next few noises, never impressed with Skrulls. Gifted shape shifters, but incredibly dull creatures with no real will of their own. What were they doing here? Then she thought about it. They would be the perfect choice for the Other to get to Midgard quickly. Still, stupid though they may be, they had the ability to listen and she would be able to pick apart with certainty where they came from and who controlled them.

All three raised their weapons and she slowly smiled as her form melted from human to AEsir. Not that the difference could be easily seen with the eyes. It was a feeling of ancient power and presence that went beyond the physical, the twin blades on her hips and delicious anticipation singing in her blood. “Let us take our business elsewhere…it is time for you to come home.” Home. To Helheim. Such obtuse creatures but they were a useful addition to her army in spite of their simplicity. The shadows swallowed them first, their insect-like shrieks making her smile wider before she too vanished.

Tony peeked his head out, blinking in confusion as he looked around. Bullet holes in the glass but no bad guys and no Gorgeous. What the hell just happened?

ALFHEIM

Loki watched Azni as she cooked in the kitchen. He’d offered several times to help but after the third time of her firmly telling him ‘no’ he’d given up. Indel and Mischief were sprawled out on the floor, whispering to one another and working on spells. Tugging gently on a lank of his playmate’s hair as he stood up. “Do not teach him that.”

Mischief stuck out his tongue. “I can if I want to, you learned it when you were his age.”

Loki stopped to glare. “I was seven and it took a year to grow my eyebrows back, he is not even four. No.”

Indel pouted. “I’m almost four.”

Both of them ignored him. The make believe boy grumbled softly to Loki. “Spoil sport.”

The trickster snarled in irritation. “Don’t make me age bracket your knowledge, Mischief.”

Mischief sneered a comment without thinking. “Why not just put a bind bracelet on me while you’re at it.”

Loki paled and walked away, Mischief biting his lower lip an instant later. Indel frowned up at Mischief and asked, not understanding. “What’s that?”

It hadn’t even been his life but Mischief still looked sad as he answered. “Something never to bring up because it will hurt his feelings. Just a moment.” He pushed himself to his feet, walking up to Loki who was leaning in the door jam and watching Azni. Wrapping both of his arms around Loki’s bicep and squeezing. “Sorry, Loki.”
Loki’s smile wobbled a little. “Do you know how sad it is to apologize to oneself?”

Azni’s voice interrupted Mischief’s reply. “He’s real to you, so it makes perfect sense.” She smiled gently at Mischief. “Go on now.” Loki nodded at him in silent forgiveness and Mischief smiled crookedly before returning to Indel’s side. “What was he apologizing for?”

Loki shivered slightly but refused to rub his arms, knowing it wouldn’t help. “Just... something from a long time ago.”

“Mhmm...” Azni nodded sagely as she hummed a reply.

He frowned at her with mistrust. “I know that look.”

“Do you?” Her tone sounded innocent enough but he wasn’t buying it.

Loki raised an eyebrow. “My mother carried that look whenever she thought she knew something and she mistakenly thought if she stared at me long enough I would confirm it.”

She gave him a silent look of consideration before asking softly, “Was she mistaken?”

“...no.” He sighed in defeat. “No, she wasn’t. Magical binding bracelets have never been my favorite topic...and when I am sharpening my tongue for a retort I do not consider who the barb is aimed at.”

Azni frowned delicately. “Why would binding bracelets have any effect on you? You are far too powerful to be subdued by them.” She wasn’t a spell caster, but she was old enough and had been around G’dath long enough that she knew a few things about magic.

He tilted his head slightly. “True, the bracelets I am thinking of were after I was acknowledged as a warrior but before my coming of age ceremony. Besides, do not underestimate the restraint shackles AEsir have invented...what?”

Her eyes were almost ablaze with anger but she turned her head slightly to control her emotions. “My apologies, child, I have never approved of such punishments no matter how short the duration...” Her voice trailed off, filling with anguish. “…the bracelets were left on for more than a few minutes.” Loki nodded silently and she exhaled slowly, visibly subduing her temper. He was surprised. He was starting to think she didn’t have a temper.

Azni seemed to anticipate his pending request to change topics. She pulled out a chair to the table and he mirrored her. He’d been debating asking this question for a while and now that she knew who he was he didn’t have to hide nearly as much of himself as he had.

“Why have Alfheim and Asgard deviated so far from one another?”

“What do you mean?” She asked the question more for clarity’s sake because the topic itself was quite broad.

Loki stabbed at the table with a finger, talking as he remembered what he’d read in history books. “The light elves were a warrior class even more fierce than the AEsir, and then suddenly you weren’t. You focused on scholastic pursuits and magic while AEsir remain as they are.”

The front door opened and closed, a blond-haired child just a little older than Indel slipping through the main room before ducking to hide behind Azni. She peeked out to look at him but Azni paid her no mind. “Ah. I believe it has to do with Et’ana.”
Loki glanced at the girl who would watch him with sky-blue eyes, before hiding again. Deciding to ignore her for now. “The elf Queen.”

Azni nodded slowly, speaking carefully. “After the great wars had beaten back Malekith… there was so much devastation left behind. Billions upon billions lost their lives in that war, Loki. It was a horror beyond comprehension and we have never been the same because of it. Entire species have gone extinct because of it. The nine realms have never been truly harmonious but that war almost ended us. Et’ana had seen too much to allow for a warrior way to continue for Alfheim. She and her family refocused the people on knowledge over violence. We still have our legions, but they do not rule our world, the Senate does. Not even Et’ana rules the world anymore, save in her one duty.”

“To decide to answer the call to war.” Loki nodded in reply, remembering one of his tutors mentioning it once.

There was pride in Azni’s voice, the girl reappearing to tilt her head and obviously studying him. “You’ve read elven history.”

Loki shrugged modestly. “I read all sorts of things.”

“And do you agree or disagree?” Azni asked with curiosity in her tone.

Loki sighed softly and asked, “How can one noble with no other duties to a realm decide on a call to war?”

Now it was Azni’s turn to shrug as she answered. “Because Et’ana isn’t noble. She’s distinguished and recognized amongst her people, but there is no duty owed to her. No formal bows. She lives amongst the people, so she knows of their needs more than any noble or official ever would. She could live in any village and a non-elf would never know the difference.”

“That’s…rather clever, actually.” Loki paused in surprise before deciding he meant what he said.

“And yourself, Loki? Most AEsir are but are you eager for battle once more?”

That sobered Loki because he wasn’t. He was eager for revenge. Closure. An end to a disgusting tyrant that Odin should have destroyed millennia ago but he wasn’t eager to bring death to those that didn’t deserve it. It wouldn’t stop him, but he didn’t hunger for it. He never had. Deaths were necessary and inevitable for the achievement of a goal, but sometimes he wondered if maybe there was a better way.

He sighed again but remained truthful. “I’m…resigned to it.”

Azni smiled with encouragement. “Then you are growing wise, Loki.” Glancing to her left. “Talia, say hello to Loki.”

The girl tilted her head again as if studying him, a lank of corn silk colored hair spilling free of a messy braid. Loki slowly raised an eyebrow at her. Slowly she crossed her eyes at him and he fought to keep his lip from twitching. Whatever she saw seemed to satisfy her for she approached him without fear and crawled into his lap.

Loki was shocked. All the children were afraid of him. They didn’t run in fear screaming but they were all shy of him and he preferred it that way. He jerked back in the chair, arms flinging outward and growling softly. “I don’t hold children.”
She blinked at him, looked over his shoulder at Indel who was playing with Mischief before looking back at him with a raised eyebrow. Not a word left her lips yet she was almost as sarcastic as he was. His eyes narrowed as she settled on his thigh with all the imperialistic attitude of a little girl, wrapping her hand in his tunic and silently leaning back against his arm. He could just simply stand up and dump her on the ground. But for some curious reason he couldn’t convince himself to do more than move his right arm to lightly hold her in place and send a tortured look Azni’s way. Azni quickly got up from the table but her shoulders were tellingly shaking in silent laughter. All Loki could do was huff in frustration and wonder when in Hel he lost control of his own life.

Author's Notes:

Mwahahahaha...where is Jane? I'll give you three guesses.

And yes, I of course give full props to Stargate for the inspiration.

Next:

Fandral makes a decision; Loki realizes the truth
Chapter 19

ASGARD

Fandral finished sharpening his rapier and slid it carefully back into its sheath. He wasn’t one for deep contemplation. He wasn’t an idiot, in spite of what Loki might have thought, but he much preferred to live life moment to moment until his eventual death in glorious battle…or to a fair maiden’s hand. He grinned to himself before it faded.

After the prince’s death had been announced, each of them had offered words on consolation. Words to hopefully ease Thor’s grief. He wasn’t sure anything said or done could help that. And he certainly couldn’t speak for anyone else but himself but his words had been true.

_Thor, Sif, the Warriors 3…and Loki_

They had never given Loki his due. He had been tolerated, but he hadn’t been respected. Not as a prince. Not as Thor’s brother. Not as their friend. And then the trickster had done what none of them expected, what they had all given up hope for. He’d given his own life to protect Thor. Loki hadn’t offered them any remorse, nor asked any of them for forgiveness, yet he’d proven himself beyond honorable in that one moment. He’d proven loyal.

Out of any of them, it was why he had accompanied Thor to Helheim. He couldn’t imagine Loki not going to Valhalla for dying so nobly but it was his suspicion that that was why Thor went. Either to rescue Loki from Hel, or just to make sure he wasn’t there. The others probably assumed the thunderer had gone to visit Hela because of their family ties through Loki but the fact that he wanted to speak of a ‘personal’ matter told him otherwise. Thor had seemed lighter, happier, after their visit so Fandral assumed Loki wasn’t in Hel.

Fandral frowned to himself suddenly and crossed the room to an old chest. His childhood keepsakes were buried in here and, taking a knee, he carelessly pulled items out. There were things from his parents in here. Sif. Volstagg. He paused, there it was.

When they were children, he, like Loki, was overlooked. He carried the golden beauty that most Asgardians hold but he had been short and skinny. He grinned to himself, pulling out an apple more than a thousand years old that was still perfectly preserved. He and Loki had been the best of friends once. They would wrestle in the apple orchards and have mock battles with practice swords through the palace hallways.

His eyes roamed over the flawless beauty. It had been one of the first big spells Loki had tried, and like many things the mage had done, it had been a perfect execution. He reached over and put the apple on the table. Fandral was still skinny, but he was respected because he was simply the best fighter with a rapier in all of Asgard. His smile dimmed…and Loki had been the best mage in the nine realms.

He blinked to himself, looking over that apple again before something occurred to him. Loki truly had been the best and a stab wound to the chest felled him? He dove back into the chest, almost frantic in his search. Letters. An odd toy here or there. Old keepsakes that would mean nothing special to anyone but him. And then he stopped. Then Fandral paused to reverently pick up the necklace lying so innocently at the bottom.

The apple had been _one_ of Loki’s first spells, but this had been the very first.
“Loki? What’s that?”

That slow grin that meant trouble spread across a pale face. “This is a very special pendant. I stole a piece of Yggdrasil and trapped it in this glass.”

“What??” Fandral’s blue eyes were filled with wide-eyed horror. It couldn’t be done. Only the Norns, like the sister fates, had the power to manipulate and control Yggdrasil.

A mischievous laugh escaped, although the green eyes suggested otherwise. “At ease, Fandral, I mostly jest. I made it for you.”

The chain lay amongst pale fingers that hinted to the long grace they would one day grow into and passed over a long gold chain with a marble shaped pendant the size of a quarter. He held the necklace carefully, the golden chain hanging towards the ground. The glass was clear and yet black, the swirling gold and green ribbons of energy hypnotizing. Fandral had never seen anything like it and even at such a tender age he knew no one had seen the like. “But—should you not give such things to your father or your brother?”

The little face became solemn, with a wisdom and a knowledge in them that was heartbreaking. “…I think you will appreciate it more.”

Even as a young child, Loki had an understanding that Fandral never had. That magic was accepted in Asgard, but it was a woman’s art. It wasn’t what warriors were adept in and no mage was an AEsir warrior. And only as a warrior would he ever earn his father’s praise.

For over a century Fandral had worn the necklace, but somehow the memory had been lost and the significance of the piece dismissed as just something he’d been fond of as a child. The gold and the green danced and swirled within the glass and Fandral let out a crow of laughter. He smoothed a finger over the flawless surface.

The gold really was a bit of Yggdrasil Loki had stolen, although he still didn’t understand the concept but that wasn’t what cheered him. The green was a piece of Loki’s own magic, moving to keep the gold contained. Until Loki’s death, the two will continue to dance. Fandral shook his head fondly. “You old trickster.” His mirth faded as worry settled in. The last time Loki had disappeared for a year, some truly unsavory creatures had gotten a hold of him. Fandral worried what might have happened…and what that meant for Asgard.

The prince was angry with him, angry with all of them. Until Midgard he’d never thought the trickster capable of sending the Destroyer after them. What had frightened and outraged the others he’d found respect from. Loki had been acting as King, it was treason to defy his orders and dishonorable to do so behind his back. By that technicality, the trickster had every right to smite them.

Hela hadn’t told Thor, Fandral knew that with certainty. If she’d confirmed Loki was alive, the thunderer would have never rested until he’d been found. Which meant Loki wanted to be hidden and Hela was helping him. Not terribly surprising, but interesting.

The knock on his door pulled him from his thoughts. Unlike Sif and Hogan, Fandral chose to live in the village amongst the people. Volstagg did so because the castle was no place for a married man with so many little ones but Fandral did so to remember where he came from. And to
remember who he continued to fight for. He listened for just a moment before smiling. Volstagg’s heavy breathing. Sif with the familiar click of her sword against her armor. Hogun was no doubt there as well, silent and grim.

He’d keep silent for now. There was a reason. If Loki wasn’t here, he had a reason. So he’d wait patiently for his friend, his **friend**, and slipped on the necklace once again.

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**ALFHEIM**

Loki frowned hard at the mirror, beyond frustrated. It wasn’t the first time Jane hadn’t arrived for their usual ‘coffee’ chat, but she usually sent a note. Nor was she the type of person who would abandon someone after using them for their knowledge. He was, but that was beside the point. He couldn’t find her. Not anywhere. As far as he could tell, she wasn’t on Midgard at all. Naturally Asgard had been his second thought but she wasn’t there either and worry was tugging at his concentration, distracting him.

He never should have gotten so attached to her. Jane Foster. A puzzle wrapped in an attractive package. There was no denying her quiet beauty. And her intellect was absolutely seductive to someone like himself. But what he found himself increasingly drawn to was her innate kindness. *Perhaps someone kind enough to actually befriend ‘Loki’ instead of ‘William’?*

“Dada?”

Loki continued to concentrate on the mirror, not looking at his son. “Yes?”

Indel pouted with a bored look on his face. “Are you gonna be talking to the pretty lady again?”

Mentally Loki cringed. Someone, and he wasn’t sure who but he had his suspicions, but someone had introduced Indel to slang. Sighing softly. “It is ‘going to’, not gonna.”

Indel looked up from his drawing and rolled his eyes, very impressive for a three and a half year old. “Are you **going to** talk to the pretty lady again?”

Loki smirked to himself before it faded. “I am afraid she has wandered away from her mortal world today. I will have to try again tomorrow.” He kept reminding himself she was an insignificant mortal. She was destined to die within a few decades anyway. He was being absolutely ridiculous in even entertaining the notion of going to Midgard to look for her.

He paused in his mental rant when he felt small fingers brush against the stress lines along his forehead, Indel having climbed up on the table to reach them. “What's wrong, dada?”

Grumbling under his breath about ‘clever little boys’, Loki sat down and pulled him into his lap. As much as he would love to lie, Indel would spot it immediately. “I am concerned for her.”

The little boy grinned. “You like her.”

Narrowing his grey-green eyes. “It is entirely too impractical for me to have any feelings for a human.”

Indel shrugged and made a very logical argument. “So what, you like me and it’s far more impractical to like me.”

Loki huffed as he retorted. “You are my son, I am required to like you.”
Indel shook his head quickly. “Nuh uh.” Grinning with sudden inspiration, chirping. “She can be my mama!”

Closing his eyes in exasperation at his offspring. “How did you come to that illogical conclusion?”

“Cause you’re my dada and you like her, so she’ll like me and stay and give me a baby brother.” Indel ended his argument with a decisive nod. Very, very firmly Loki pushed that appealing idea out of his disturbed mind.

It sometimes made him dizzy trying to keep up with the strange mental leaps that this little boy made. His argument was thoroughly without logic or merit, yet somehow it made perfect sense to a three year old. Narrowing his eyes to focus on the one aspect easily defended. “I do not like her.”

Indel immediately argued. “Do so.”

Loki sighed. “Indel-…”

Bobbing his head lightly with each word. “Do. So.”

Loki narrowed his eyes a little as he retorted. “Do not.”

“So do. Do so.” Indel leaned in closer as if to add emphasis to his words.

Growling playfully. “Do not times infinity.”

Indel nibbled on the inside of his lower lip and thought very hard, looking upward. “Do so times infinity plus apple pie.”

Loki’s eyebrows contorted, struggling not to laugh as he was caught by surprise. “That—what??”

Crooked grin spreading across Indel’s cherubic face, singing the words. “Dada likes a hu-man. Dada likes a hu-man.” Loki was most definitely pouting a second before he tucked his fingers into Indel’s sides, the little boy squealing as he giggled.

Setting Indel down. “Go play.”

Indel ducked outside with a giggle and Loki’s mirth faded. He cast another look around his home. Something had changed in him but he had no idea when it had happened. It wasn’t just that he cared. He’d always been capable of the emotion, he just refused to allow his actions to overrule his self-preservation. But it was more than that, deeper than that. He was…protective of her.

Would he sacrifice her for Indel? Of course, absurd to even wonder that.

Would he sacrifice his home for her? Absolutely not. He was almost positive. Wasn’t he? Hmm…

Loki huffed and crossed to the threshold, chiding himself for being completely ridiculous. Let Thor save her, she was his woman after all. He paused in surprise at the wellspring of possessive emotions that bubbled up with that thought.

Oh. No. With a whimper he let his forehead lean against the door frame. It was absolutely impossible. Not even he could be this stupid. Loki moved his head back and forth to hit his forehead
a few times and hopefully knock some sense into himself. No. He was not turning into his idiotic brother who was ruled completely by his heart. Never. He would rather die first. He pushed her completely from his thoughts, absolutely refusing to fall in love. He opened his eyes, watching Indel play. He’d build a wall. A giant wall to keep her out. Refuse to ever speak to her again. In a hundred years she’d be stone dead and it wouldn’t matter. Even he knew he was starting to sound hysterical.

“Father, you look ridiculous.” Feeling his spine stiffen in surprise, he whipped to the left to see Hela smirking at him. His, for all intents and purposes, daughter. Before he could even form the words she cut him off. “Think before you ask such an inane question. I can walk the golden branches of Yggdrasil as easily as you can.”

Loki lifted an eyebrow at Hela, tone almost vicious. “Then if I am such an easily read book there is no need for a conversation.”

She slowly crossed her arms, unimpressed. “By the Norns you’ve developed a viper’s tongue.”

He just shrugged. “No more so than normal.”

She grinned brightly in agreement. “True.” The grin morphed into its normal smirk. “Oh, since you’ve made friends with Thanos I attempted to steal the infinity gems from him but…well, even a pick pocket of my skill cannot always succeed.” She shrugged and turned to watch Indel, a hint of fondness in her eyes.

His voice took on a rarely used tone. “We need to have a discussion about your suitors.”

She gaped and sputtered at him. She hated when he did this. And every time she succumbed, reverting back to the young girl she used to be instead of the independent queen she was. She may be ageless but she had still allowed her body to mature from teenager to adult. There were still times, however, when her emotions reverted backwards. Whining and stomping her foot. “Don’t you dare do that now.”

Loki crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head slightly towards her in reproach. “Hela, there is the matter of having a standard.”

Still whining. “How was I supposed to know he was going to turn creepy?”

He tilted his head in the other direction, looking befuddled. “Do I even have to answer that?”

Huffing, sulking like a teenager. “Fine…Fandral’s cuter, anyway—…”

Loki snarled violently and stabbed a finger in her direction. “If he lays a single finger on you I’ll rip his head off! That idiot is worse than Stark.”

Hela suddenly looked nervous. “Um…who?”

With a slow sigh Loki pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t want to know.” She opened her mouth and he held up a finger. “No. I don’t want to know or I will be killing a few people more than I intended.”

“Can I just say you being the overprotective father is scary?” She rolled her eyes, her body shivered as if to fluff invisible fur. “Like your dating choices were any better.”

Something in Loki’s eyes just dared her to finish that thought. “Hela—…”
Waving him off, not even bothering to look at him. “I do understand about Sif since it wasn’t by technicality dating…I think the humans say friends with benefits—but Heimdall? Really? The man has the personality of a rock.”

“IT was one ti-shut up!” He closed his eyes for a moment to center himself. Frowning suddenly, not sure why he hadn’t asked sooner, “And why is it that you could not lift the gems from Thanos?”

Her lip curled. “He put the gem in a place where he would have felt me taking them.” Loki looked at her with a frown. She raised an eyebrow and looked right back. “Let us simply say that the gems should be washed thoroughly before being used. Midgardian bleach wouldn’t hurt.”

Loki shuddered. “That is disgusting.” He was trained to be a warrior so he had no issue with the blood and gore of the battlefield. He was a mage. He was a former prisoner. Many aspects of his life had prepared to not be squeamish. But still…

Hela nodded in agreement. “I deal with the dead and even I found it gross.” Grinning with nostalgia as she watched Indel, who was oblivious to both of them. “He looks just like his father.”

Loki shrugged absently. “Whoever his father is.”

Her smirk was gentle, as was her voice. “You still haven’t figured it out, have you?” Loki tilted his head a little, perplexed. There was knowledge and comfort in those dark green eyes. The Queen of Helheim, the most feared and supposedly corrupted creature in the nine realms…and she’d always been the one to offer him the most comfort when he’d needed it most. “Watch him.”

He turned back just as she stepped to the right and disappeared from the fabric of reality through the golden branches of Yggdrasil but Loki barely felt her go. He checked his surroundings just to be certain but most assuredly it was not winter. It wasn’t even relatively cold. Yet he could clearly see little ice sculptures of different shapes surrounding Indel, who looked up at him and grinned. Words from long ago echoed in his mind, words between himself and Odin when he’d been a child about Indel’s age.

[Look at what I can do, father!]

Indel’s grin slowly slipped, reading the surprise on Loki’s face. He put the delicate flower he’d made with ice on the ground before pushing it a little further away. There were all sorts of spells and tricks that he knew, but Indel also knew he was supposed to only do the spells Loki had taught him. He frowned and wrung his small hands together. “Is it bad?”

[Why?]

Indel shrugged. “No spell, I just talk to my hand in my head.” His little brow furrowed, hands cupped and a small puddle of water formed in the space. Then just as quickly the water froze into a small globe of ice. “Then I tell it to make a shape. Balls are easy, but the ice is friendly, it wants to play with me and make other shapes.” The ball flattened and rolled until it formed a lute. Grinning slowly, hesitant. “See?”

[Ice magic is very dangerous. Do you see how it turns your hand blue?!”]
Loki shook himself out of the past. Indel’s little hands didn’t turn blue. Nothing about the little elfling changed, yet he was using ice magic, a magic that elves had no ability to use. Except perhaps one little elfling that had been cut from his own body. The child that had been half Jötunn and half dark elf. The child that he’d believed to be dead. It was impossible. He’d found Indel as a newborn, yet more than a year had passed since he was in the Other’s clutches. It made no sense.

He honestly didn’t care.

A tear slipped down Loki’s cheek as he reached over and hoisted the boy into his arms, grinning as he hugged him desperately and kissed the top of his head. “Yes. Yes, I do see.”

Indel’s voice was worried, muffled against his neck. “Does ice make you sad?”

Loki chuckled, swallowing a sob. “No, ice makes me very happy.”

Indel’s head craned up to look at him, face confused. “Happy?”

Nodding his head quickly, still hugging his son tightly. “Very, very happy.”

He nibbled on his lower lip before Indel hesitantly asked, “Can you make ice?”

Loki shook his head slowly, eyes distant again. It was the only memory he had of trying, but he hadn’t had the knowledge of why Odin had forbidden him from using ice magic at the time. “No…I forgot how.”

“So…I can make more?”

Loki’s grin just got wider. “You can make ice whenever you want.”

Wiggling, Loki took the hint and reluctantly put Indel back down. The little boy started working on a castle but all Loki could do was stand there and watch him, a small smile filled with joy on his lips. And unconsciously, his hand pressed lightly against his abdomen and silently thanked Hela as a painful memory faded.

Author's Notes:

Yes, I was inspired by the Comedy Central commercials for TDW for that little interaction between Loki and Indel. It was awesomely cute.

For Indel's origins it hadn't been my intention when I started writing this. The story kinda wrote itself which is both cool and scary when that happens.

Next:

Thor has a truth confirmed; Loki makes a discovery
Chapter 20

ASGARD

Thor walked down the steps to the dungeons slowly, hand loosely holding a bracelet. He passed by the other cells, a few of them with prisoners but most of them empty. He didn’t turn his head one way or the other. He was here for one specific prisoner.

He found Amora pacing and wringing her hands, though she paused to stare at him in shock before seemingly remembering herself. “Prince Thor.”

He nodded to her in return, speaking without preamble. “I have a question to ask of you, and I will hear the truth.”

She pouted and batted her blue eyes at Thor. “Why do you instantly believe I will lie?” He just continued to stare at her and she pouted harder, crossing her arms. “Oh…alright. Truth, then.”

Holding up the golden bracelet Hela had tossed at him, Thor watched silently as Amora backed up slightly with a soft hiss. He’d been toying with the idea of confronting his father about this, but Hela was as artful a liar as Loki had been. Without more information he wasn’t going to make himself look like a fool, especially if she was just toying with him. Although, he’d believed Hela.

Especially now with Amora’s reaction which felt honest to him. Amora’s eyes narrowed. “You’re not putting that thing on me.”

“Talk to me of this.” Thor’s tone didn’t indicate one way or another how he felt about the bracelet or her insistence in not wearing it.

She glanced away for a moment and shivered before looking back. “You know as well as I it is a magical restraint bracelet. Also called a binding bracelet…or mages just call it a circle of Hel.”

The AEsir had invented several devices to keep spell casters contained. The cells in the dungeons, for instance, absorbed outward magic but allowed for its use within the cell. The restraint shackles were another, uncomfortable, but had no lasting effect. The binding bracelets were far different, the earliest attempt to control spell casters.

Thor slowly crossed his arms. “You are not a mage.”

Lifting her chin a little. “No, I’m an enchantress, and even I can’t stand the things.”

“Describe this to me.” The words sounded like a request but the tone wasn’t.

Amora narrowed her eyes again. “Why?”

Thor growled, tired of her obstinate attitude. He met similar obstacles with Loki but his brother had earned the right. Amora hadn’t. “You forget yourself, Amora. You are not here as a guest, you are a prisoner. And unless you wish for a pair of these for yourself you will answer my queries.”

She backed up a step, shoulders hunched. “Ants crawling across one’s skin. It radiates outward from the bracelet, but it’s an itch that can’t be scratched. An irritation that allows for no
sleep, no rest, and no respite.”

“That is all?” Thor asked with a voice tinged with disappointment. Disappointment that Hela had lied to him, yet again.

Amora snapped at him. “Isn’t that enough? I can’t keep anything down, not even water. And for a mage…” Her voice turned horrified. “Imagine being plunged into a tank of water. There’s no air, yet you survive at first. But then the pressure starts to increase as you sink further and further down into an endless abyss. The gravity starts to crush your bones and the air thins and runs out. And even as the physical pain begins to compound on itself, your mind is slowly torn apart as you slowly lose all hold on reality.”

Like being thrown into a dark vacuum of endless nothingness as your body slowly disintegrates until all that is left is a lifeless husk. Thor shivered. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a few of the prisoners listening in do the same.

Amora shrugged slightly. “That was how it was described to me by my former master. But then mages are much more comprised of magic than I, would it not make sense that their reaction to its lack be more severe?”

Nodding slowly, Thor turned to walk back the way he’d come. His mother hadn’t been a mage but she had been magical.

SOMEWHERE

Jane looked around with a stunned expression as she carefully climbed to her feet. _What have I done? Dear God where am I?_ She felt herself start to panic but forced her breathing to slow down and willed her racing heart to calm as she looked around. At first she’d hoped it was earth. She spotted a really big lake and a whole lot of really tall trees. Then she froze to see a deer. It could be considered normal looking, if it didn’t have six legs.

Not earth then. _Where the hell is this?_ She looked up, seeing blue skies similar to earth, but this was definitely not earth. And she couldn’t see the stars peeking through the sky. Not Asgard. She was almost certain. Not even close if she had to guess.

How had it all gone wrong? Her calculations had been so precise. She’d doubted herself in her panic but now that she was here she wondered how she had been pushed off course. She wasn’t dead, this was good. She wasn’t injured, that was even better. The wind, a little too cool, whipped past her and she shivered. Her clothing wasn’t nearly insulated enough. Not so good. The blue jeans were solid enough, the socks casual and the high backed sneakers impractical. Tucking her arms around her body, the t-shirt loose but thin, she stood up and looked around. Trees as far as she could see, other than the water. Then she squinted. There in the distant skyline she could see uniform smoke. A chimney maybe? Certainly a fire and fire meant people, she hoped.

But now for the big debate: did she try to get to that smoke that looked so far away, or did she stay here and wait to see if rescue was coming? Glancing up at the skies again, seeing the hint of red in the distance, she shook her head to herself. It was almost dusk, there was no way she could find that smoke before the sun set. Even with the stars out this was a forest, with her luck she’d stumble across a predator and be eaten before dawn.
Digging into her pockets, she pulled out a granola bar and sighed softly.

**JOTUNHEIM**

Loki looked around silently, perplexed to see the throne that Laufey had sat in torn down and in ruins, even worse than the city that had surrounded it. His attempt to destroy Jötunheim by Bifrost hadn’t impacted here. He wondered why Helblindi would destroy his throne.

“I was beginning to wonder if you would return.”

Loki shrugged slightly to himself, eyes still looking at his surroundings. “It has been but a few months.”

A voice that was smooth and harsh all at once mused, “Hmm…I suppose it has. Perhaps I am more conscientious of each minute of each day.”

Loki looked Helblindi over curiously. Surprisingly articulate, frost giant or not. And there was wisdom in those red eyes, coupled with a fierce intelligence. “Why has your throne been torn down?”

Helblindi looked like he might spit but seemed to restrain his temper at the last second before answering. “That was my father’s throne of hypocrisy. He sat on a hollow throne and did nothing but waited for our people to die instead of setting aside his pride at his defeat and striving for the betterment of Jötunheim. I would rather have no throne and no crown than to ever have a Jötunn sit there again.”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing?” A thousand years Laufey had done nothing. Helblindi’s reign was a brief moment in time by comparison but as far as Loki knew no attempts had been made to open communication between Jötunheim and the nine.

Surprisingly Helblindi didn’t seem offended. In fact he conceded the point with a considered tilt of his head. “Perhaps…although I can hardly better my people with what little we have left. The time to bring us out of ruin passed by centuries ago.”

Loki wasn’t so sure that he completely agreed with that. Surely there was something on Jötunheim worth value. Game. Gems. They let their children die easily enough, and he was speaking from personal experience for that conclusion. Surely selling a few of them wouldn’t phase such creatures.

Focusing on the reason Loki had returned, an offer that had sparked his curiosity. “You were going to show me something.”

The king nodded and started walking away from the ruins, Loki easily keeping pace. He’d always had an easy time walking on ice and snow, even before he knew what he was. And the cold weather rarely bothered him. He should have suspected something centuries ago. Helblindi speaking caused the rising bitterness to drift away. “Admittedly, when I learned that you had murdered my father, I was blinded for a time by anger and bitterness. By the time we first met, I realized that it was for the best.”

Blurting out his question without considering to temper it. “Killing your father was for the best??”

An icy chuckle without humor answered Loki’s social blunder, Helblindi’s face showing no insult. “My father was a legendary leader among the Jötunn. He was distinguished further by
several acts that no Jotnar committed in living memory. He is the king that brought Jötunheim to its knees, felled under Asgard’s strength for attempting to conquer Midgard. As punishment Odin One-Eye took the Casket of Winters, the heart of our world, and left us to slowly die as our planet turns to a barren rock of ice and snow.”

Outwardly Loki didn’t betray himself, but inwardly he felt his anger flare. He was not opposed to such actions but he’d thought Odin was supposedly above such brutality. Odin had stolen the living heart of Jötunheim. My, my…how horrified your subjects would be should they learn the truth, All-father.

Loki looked around but found it hard to imagine this planet as anything else as Helblindi turned and continued speaking, eyes grim. “He is also the first and only Jötunn to ever abandon a child to die, my elder brother. As much as I may have wished for his pride, that act I will always condemn him for.”

Ah. So selling the children was out, he supposed. He wondered why he was the fortunate one to be the spawn of evil itself. Mentally Loki sighed. He was feeling sorry for himself but he would argue he had the right to it, at least a little.

Loki’s grey-green eyes swept over the harsh landscape as they continued to walk. “I would have thought it common practice to abandon a runt.”

Helblindi hissed through his sharp teeth. “Yet more Asgardian lies to make us into monsters.” Loki mentally jolted at that statement. It sounded like something Tyr or one of the warriors would say, only in reverse. He wondered if it was possible that the same tales that AEsir children were told to make them afraid of Jötunn was also true for Jötunn children. The Jötunn king visibly calmed himself, anger in his eyes. “We may look the part to you AEsir but you are the same to us. Do not think there are those that do not speak to their children of fearing the AEsir, who would steal them in the middle of the night if they could.”

Loki sputtered. “Aren’t w-you? You tried to pillage a world not your own-…”

He cut Loki off, wisdom in his words. “And Asgard never subdued Vanaheim? Svartalfheim? Never utilized war and intimidation under the guise of peace?” That was dangerously insightful and one of the reasons he was still confused. In Loki’s opinion Odin overreacted, as he always did when it was the second prince who did something he didn’t agree with. He knew his reasons for unleashing the Chitauri on Midgard weren’t even close to altruistic but history didn’t remember the reasons, just the results. The Chitauri died, hopefully horribly, Asgard got the Tesseract back and no AEsir died. As far as he was concerned, it was a win. “You AEsir are hypocrites. You use different words but your acts are the same. I willingly admit to the mistakes of the past. Do you?”

No, was all Loki could think. He didn’t dwell. He liked to just move on and dismiss fault, unless it was against him. He was aware it was a contradiction and not something he should instill in Indel but the bad habits of a lifetime were difficult to change in just a few years. The silence stretched out for a few minutes, Loki not about to answer questions that he found himself wondering.

The pair of them walked under an awning of ice, Helblindi giving Loki another thoughtful look. “How did you know my brother was born a runt?” Loki froze in the shadows of the awning as Helblindi stepped outside of it, turning to frown when the mage moved no further.

Helblindi was not oblivious. In fact by many he was considered disturbingly perceptive. Suddenly all the little facts that he knew were starting to add up. Crimson eyes assessed Loki before a mixture of emotions crossed his face. Rage and bitterness mixed with sorrow before there was
nothing but acceptance remaining. Loki of Asgard was the exact same age as the lost eldest of Laufey but it was dismissed as coincidence for obvious reasons.

It made sense now, why he could feel this AEsir’s presence. He was no mage but all Jötunn could utilize ice magic. Unlike any other species, the magical ties of family were strong amongst his people. Like sang to like. This man’s magic sang to him as strongly as his younger brother Byleistr. A man who must be a truly gifted shape shifter to hide from his own kind.

Loki would have been a true gift to his people. “Of course…” Loki stepped back further, about to wave his hand and fade, silently vowing never to return but Helblindi lifted a hand to pause him. “Before you depart, at least see a fraction of what I wish to show you.”

Loki knew with absolute surety he didn’t want to know. This was hitting too close to scars that were constantly tearing and bleeding, but he couldn’t seem to walk away. Were they monsters? Am I? Were they truly so alien and different or was there a commonality? He didn’t want to know, but he had to know.

Timidly Loki stepped forward when Helblindi did nothing except turn to look for himself. Stepping out of the awning, he froze with wide eyes to see icy structures. They weren’t the tall structures of Midgard, nor the grand and ancient scale of Asgard but they were beautiful. Houses. Hundreds of them in a circular fashion around one another, protected on all sides from the harsh winds by the icy mountains. Jötunn men and women…he felt himself gasp. Children. Infants. Their clothing shabby but that spoke of circumstance, not a lack of creativity and imagination. Larger than himself of course, but…they were people. Did they have hopes and dreams? Did the children laugh and play? He wrapped his arms around himself and shivered as if cold.

It was easy to destroy a distant star, to think of those actions as nothing more than exterminating monsters. He felt numb. He’d almost destroyed an entire race and yes it ended the threat of war but to threaten the denizens of the realm along with the warriors was unforgiveable… and all in a fit of childish, selfish rage. There were other emotions, other reasons, but those were the most shaming.

Loki turned around before anyone could see, wiping hastily at his face and stumbling several feet before realizing he could just let go of the projection and be home. Helblindi’s quiet voice stayed him for just a moment longer. “Return soon, Loki. Denied or not, we are the kin of your blood…and there is much that we could teach one another.”

He vanished but he didn’t go far. Loki went back to the crater, and stared at what he’d done. Was he a monster? No one had done before what he had. No one had dared. Closing his eyes, he felt ice creep through his veins and looked down at blue skin. He still flinched, he might always flinch, but now he knew.

Was he a monster? Yes, he thought, but it isn’t because of my skin. It wasn’t his, he assumed, red eyes or his blood. It was this. It was his actions that made him a monster, not the genetic ties that outed him. So now to the dilemma that he faced: should a monster have a child to care for? Did he truly wish to teach Indel to grow up to be just like him? Would the boy be better off…?

No. Love made him selfish and he needed that boy too much to ever let him go. He may be melodramatic but above everything else, other than doing what would be best for Indel, he would do what was best for Loki because no one else would. But he wouldn’t forget this. This was a lesson too important to ever forget. Know yourself, and know your enemy. He now knew himself. He knew what he was capable of, as much as he wished he didn’t. But it was Laufey who had been his enemy, and he’d taken his anger out on the wrong people.
He was the God of Chaos and Mischief. The latter was a choice but the former defined him. Could chaos be controlled? He knew it couldn’t, and the more that he or anyone else tried the more uncontrollable he grew. Could it be focused? It might take a lifetime, but he would find a way. This was never happening again.

Author's Notes:

Gotta have a nice bit of Loki angst...mostly because I like to write it.

Oh, and a special thanks to all my reviewers. You're one of the main reasons I post or otherwise I would just keep this my dark little secret ;)

Next:

Some light elves don't like dark elves; Thor and Odin have words
Chapter 21

ALFHEIM

Talton stared at the village of Alfheim’s moon, his face carefully hiding the contempt he felt for the elves here. All of Alfheim was theirs, yet these remnants would rather spend their existence hiding from the present on this overgrown weed of a moon. Soldiers that couldn’t return to Alfheim proper for one reason or another. Criminals and outcasts not welcome in polite society. The most laughable was their elder, a man of such below average intelligence only here would he be given a role of authority.

It was not that he didn’t respect his mother, G’dath. And he knew that wherever Azni went G’dath would follow. But his contempt was aimed more towards the older woman than any other, who chose to be here. The Senate could be easily swayed with the influence of the two women. Asgard was weakened and exposed with the recent deaths in the royal family. Now was the opportunity for the light elves to impose influence on the AEsir. Perhaps convince Lord Odin during his time of grief to give them Midgard or Vanaheim. Alfheim could become the new golden crown of the nine realms, yet the Senate remained detached and no actions taken as the window of opportunity closed.

He watched his mother tending to a young girl who’d taken a tumble off a fence, mentally shaking his head. *Elves were supposed to be some of the most graceful creatures in the universe and she falls off a fence?* His eyes moved to sweep over the village, pausing to see a small elven child with strangely small ears watching from the entrance to the healing hut.

His blood froze. Paler than pale complexion and white hair. That child was a dark elf. One of the despicable creatures that killed both Queen and Prince of Asgard, but more importantly the disgusting supporters of Thanos. It had been zealots of Thanos that had killed his father and so many others. If a child was here, then so were the parents. The sword was in his hand and he was running before he’d formed the command. Indel blinked up with a startled expression, took one look at the light elf’s face, and ran in the opposite direction.

“Dark elf!”

The villagers jerked around, the guards tensing with weapons in hand and looking for an enemy. G’dath’s head jerked up and around, eyes widening in horror.

Indel was good at running and hiding but he’d never come to the village without his father close and he had no idea where to duck and hide. He wove through the adults that scattered only when Talton raised his sword as if to cut through them to get to the boy. The guards were a few seconds too slow to get in the way of the adult elf as the child scrambled past, panting to find himself cornered against the northern wall that separated the village from the forest. A powerful little mage Indel may be, he was also a very little boy and any spells he knew were swept aside by panic.

Talton slowed down, sword in hand and a sneer on his face. “Where are the others?”

Indel shifted left, squealing and tumbling back when the sword hit the dirt a second later.

“WHERE ARE THEY?”

Talton heard his mother running forward. “Talton-…”

Indel lifted up his hands, backed into a corner and screamed at the top of his lungs.
“DADA!!”

The sword came down and clanged, blocked and countered by a magic created saber. A spin kick from a heavy set of boots had the light elf stumbling back, grabbing his midsection in shock. Talton’s head lifted, blue eyes taking in the figure who had somehow appeared out of nowhere.

Indel clung to Loki’s leg, hiding his face against the leather. Reassuring fingers ran through his white hair for the barest of seconds. Loki’s tone offered no disobedience. “Go.” A second sword was produced in Loki’s left hand as Indel ran. Green energy swirled and glowed off his skin and eyes were like burning emeralds. Loki had teleported as soon as he felt his son’s terror, but now all that he could see and feel was rage.

He started forward, first one sword and then the other and the elf retreated quickly. “Wait-…”

Loki didn’t bother with his disguise or with his armor, too focused on blood lust. Still moving, not about to even entertain sparing the other’s life. His tone was casual but his entire being was cold. “Ah, like you were about to stop when trying to cut down an unarmed child. No, you will fight and you will die and I will enjoy every second of it.” This was just what he needed right now. A bit of violence and a splash of blood. As if he wasn’t already in a foul mood.

Talton tried to defend his actions with words. “A dark elf-…”

Hand still clenched around his weapon, Loki punched the elf in the face. “My SON.” Talton’s eyes widened even as he stumbled back but was able to hold onto his weapon. Elves were naturally light and quick, but their skills were in their perfection of the bow and arrow, not sword play. Loki may be the most proficient in magic but he was Asgardian trained. He knew how to use a sword when he had to and he’d always been faster than most AEsir. Metal clashed with magic but the AEsir was too strong, too fast. Talton never even had the illusion of a chance. In five moves he was disarmed and Loki thrust forward, swords crossed on either shoulder and ready to decapitate him. Baring his teeth and snarling, “Give my regards to Hela, elf.”

“Loki!” G’dath’s voice penetrated the haze of red. One of the few that could reach him, even in his present condition. Emerald deepened in his eyes but he didn’t make the killing move. He glanced slightly to the right to see G’dath running to him, pale as a ghost and hand trembling. Indel was held protectively in her arms. “…please…”

Loki’s voice was more of a snarl than anything, white teeth unconsciously sharpened to points. “He tried to kill my son, why should I spare him?” In his opinion a quick kill was too merciful.

G’dath whispered with tears in her eyes. “Please take your son…and spare mine.” Then her spine stiffened in formal acceptance, willing to trade a life for a life. “Take my life instead if you must.”

*Her son. Her son??* Taking her life wasn’t even a consideration. Before coming here, he would have sneered at her sentiment and killed the male elf anyway. But he owed her too much as his mentor as well as his friend to dismiss her request. As an act of honor, he would have to kill her or walk away. He pulled in a deep breath through his nose.

The deadly purr in his voice froze everyone. “What is his name?”

His brow furrowed in distress as Indel held out his arm, wanting to be held. “Dada?”
G’dath swallowed cautiously. “Talton.”

Loki memorized the face, the name. This elf was a marked man. Staring down coldly at Talton. “Be very careful in your life, elf. If Hel is to be your fate, you will regret every instant of your afterlife before Hela is done playing with you.” He glared at G’dath as if he’d never seen her before, taking a second look at the other elf before the swords faded to nothing. He carefully jerked Indel out of her arms, sneering down his nose at her. “I trust you with his life and this is what happens.” Pivoting on his heels to stalk away, talking to himself. “…is it any wonder…”

The crowd leapt out of his way, Azni reaching out a hand to touch his arm and flinching when he jerked out of reach and kept walking, not looking back. Indel could see over the top of his father’s shoulder and he wiggled his fingers at her as if waving goodbye. And if something wasn’t done it really would be. Her lips pressed together before narrowing a frigid glare at G’dath who felt her shoulders tighten.

Azni’s shoulders pulled back slightly, hands folded in front and her tone could have cut glass. “Odin’s edicts are for his people alone. Your son now follows Asgardian mandates?”

G’dath swallowed warily. It took a great deal to anger Azni. But once it happened only an idiot would push her temper. “Talton is an ambitious fool that I will soundly reprimand.”

Talton frowned at that statement. He’d outgrown being considered an elfling over a thousand years ago. “Mo-…”

G’dath hissed a snarl that was no bluff. “Silence.”

He cowered back from that tone. He hadn’t heard that tone since he was a very young elfling but obviously he was missing something so he obeyed.

Azni’s eyes flashed coldly. “After his reprimand you and I will have a discussion. Yggdrasil will not be pleased.”

Talton gaped but knew better than to say anything. Yggdrasil? What could that obviously disturbed light elf who cared for a dark elf child have to do with the World Tree? The stony glare his mother was leveling him with completely unmanned him and he cringed.

Trax walked out of the community center, frowning to see everyone so still. “What is it? What happened?”

Azni turned and smiled softly, patting his arm as the other elves dispersed. “Nothing that our healer couldn’t handle. Now, come walk an old woman home.” He frowned a little but moved to obey, the confusion fading from his mind.

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ASGARD

Thor twirled the bracelet in his hand between his fingers absently. Magic wasn’t his strength. It was useful to him, but not vital. It was that way for most of Asgard but for people like Loki and Hela it was the exact opposite. He wasn’t comfortable diving into a topic with his father that he felt ignorant in but for them he would. He’d chosen to wait in the balcony across from his father’s official study. He’d put off this discussion long enough.

“Thor?”

Turning to the right, he smiled as Sif approached him and acknowledged her with a nod of
his head. “Sif.”

A look of discomfort crossed her face. But then she pulled in a fortifying breath and asked, “You weren’t in the practice yards today…are you well?”

Thor nodded slowly. “I am…assuming a new duty.” Her eyebrow arched, intrigued. “I suspect none stand as advocate for the spell casters of the realm, I will change that.”

She frowned and contradicted him. “The All-Father’s power knows no equal. Why would they need a greater champion than he?”

He wasn’t so sure he agreed with that. His father’s powers were legendary and his fights glorious, but he battled with sword first and scepter second. “I do not dispute his might, but perhaps he does not have knowledge of certain matters.”

Sif looked absolutely scandalized and perhaps she had a right to it. “Thor! You cannot go into a meeting and say such to your king.”

He almost smiled, humor in his blue eyes. “He is also my father and if I fear confronting him for something as simple as policy I will never be a good king.”

They both turned as the doors to the study opened and two advisors slipped down the corridor. He nodded to Sif before stepping inside, she looking like she might stop him but he ignored her, closing the doors behind him. Odin blinked before frowning lightly, sitting behind his desk. “What is wrong, my son?”

Thor held up the binding bracelet. “I wish to converse about the bracelets.”

Odin pushed around a few papers, frowning at something he was reading. “What of them?”

Pulling in a slow breath before speaking carefully. “I wish to ban their future use.”

“No.”

Thor blinked slowly when there wasn’t even a pause in the reply. No question as to why, just a simple denial. “No?”

Now Odin sighed wearily before shooting him a reproaching look. “Amora put you up to this. I have not the time to fix her bedevilment now but until then, no.”

Thor stood up a little straighter. “This was not given to me by Amora.”

Odin arched his eyebrow, knowledge in his eye. “You went to see her in the dungeons, did it not occur to you she can use persuasion?”

After a considering moment Thor shook his head. “She is a liar and deceptive but has not the ability for persuasion.”

Making a dismissive gesture. “And who told you this?”

“Loki.” That paused Odin, and he gave his eldest a second glance. As often as Loki lied, they both knew when it came to an assessment of a potential adversary the trickster didn’t give false details. Thor stepped closer. “And I went to Amora to confirm what was already told to me by my niece.”
Frowning, Odin reached out and took the bracelet, looking over it thoughtfully. “It is a simple binding bracelet.”

Thor nodded in agreement and explained. “I have been told such a fate is deadly to a mage.”

Odin almost laughed, his tone dismissive. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Oh-…”

Standing up and slamming his fist into the desk. “Do NOT speak her name.” Thor knew what would happen if he did. Not only would it break the spell that prevented Hela from entering Asgard, it would be a blatant act of treason against a king’s decree. Thor would give up his right to the throne and be magically expelled from the golden realm for all time. Odin’s voice rumbled with authority and ire. “You would believe a pair of liars over your king?”

Thunder rumbling outside, lightning flashing in Thor’s blue eyes. “I will listen to her expertise in magic, aye.”

Odin’s agitation grew as he spoke, “She is a child-…”

Thor cut him off to counter what he knew of Hela. And of Loki. “She is equal to Loki, and he always knew more of magic than you did.”

Lifting the bracelet higher in his hand. “Those bracelets are the same ones placed on your brother-…”

“And you nearly killed him with them!” Thor growled his retort, thunder clouds racing across the skies.

Odin snarled in anger at the accusation. “How dare you imply-…”

Thor shouted, a crash of lightning followed by thunder shook the windows. “Have you worn them? Have you any idea how they affect people like him? Be an example, sire, place one on your wrist and discover the truth.”

There was no choice in the matter, it was now a question of honor. Anyone else who challenged him in such a way he could dismiss, but not Thor. He was to be the future king of Asgard, if he failed to meet his son’s challenge he would prove his own lack of worth as a king. Stiffly Odin moved around his desk, walking right up to his son and opening the latch. The silver bracelet slid on easily and he closed the latch.

Dizziness. No, it was like the room did a turn and everything went silent. It faded to nothing. There was no crackle of fire from the hearth. No crickets in the distance. The clang of swords in the practice arena. His son breathing in the room with him.

But the worst was within, not without. His blood was on fire, racing pain through his veins.
and amplifying with each breath he took until it was tempting to stop breathing. His bones weakened and sagged like rubber, but felt brittle enough to cut into sinew and muscle. His skin dried to ash and crackled like parchment…and within a span of eternity of each second, was the terrifying knowledge that he was dying and falling into an endless pit of blackness that pulled at his sanity-

“…-father!”

Odin blinked and looked around to find himself sitting on the floor, back pressed against the desk and Thor hovering anxiously over him. Outside the storm had broken to a light rain. Near his knee, the bracelet had been snapped in Thor’s haste to rip it from him. A few seconds at most, and that was just one bracelet for a short amount of time. He had subjected his son as a young man, a boy really, to endure both. No wonder Hela had threatened to never return Loki should he use the bracelet on him again.

How could he be so careless? He’d never worn them himself. How could he have done something to his son he had been unwilling to experience? Why hadn’t Loki ever told him? Had he really broken his son’s trust so completely that Loki didn’t even believe he cared if he lived or died? He had the disturbing suspicion he didn’t want that question answered.

What had he done? His boy…Frigga’s baby…

You would never do that to Thor. The accusation sounded suspiciously like Loki’s voice even though it was his own guilty conscience screaming at him. A thousand and one excuses came and went but none of them were good enough. He would make it up to him.

How? How do you make up for something like that? And may the Norns save him but he didn’t know. Frigga would know. But as in many matters, Asgardian punishments for the most part were handed out without the queen in attendance. Sweet Norns above she would have killed him if she’d found out and wouldn’t have given a damn about his ignorance. He felt like hanging his head in shame and weeping…but he couldn’t. Not yet. He needed to be strong for his son. To show him that even when a king erred so grievously, personal needs have to be set aside for duty.

It wouldn’t be easy to stop their use. They were a traditional piece of punishment used even before his grandfather’s time. He would never order them again, but it would take time to sway the council if they levied punishment without consulting him. Odin nodded slowly to his son, voice shaky. “You have a most worthy cause, Thor. Let us discuss what needs to be done so you succeed.”

ALFHEIM

It was time to go. It wasn’t safe. We aren’t safe. Loki paced from one side of the cottage to the other, his Asgardian armor back on and the boots making his normally silent steps audible. His love for Indel as the adopted son Loki had thought he was or as the blood son he turned out to be was no different but old fears had crept back in. He had something, someone, valuable and precious to him. It was a weakness. It was a sentiment that could be used against him and people like G’dath and Azni knew his weakness.

Trust. Such a fragile, desperate, dangerous sentiment but there was no denying that he had extended it. And now it had burned him, nearly at the cost of the being he loved most in the nine realms. He should just take Indel and hide on one of the uncharted planets on the western edge of the universe. Skip the nine realms all together and just hide for a few centuries until Indel was old enough to protect himself. Then he might come back, unless life was better out there. He might decide never to come back, even if he would miss some of this. He would miss Jane. He might even
miss G’dath and Azni. And Thor…

Exhaling, Loki slowly sat down. Was he overreacting? Was he being a coward? Would anyone even miss him or did it even matter?

He didn’t even look up when he heard the soft knock on his door. He wasn’t surprised in the slightest, except perhaps that she’d dared to approach him so soon. He sighed, of course she would. When Thor had gotten himself into a temper he didn’t approach his brother when it would have been safer, he did it when the thunderer was still wound up enough to be manipulated.

Loki asked quietly, voice filled with dark resignation. “What do you want, G’dath? I am truly not in the mood.”

“You’re not even going to offer an old woman a seat?” Loki brushed off his manners as he opened his door and offered Azni the chair he’d been in. His eyes flickered to the wards, seeing them still intact and Indel obediently still within them. The double he’d left outside to watch over Indel turned and shrugged, not seeing Azni walk past him. Azni smiled gently, noticing his confusion. “Light elves sometimes have a curious effect on wards, even those without in the way of magic.”

He frowned thoughtfully, head tilted as he observed her. “You can do magic?”

He couldn’t sense anything in her beyond her life force. She smiled that small, elf smile. “No, dear, I’m just not really restricted by shields.”

Shifting uncomfortably at that rather disturbing thought. Because it didn’t make sense to what he knew about shields. He was going to have to research them extensively now…and that thought shouldn’t have cheered him up as much as it did. Instead of quizzing her further he asked politely, “Would you like some tea?”

She nodded slowly. “That would be delightful.” He nodded in return and went about preparing some, listening with one ear but finding the act of making tea soothing in itself. “Do hope you’re wearing those just for nostalgia’s sake, and not because you plan to leave us.” He paused for a heartbeat but didn’t turn around. “Oh dear, that was what I was afraid of.”

He spoke quietly, intensely. “What would you have me do, wait until the next elf succeeds?” His eyes flashed emerald as he glanced at her. “Do you have any idea how protracted an end I will bring down on you all if that happens?”

Azni didn’t even flinch at the threat. Again just like his mother, a woman who was never afraid of him a day in her life. “I would hope that you would choose someone better able to watch your little imp.” He quirked an eyebrow at her, impressed that such a calm, sweet woman took in his temper without even truly reacting. “G’dath is a very dedicated woman. There will be injuries and she will be called away…and your son is precocious, easily bored, and a mischief maker as his father is.”

He shrugged and asked bluntly. “Who then, Trax? He is a good man but…”

Azni nodded and completed the thought. “I know…not the brightest of the stars.” He handed her a tea cup and sat down across from her. She took a sip before nodding slightly to herself, eyes distant. “I lost my mate in the great war of the nine realms. Whether it was Thanos or a dark elf that killed him I know not…I never shall but I harbor their race no ill will. He was a good man, caring and brave. He loved our children very much. I had two children with him, and you remind me of my oldest. A bright boy, a trouble maker, but he had a good heart. My youngest was a very passionate soul and deeply troubled.” She sipped from her cup again. “I have no other priorities,
child. I am all that is left of my family and I would be more than happy to look after yours…if you trust me enough.”

“You have no idea what you ask of me.” Loki shook his head as he spoke. She really didn’t understand. She expected him to extend the hand of trust so soon after this.

Azni smiled sadly. “Oh, but I do know what I ask of you. I ask of you the one thing that you cannot give. The one request that at every turn it has been betrayed.” She leaned forward slightly and put her hand over his. “But trusting me will be different. I will not fail you, nor disappoint you.” He’d offered her little secrets and she’d taken what he’d given. He’d shared pain with her and she’d held him together. She was sweet and she was kind, and he had this feeling that she was much more than that. Well, he’d kept secrets, too, he just wasn’t used to being the one who knew so little about someone before he trusted them. Innocently studying her tea. “I might even be baking later on today.”

A gleam leapt into Loki’s eyes. Indel’s shyness was well known…Loki’s complete and utter lack of handling sugar was infamous. More often than not he convinced himself not to indulge but right now he felt like spreading a little chaos. If he couldn’t kill them, he could prank them all within an inch of their lives. “Indeed? What is the bribe?”

She stirred her tea demurely. “Breakfast biscuits…”

He scowled. “That’s not a bribe, that’s a punishment!”

She glanced up at him for a moment and completed her sentence. “…with apples, cinnamon and sugar.”

Loki gaped, his question an octave higher than normal. “Where did you get cinnamon??”

It was almost an exclusive Midgardian delicacy and unheard of on Alfheim. That small little smile made another appearance as she replied, “I know people.”

He gave her a considering look. The bribe was just a teasing formality since he could damn well make his own if he really wanted to. Although he could grudgingly admit hers were always the best. Declaring firmly, “Neither Indel nor I are going near the village so long as that elf of G’dath’s is there.”

Azni’s smile turned secret. “Not to worry, Loki, Talton will not be back unless I allow it.” He blinked at her in surprise but she just sipped her cup. He knew that smile. Frigga had that smile once in a while. His mother had been a queen. It was a stature of prominence but not necessarily power. Frigga had not been a lady to tangle with and he was starting to realize that Azni might be a similar lady in that regard as well.

Well, well, intriguing. Smirking evilly. “Was his punishment horrible?”

Her smile widened just a little before she patted his hand primly and sat back. “Now, you should know better than to ask such questions.” There was a definite twinkle in her eye and he chuckled with a shake of his head. He almost felt sorry for Talton. Almost. “Is my bribe satisfactory?”

He studied her silently for another moment before breathing a silent word, his armor going back into storage. She rewarded him with a brilliant smile.
Tony had had many lows in his life, but none quite as bad as this. He could easily make Pepper mad. Annoyed. Aggravated. Flirty. To his knowledge it was the first time he had ever made Pepper bawl and he was feeling about as fabulous as used Kleenex. Jane Foster was gone and it was his fault. He moved to slam back the scotch in his hand and a hand moved over the top of the glass to stop him. Scowling at the evil hand. “Go away, Cap.”

Steve Rogers sighed and plucked the glass out of his reach, pushing it a little ways away. It was the illusion of distance since they both knew Tony could just reach over the bar and grab the whole damn bottle of scotch if he wanted to. Asking the inventor quietly. “What are you doing, Tony?”

“Drinking, what does it look like?”

Steve had taken it upon himself to keep an eye on all of the Avengers. At the moment they were at loose ends, on individual assignments but he didn’t want too much distance to develop. It took them too long to come together as a team last time. Next time they might not get days of advanced warning to get their act together. JARVIS had already updated him on what happened to one of the scientist’s experiments, and to the woman that had apparently been dating Thor. “You should be down there trying to figure out what-…”

Tony snarled and cut the super soldier off. “Don’t, Spangles. You don’t get to lecture about should’s and should not’s. You don’t have a clue what’s going on.”

Steve didn’t take offense, his tone still calm. “I would if you would tell me.”

Tony pulled back a little, staring at him for a moment. He kept forgetting that Steve may be naïve about all things modern, displaced in time thanks to his catnap in ice, but he wasn’t stupid. Sighing and glancing away, muttering. “It’s complicated…”

Nodding and sitting at the bar. “Then un-complicate it for me.” Tony didn’t turn back around and Steve’s tone changed to a quiet chide. “We’re supposed to be a team, Stark. We’re not if we don’t trust one another.”

Tony laughed bitterly. “Right, trust each other as much as we trust SHIELD.”

Steve nodded firmly in agreement, missing the sarcasm. “Exactly.”

The inventor grabbed his glass with a huff. “Yeah, not comforting. JARVIS, I need-…”

Brow furrowed as he interrupted Tony’s intended exit. “Since when do you not trust SHIELD?”

Tony snorted at that one. “When have I ever trusted them?” He trusted what he knew. He trusted that SHIELD had the best interests of the overall picture but he didn’t trust their methods. He trusted that Nick Fury was a man who was intent on saving the world. As a former spy Tony didn’t trust that if it came down to it, Fury wouldn’t leave them high and dry if that’s what the world needed.

“We work for them-…”

Tony jabbed a finger at Steve’s chest, the liquor sloshing in his glass but not spilling. “Wrong. You, Captain America, you work for them. Me? I’m the narcissistic billionaire genius. I work for myself.” Storming for the elevator, calling over his shoulder. “I’ll be in my lab, JARVIS, Cap is not invited.”
“Yes, sir.”

Steve stayed where he was for several minutes, pondering. In spite of what anyone else thought he wasn’t oblivious. He knew Tony constantly underestimated him. The assassins listened to him because Fury had appointed him as the leader on the field but they only took orders in combat. Bruce wasn’t military and had more loyalty to Tony than to him. Thor would be the most open to listening and he hadn’t been seen on earth in months. He was the odd man out. But he also knew that there was something going on that had his team retreating and going to Fury would only make it worse.

Nodding to himself and glancing up at the ceiling. “JARVIS, do you have a way of giving Tony a message?”

“Of course, Captain Rogers. I am capable of recording both verbal and visual messages.”

Steve firmed his jaw, resolute that what he said he meant. “Great. Tell Tony if he decides he wants to tell me what’s going on, even if it stays off SHIELD records, to let me know.”

“Message recorded, sir.”

Author's Notes:

I know all you Lokane fans are starting to chomp at the bit. Therefore...

Next:

Jane finds help from an unexpected source
Chapter 22

ALFHEIM

Last night had been the worst night of Jane’s short existence. She’d huddled against some bushes, miserable and cold before deciding there was no way she could wait around for a rescue. Grabbing a tree branch because she’d seen enough movies to know that hikers walked with them… for reasons that eluded her, at dawn she followed around the perimeter of the lake towards the smoke.

It was a lot further away than Jane had thought and she was starving. And as normal as the trees looked, nothing else was even close to identifiable so she was scared of accidentally poisoning herself and miserably did without. A small creek fed off of the lake and she tried to cross it without incident. Frankly she was surprised nothing had happened to her before now. One wrong step and she went sprawling, tumbling over the stick she was walking with and hitting her ankle on the sharp edge of a rock HARD. Jane actually heard the snap and screamed in pain, lying in a dazed heap for what felt like hours.

She heard a series of cracks and peeps and looked to the left as four bird-like creatures pushed themselves out of their shells and looked at her expectantly. They greatly resembled baby chickens, but their fluff was a bright green. She’d managed to pull herself onto one foot, carefully navigating the forest, and realized the peeps weren’t getting quieter. Glancing behind her, she saw all four of them were following her with dedication.

Great, was all she could think, I’m a mommy.

Now she could see the smoke, coming from a two story cottage. She couldn’t even limp, whimpering softly as she hopped and using the evil branch as a prop. “Okay?”

She jerked, then craned her head up to see a small elven boy staring at her from the branch of a tree. At least she guessed he was an elf. He most definitely had adorable Spock-like ears. He was over her head by several feet, apparently a natural climber and couldn’t have been much more than three. Where the hell were his parents?

He grinned shyly as if reading her thoughts, pointing to himself. “Indel.”

Jane swallowed a wince and tried to smile. “Hi, Indel, I’m Jane.”

Indel’s head tilted as if studying her, something like recognition sparking in his green eyes. “Pretty lady.”

“Thank you.” Jane couldn’t think of anything else to say in response.

He pointed at the little fluff balls following at her heels. “Your chicks?”

Jane bit back a self-depreciating sigh. If they were anything like some of the creatures from earth they would follow her with dedication until they grew up. “I guess so.”

Indel frowned thoughtfully, looking from the stick to her leg held off the ground. “Foot hurt, is that why hopping?”

Perceptive for being so young. Her smile wobbled a little. “Yes…”
His voice was a chirp of enthusiastic pride. “Want my dada? He knows magic.” She tried to take a step and landed against the wards, pushed backwards and landing on her ankle awkwardly. She gave a pained shout and crashed to the ground, whimpering. The little chicks scattered before returning to cluster above her head. Indel leapt to the ground and sprinted for the cottage. “Dada! Come quick!”

She couldn’t see his ‘dada’ but she certainly heard him, his boots hitting the ground heavily. For some reason they sounded familiar but she dismissed it, moaning in pain and staring up at the canopy of trees. A blue field of magic shimmered and disappeared and a familiar face appeared in her line of sight, dressed in the green and gold armor she last remembered him in. Well, except for the dreams and she felt her face burn. He looks good.

His skin was lightly sun-kissed and his grey-green eyes almost sparkled. His dark hair was longer, a thick portion pulled back in a leather tie but the rest loosely hanging around his face to give him a subtly wild appearance. Her eyes slowly widened in horrified surprise as Loki sighed with a slow shake of his head. “Hello, Jane.”

She blinked slowly and said the first thing that popped into her mouth. “You died.”

Loki raised an eyebrow, refusing to acknowledge that his sigh was one of relief that she was alive, tone amused. “Hmm…I suppose you must be in Valhalla, then.” A wicked sparkle in his eyes as he teased her. “Or Hel.” She scowled at him and he smirked. “Now, as fascinating as your current position is, I do wonder why you have chosen to simply lie down and make a meal of yourself for the next available predator.”

Why did I never notice how sexy his smirk is? No, Jane! Bad! Stay mad. Snapping at him to cover her embarrassment. “What? Like you’re not a predator.” She shifted her leg, and bit back a whimper, closing her eyes as pain lanced upward.

“I am indeed, little girl.” He narrowed his eyes as he looked her over and concluded more than just momentary un-coordination afflicted her, concern hidden in those gray-green depths. Murmuring under his breath. “You are fortunate I am in a generous mood.”

“Dada?”

She yelped in surprise when he picked her up fluidly, walking through the magic field and towards the cottage she’d seen. Her right arm shot up automatically, grasping the back of his armor. A series of distressed ‘peeps’ had Loki pausing to turn, seeing the little chicks trying to get through the shield. They flapped their stubby little featherless wings and scrambled with their feet against the shield. Loki felt his eyebrows slowly hike up towards his hairline. “Really?”

She was grossly, laughably unprepared for being here. If he had to guess it had been less than 24 hours since her arrival and she’d managed to injure herself, probably hungry, and attached herself to a group of nestlings. He sent her a mild look, heat burning her cheeks, before loosely gesturing. The chicks fell through before running to follow behind.

Indel grinned brightly, watching the little creatures. “Can we keep them, dada?”

Loki huffed, only mildly irritated with their presence. “Not much choice in the matter now…unless we want them for dinner.” Two sets of horrified eyes stared at him and he stopped to glare at both of them. “I didn’t say I would kill and cook the damn things, stop looking at me like that.” Indel giggled. Grumbling under his breath, Loki started walking again.

Looking to her right, Jane noticed Indel followed by hopping with a big grin on his small
face. “He’s your father?” Indel happily nodded and Jane groaned. “I knew it, I’m in hell.” Only I would have the luck to have to rely on Loki’s help, yet again. Its official, Jane thought to herself. My life sucks.

Loki snorted, hearing her thoughts, and her head whipped around to stare at him in shock, eyebrows rising. He did not just actually sound normal-dream Loki normal. He noticed her expression and scowled an instant later, hackles raised as he asked, “Something to add?”

She felt the urge to tease him about being so sensitive, but that was a dream Loki and the real Loki was dangerous. At least, she thought he was…her brain was a very confusing place right now. Realizing if he dropped her it would probably hurt, she put up both hands slightly in a placating gesture. “Nope, I’m good.”

Sighing with another shake of his head as he stepped through the door, careful not to jar her foot, and mumbling to himself. “Of all the women in the nine realms…” Clearing his throat, Loki spoke a little louder. “Indel, clear the table, please.” Indel started to gesture to the right. “Ah ah… think about it, first.” The boy glanced up before looking over the items carefully, then grinned and started from the left. Everything vanished and Loki nodded. “Excellent.”

Indel hopped on the balls of his feet excitedly. “Will you read me?”

Loki gave his son a small grin. “Yes, I will read to you once I set Jane’s ankle.” Indel gave a happy yelp, darted around the chicks, and disappeared into a door that Jane presumed led to his room. Loki set her down carefully on the cleared table and helped her stretch out. Her hands moved over the exquisite oak table and if she weren’t in so much pain she would worry about scratching the smooth, flawless surface.

Closing her eyes, Jane breathed slowly through her nose and tried to distract herself with conversation. “He likes to read?”

His lip quirked in amusement to himself. “Almost as much as I do.”

Bookworm. A tease she didn’t say, but she was thinking it. Loki’s fingers deftly worked to untie the laces to her sneakers, taking them off a bit too quickly. Jane refused to make a sound, biting her lip as her eyes filled with tears. His eyes glanced up just as a pain-filled tear slipped down her cheek. He was still quick, but his touch was gentle and more careful as he coaxed off her socks.

Small fingers pushed the book across the table, Indel’s small face filled with worry. “The blue one, dada. She needs blue one.”

Loki mentally winced as he rolled up her pants, realizing the bone was broken quite badly and would need to be realigned. At least it wasn’t poking through skin was all he could think. He felt a flash of pity for her, as well as grudging respect. He wasn’t so sure he’d be able to handle the pain she was no doubt in as stoically. Not to mention she had managed to get to him from however far away she’d been. The questions buzzed around his head like bees but he ignored them for now. She wouldn’t be going anywhere for a long while, plenty of time to get his questions answered.

He probed with his magic just enough to see nothing else was causing the swelling, no puncture marks from a bite, and he was dealing with inflammation instead of a wound that required draining. It was a relief, since that level of care he would have pulled G’dath for and he was not looking forward to light elf reactions to a mortal on their soil. Although he was curious to see how G’dath would react, having a suspicion that her instincts would escape her control. “The swelling is quite extensive, Indel, will you retrieve it for me?”
“Kay!” The little boy scampered over to a work table and retrieved one of three differently shaded blue potions on the surface.

Loki snatched it before the child could give it to her, took a quick sniff, then nodded and handed it to her. “Excellent.”

He ruffled the elf’s white hair in further praise. Indel grinned and chirped at Jane. “I like blue one, makes ya full and warm and fuzzy.”

Jane raised an eyebrow at Loki who shrugged to himself and translated for his son. “Indel is very skilled in breaking limbs—…”

“It was only once, dada!”

Loki corrected him swiftly. “It was twice because someone decided they wanted to fly. Twice. And as skilled as I am I cannot watch him every second of every minute.” The first time Indel had jumped off a tree and his landing had been too awkward for his ankle to withstand the pressure. The second time he’d snuck around Loki’s double and climbed up on the roof. After that incident he’d made his son promise not to do it again or there would be no more doubles watching him and his boy would be spending an inordinate amount of time inside. Indel stuck out his lower lip a little, face scrunch up in thought. Loki turned his attention to Jane. “It’s for the pain…with a nutrient boost.”

“Ah.” She considered it, then decided to just go with it and downed it in one go. She felt herself gag a bit, tasting used socks, but managed to keep it down, jumping a little to feel Loki’s hand on the back of her neck, coaxing her to lie down.

Loki murmured softly but refused to meet her eyes. “You will feel quite…fuzzy, as Indel put it very soon. Best to lie down lest you fall.”

Indel hopped with a pout as the reason came to him. “The spell didn’t work!”

Loki mentally rolled his eyes. As if that were the only reason Indel fell. Twice. There were spells that could help the boy, but not with what little he knew. He might be able to attempt such a spell if he was interested but he wasn’t, finding teleporting much more efficient. Loki sighed. “There is no spell you can attempt to make you fly if you do not have wings—…”

Indel jumped and pointed. “Lie!”

Loki just looked at his son and Indel’s jumping ground to a halt, face dropping to study the floor with a frown. “You are not trying again or I will be taking back the red book for six months.” Indel pouted harder since currently he was only allowed to use the three spell books. But he didn’t look tempted to try, clearly remembering how much fun a broken arm wasn’t.

Jane stared up at the ceiling. “Will I fall asleep?”

Loki muttered softly, pulling his grimoire out of storage to review the ingredients for a healing stone. “We all do eventually…” Indel nudged him and Loki glanced down before asking. “Yes?”

The little boy pointed. “Heal her?”

He wished magic worked that way. A simple gesture, a buildup of power, and all wounds instantly healed. It was even more complicated since he was dealing with a fragile mortal, who never quite reacted correctly to healing spells. He was getting better thanks to G’dath, but he would be
nowhere near her or Eir’s caliber for centuries. Thankfully healing stones were the least invasive, even if it would drag out her healing time by a couple of days. Loki explained carefully, “We have to wait until she is sufficiently fuzzy.”

White eyebrows knitting together, frowning. “Why?”

Pointing to a basket on the work table, dodging the question since his son was so skilled in spotting lies, even half-truths. “So that you can go outside and collect mushrooms from the east side of the house.”

Indel instantly grinned. “Oh! I can do that, how many?”

Glancing at the ingredients and doubling them for future use. “Six, as big as you can find. Now Indel, a reminder—…”

A production-worthy sigh escaped the little boy, eyes rolling around loosely. “Not to leave the magic shield, I know. I know.”

Jane giggled a little drunkenly but she was ignored, Loki’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t consider himself a strict father, and more often than not he ignored Indel being sarcastic since he was just as bad. However. That level of disrespect he would not put up with and Indel knew it. “If someone would prefer a nap to be in a more congenial mood…”

Indel jumped and grabbed a basket, voice contrite. “No, sir.” He grinned suddenly and squeezed Loki’s side, the trickster grinning back and loosely wrapping an arm around him. Most definitely his son. He ran outside, a Loki clone appearing to follow after him.

As soon as Indel was out of earshot with a sharp snap that made both Jane and he jump, Loki realigned the broken leg. He had not wanted Indel to hear that and he was just thankful his potion was as potent as it was or she would have been screaming. With care he sent warm waves of his magic through her skin, wrapping loosely around the bone to form a temporary brace and making sure none of the fragile pieces splintered or fractured, soothing the screaming nerve endings and deadening them. Mortals were so breakable, Loki thought to himself. It was almost distressing.

His brow furrowed, resting a hand on her forehead as her eyes closed. He could feel her life fluttering against his hand like butterfly wings. He was thankful for the training G’dath had given him, but it left him with an uneasy feeling. Her life was so fleeting and short. Closing his eyes, voice turning coaxing. “Rest, Jane. All is well. Safe.” She’d spent a hard day in the forest but she would recover. The ankle would be tender for a couple of days, just because of the severity of the break but it would be whole soon enough. He nodded to himself and went about creating a healing rock.

Jane woke up slowly, bringing her hand to her head and frowning to herself. She had definitely been fuzzy and warm. With her finger tips she traced along her forehead, almost feeling the echo of something touching her. It was the oddest sensation, like an echo of a touch that she couldn’t see or identify, but it felt…nice.

**Peep**

She glanced over to see the four chicks curled in a box with a blanket covering them partially. Next to them was a shallow dish with water in it and a second with some type of grain in it. Maybe it was the little boy’s influence, but even if it wasn’t that was awfully sweet of him.

How was it even possible? Out of all the slim possibilities where she landed and actually lived, and it just happened to be where Loki lived. She could probably spend the next year working
out the statistical probability but it came down to one thing: how she’d gotten here in the first place. An accident, maybe. A fluke, even less likely. Magic, however, left her highly suspicious. A few years ago she didn’t believe in magic, but that was then and this was now. And now she was currently being nursed back to health by the expert of magic. To say that she suspected he had dragged her here just to toy with her was high on her list of suspicions.

She glanced down with a pained hiss, wishing she was still unconscious. The swelling was down but her leg still felt off. Fiery pain was shooting upwards with each beat of her heart and she hadn’t even attempted to move. She clenched her jaw and stared up at the ceiling, biting into her lower lip. She would not call for Loki’s help. She wouldn’t do it.

She didn’t even move, she just took in a breath and felt another painful throb. With a defeated whimper she turned her head to do exactly that and paused. She blinked as Loki came into the small room as if reading her mind, Indel trailing behind him. Wait, she knew he could if he chose to. She blushed hotly, horrified at the thought that if her dreams were true and he could read her mind…

He noticed the blush and it intrigued him but he wouldn’t go poking into her thoughts… not yet anyway. He couldn’t always help what he picked up but he wasn’t actively seeking them out. Loki looked down at Indel. “See? Now go play.”

Indel pouted up at him. “But you said I gotta go bed soon.”

Raising an eyebrow, failing to see the logic to that argument. While Loki normally insisted on complete, proper sentences from Indel, he generally refrained when it was because Indel was having a shy moment. Loki kept his tone even. “Bedtime will not change whether you play or not.”

“She read me?”

Jane moved to open her mouth, hesitating because she was having a hard time remembering the little boy’s name. Loki cut her off effortlessly before she could make a sound. “Her next potion is now and she will be in no condition to read to you until tomorrow.” He handed her another blue potion, their fingers brushing and she had to fight to keep from flushing.

What is wrong with me? Yes, he was attractive but it’s not like I hadn’t noticed on Asgard. But Jane knew the answer to her own question. It was because he was just a prisoner and Thor’s brother…but now she wasn’t with Thor anymore and he’d saved her life and he was healing her. She was in so much trouble.

“You read me?” Indel’s question to Loki distracted her before she could become quietly hysterical.

A small reading chair popping into existence as Loki sat down and pulled out a small book. “Yes, I will read to both of you until the end of the chapter. Then it will be time for all good little boys to go to bed.”

Indel swayed and played with the bottom of his tunic, considering Loki’s words. “If I’m bad can I stay up?”

“No.”

The little boy nibbled on his lower lip. “I could hide.”

Loki raised an eyebrow, inwardly amused. This was him as a child. He was constantly trying to find the loophole in a rule. He kept his tone even, though he truly wanted to be laughing.
“Indel, your argument is only securing you an early bedtime for the next week.” Indel pouted but didn’t hesitate in climbing into Loki’s lap, the prince tilting up an eyebrow at her.

That was his name. Indel. Jane smiled just a little to Loki. “Thank you.”

He nodded slightly and waited until she took the hint and swallowed the vial before opening the book. Indel turned a little. “Dada?”

Loki’s lip quirked, anticipating whatever interesting questions his son was going to ask. “Yes?”

Indel touched the moving picture on the inner cover. “Are dragons real?”

“Yes.”

Jane felt her eyes widen incredulously. Dragons were real?? Oh. My. God.

For some reason, and she kept in mind he was the Liesmith, she knew he was telling the truth. The little boy bounced in excitement and grinned. “Can we go see some??”

A small, crooked smile crossed Loki’s face as he drank in his child’s eagerness. He had a few enemies to kill but then after, it would be a wonderful adventure. He would just have to decide the type of dragon to show the child. Water dragons were hard to find, having adapted invisibility naturally to avoid humans. Fire dragons were beautiful, but as a frost giant Muspelheim wasn’t the best environment for either one of them to investigate. He might just settle for visiting Alfheim proper since there were more than ten different species hiding in various places around the world. “Perhaps, someday.”

She was going to have to beg, Jane was positive, but if he dragged her along to see a dragon she didn’t give a damn. Indel chattered in quiet excitement about the dragons in the story that had obviously been read to him repeatedly, reading some of the phrases along with Loki. Jane lay her head back down and watched them.

The way he held that boy so close, resting his chin lightly on his head. The way Indel’s free hand was wrapped in his tunic to hold onto him. One hand held the book but his free arm was wrapped around that little body. So that is what love looks like. She smiled and quietly watched them until her world went fuzzy and warm once more.

Author's Notes:

For those who have read the completed work and are curious...yes, I am making little modifications.

Missing details, tense corrections, maybe a scene extension or two...etc. Gotta spackle those holes and touch up the scratches to get my deposit back ;)

Next:

Loki has issues...poor Jane; Fandral flirts with death
Chapter 23

ALFHEIM

Loki crouched down, studying the small nest Jane had tucked herself in to protect her from the chill of night. It was rather foolish of her, since camping in the trees would have been safer but it didn’t even take a stretch of his formidable intelligence to realize she was completely out of her element and her being here hadn’t been planned. There were two more hours before the potion wore off on her, enough time for Mischief to look after Indel while he investigated how Jane Foster had gotten here…and how to send her back. His nose twitched as he scented the air, a strange combination of magic and ozone left behind from her wormhole. Familiar magic. It wasn’t his and it wasn’t Hela’s…he just couldn’t place it. If he’d come here earlier he might have caught it but too much time had passed.

It had definitely been a temporal gateway but unlike the dark passages there was no scarring left behind to reopen. A one-way trip. He sighed softly, standing and crossing his arms in thought. He didn’t want her here. She was mortal. She was fragile…she was dangerous. And he didn’t want to think of why she was dangerous but he already knew even if he didn’t want to admit it.

He would do nothing to endanger Indel for her…but he suspected if she was persistent enough he might grant her requests to his own detriment.

No, she had to leave and it had to be as soon as possible. If he took the dark passages Thanos would find him…or Odin would, and neither thought was comforting. The golden branches couldn’t be navigated by a mortal. He was going to have to call in for reinforcements since there was one other mage who knew the dark passages as well as he did. Closing his eyes for a moment, he searched out Hela and surprisingly found her on Helheim and sent a shadow sprite to her. “Hela?”

Hela turned her head, primping in front of the mirror in her rooms. “Father?”

Smiling just a little, venturing closer to see her dressed quite elegantly. “That does not look like a dress for court.”

Lip quirking as she smoothed down the green material gently hugging her hips. “Since it’s not a dress I would wear in court you would be correct.” Turning fully and crossing her arms, unconsciously mimicking his pose. “What do you want?”

His head tilted slightly. “What makes you assume I want anything?”

Rolling her eyes and sitting on her vanity. “By Hel…father. As much as I enjoy the chase just tree the prey.”

The corner of his lips twitched but he conceded far too quickly for Hela’s comfort level. “I need you to take someone to another world.”

She wasn’t going to ask why he couldn’t since she was well aware of what he feared. Fear had never stopped him before and as much as he might consciously think he was hiding it wasn’t what he was doing. Loki was biding his time for the right opportunity. His fear stemmed from his need to protect Indel. If he truly feared falling into Thanos’ hands, he would have slipped out of the nine realms a long time ago. Lips turned down in a slight frown. “Who?”

Grimacing to say her name, shoving aside the annoying pang in his heart that he refused to
Hela almost squealed as she asked, “The mortal you like?” She had been hoping against hope that his interference hadn’t killed the little mortal. Not only had he gotten the mortal to Alfheim, he’d done so ahead of schedule.

Loki scowled instantly at Hela. “I do not like—…”

She held up her hand, looking tired. “Father, stop. Just stop. There is nothing wrong with being attracted to a human.”

“Mortals are beneath our notice.”

Slowly Hela’s face went blank. “I see. So we are to limit ourselves and blindly accept AEsir prejudice now? I should accept my status as a lesser being merely for being Jötunn?”

He clenched both fists at his sides and leaned towards her. As if she had ever been intimidated by him. “I. Don’t. Like. Her.” She stared at him with a cold expression, unimpressed. “She’s not safe on Alfheim, not around light elves.”

She shrugged dismissively. “Then protect her.”

He made just as dismissive a gesture. “She’s not my responsibility.”

Crossing her arms again and shrugging. “Not my problem. You’re the one who couldn’t resist giving her the tools to create a primitive Bi-frost.”

Loki shook his head. “To Asgard, not here.”

“Still not my problem.”

Snarling at her, not even completely aware of what he was saying. “As soon as she heals I’ll shove her out the door—…”

Loki choked, staring at Hela with a stunned expression. Her hand was wrapped around his neck, which shouldn’t be possible since this was a shadow sprite, not his astral projection and certainly not his real body. Dragging him to be nose to nose with her. “Code of honor, Loki. You gave her the tools, she is your responsibility and if you do anything that causes her to expire before her due time I will personally kick your ass from Alfheim to Midgard to Asgard and back again. Clear?”

His eyes flared emerald green, snarling, “I will never forgive you for this.”

Shoving him, watching him sprawl on the ground and her own eyes sparking green flames. She hated when he did this to himself. It was just like with Odin. His anger at his father’s deceit had been thrown at EVERYONE else in the family. This was no different. Hurt once by a woman and suddenly every woman he had any true interest in was immediately shoved away. “Run back home, coward. Wouldn’t want you to actually face your fear for once.”

Jumping to his feet and roaring in denial. “I’m not afraid of her!”

“You’re afraid of love. So yes, you are.” With an inarticulate snarl he vanished and Hela slowly exhaled to cool her temper. Glancing at the mirror, she formed a fist and punched the glass.
Her hackles rose as soon as he entered the room. Dream or not, Jane knew that look on his face. Loki might think it was schooled to be blank but it was a combination of subtle cues that meant nothing but trouble. The eyes were just slightly narrowed, mind puzzling to find an answer. No smirk to give away his unspoken agenda, except for the tiniest of tilts at the corner of the left side of his mouth. But the hands were the obvious tell. Both were clasped firmly behind his back so that they couldn’t betray him, which is what always betrayed him.

His tone was casual, which meant he was paying very close attention to her answer. “I am curious…how did a human come to be so far away from home?”

Jane sighed, knowing that question was inevitable. “My research…I was trying to create a bridge to Asgard.”

A smirk curled his lip and she could just imagine him picking up that proverbial stick to poke at her with, just to see what would happen. “Ah, a Midgard bound Bi-frost to see your sweet, sweet Thor again.”

She scowled at his mocking tone, wishing she could grab that stick and smack him upside the head with it. “He’s not my—…” She pulled in a deep breath to keep her temper under control. Stupid God of Mischief jerk. Loki’s eyebrow quirked, hearing that one loud and clear. “I was working with Stark Enterprises to create a stable wormhole and…I missed.”

His lips pursed slightly and suddenly a wave of longing tore through Jane. She missed William. God, she hoped he didn’t think she’d run off on him or something. Silently she promised every deity she’d ever even heard of that she would gather up the courage and ask him out if they would just get her back home. Although she couldn’t really put it into words why Loki reminded her of William.

Loki’s voice interrupted her inner musings. “Hmm…I might accept that reasoning except as the technology’s creator who is not trained to fight, I find it hard to believe they would just send you through so trustingly without testing the destination.”

Face burning. Damn him. The one demi-god who was as smart if not smarter than she was. “I was too close to the first test and got pulled in.”

A shark-like smile that was nothing more than bared teeth spread across his face. “You cannot lie to me, please refrain from insulting my intelligence. I take from that pathetic attempt at an excuse that no one knows where you are and you may have inadvertently damaged the device since there have been no further ‘tests’.”

Whispering. “Yes.”

“Pity.”

Jane glanced away. Her leg felt better but she didn’t want to take the chance of breaking it again by using it before she was supposed to…although she could see Loki being a jerk about it and lying just to keep her off her feet longer for kicks. “How long before my leg is healed?”

He adapted to the change in topic without batting an eyelash. “It was a rather severe break but your footing should be sound by tomorrow.”

She nodded in acceptance. Considering how long the natural way took to heal, she was very thankful Loki had been feeling generous. But he didn’t want her here, it was painfully obvious. “Will it take you long to get me back to earth?”
He raised an eyebrow at her. “I can’t help you return, I’m afraid.”

She blinked dumbly for several seconds before feeling her blood pressure spiking.

“What??”

He tilted his head slightly. “I believe I was rather clear.”

Sputtering in denial, Jane shook her head. “But… I don’t belong here! I have to get back!”

“And I reiterate since you seem to be unusually slow today, I can’t help you return.”

Her eyes narrowed and her fists clenched. “Can’t or won’t?”

Shrugging lightly, not intimidated at all by her ire. In fact, that spark of anger in her eyes turned ordinary brown into molten amber and he found it beautiful. “In the end it is the same reality. You remain here.”

She was grasping for straws but she was desperate. “What about Thor?”

Loki growled softly at hearing his brother’s name from her lips. “What about him?”

Nibbling on her lower lip, hoping she was guessing correctly. Even though she and Thor were over, he would still take her back to Midgard. Even to be with another guy wouldn’t stop the thunderer because that’s the kind of man Thor was. “Well, he visits you, right? He can take me.”

Sighing loudly, refusing to label one of many emotions rushing through him ‘relief’ that she still wasn’t fixated on his brother. “Try to wrap this concept around your feeble little mind… everyone believes that I am dead. I went to a great deal of effort to convince them of such and I intend to stay that way. I receive no visits from your… I think you mortals call it boyfriend, as I am sure he would do nothing more than hit me with something large and heavy and drag me back to the dungeons. I have no intention of returning to Asgard, Midgard, or any other destination with the word ‘gard’ in it.” Slapping her own head, she screamed at the ceiling and his eyes sparkled with amusement. “It is not often I see humans hitting themselves. Quite amusing.”

Snapping at him because the alternative was crying and she wasn’t going to do it. “It’s called frustration, jackass, look it up.”

A disappointed look crossed his face. “Such a common vulgarity, how pedestrian.”

Sounding forlorn even though his expression said otherwise. “I suppose you wish me to leave you alone since you are obviously not hungry.” Her stomach answered for her and she glared at him. He smirked. “I might even feed you anyway, just understand it’s in your best interest not to make me angry.” Crossing her arms, she stuck out her tongue and his smirk grew. “And after the meal you can take a nap for you are in the same mood—…” He caught the pillow she’d thrown at his face and then let it drop to the floor, well out of her reach. “…as Indel when he is over tired.”

Jane sighed. “You’re not going to give it back, are you?”

He gave her a considering look. “Perhaps if you remember your manners.”

She huffed and ground her teeth together a little. “Please may I have my pillow?”

Surprisingly he didn’t torment her, simply picked it back up and propped it under her head again. Indel’s voice drifted in through the door. “Dada, it’s ready!”

A thin table appeared next to the bed, Jane looking around in surprise as the bedroom
seemed to expand even if such a thing was impossible. She glanced back at Loki in silent question who winked and wiggled his fingers before going back into the main room. *Of course he did.*

Father and son returned promptly with simple but substantial foods and Jane found her mouth-watering in anticipation. Loki hesitated in giving her a plate, making sure she was looking at him. “I wouldn’t recommend eating as quickly as your expression suggests, I have no intention in cleaning after you.” He jerked a thumb in his son’s direction. “He is messy enough.”

Indel stuck out his tongue. “I was sick, dada!”

Sitting down as he gave her a plate and glancing at his boy, Indel wasn’t sick terribly often. Not once he’d turned two. Still it was quite a memorable stomach bug. “Ah, is that what it is called? I call it projectile vomiting.”

The boy sat up primly. “Yes, and G’dath said you can’t be mean to me because all is forgiven when one is sick.”

Jane stared in shock at the boy. *How was a child so small able to talk so well?*

Loki smirked and ruffled Indel’s hair proudly, reading her expression. “Indel is exceptionally bright but very shy, he must be fond of you.”

Of course Indel was verbally exceptional, his dad talked like that to him all the time, not to mention she had a feeling the only time Loki was quiet was when he was unconscious. Indel pouted. “M’not shy!”

After moving food to his own plate he did the same for his son. Indel attempted to block a few peas from rolling in amongst the chicken until Loki shot him a look. They were both carnivorous but a few vegetables wouldn’t kill either of them. “Do you know what the word means?”

The boy shrugged and stabbed a tenderloin with his fork. “No.”

“Then how do you know?”

Indel pondered this as he chewed before frowning and swallowing. “What’s it mean?”

Loki grinned a little, both of them ignoring Jane’s eyes ping ponging back and forth between father and son. “It means you do not like to talk a lot to people you do not know.”

Indel absorbed this before nodding with a shrug. “Oh…okay, m’shy.”

Loki sighed the sigh of the persecuted. “Whoever is teaching you to speak like that I will soundly thrash.”

Indel stuck his tongue out at Loki again. Loki stuck his tongue out at Indel.

Indel giggled. “I like it!”

“It is not appropriate for—never mind.” He thought about all the years he’d spent as a young boy being told how young princes should and should not talk. But that didn’t matter anymore so there was no reason to repeat the tired phrases his own father had instilled in him. He had to keep reminding himself that he wasn’t a prince anymore. He was Loki of Alfheim now. Indel wouldn’t have to worry about growing up to be a proper prince of Asgard. He could just be Indel. Still, it didn’t mean he had to put up with improper English. “Please refrain from speaking that horrifying way in my presence.”
Sighing at his father. “Okay.”

The little, green chicks ‘peeped’ expectantly from the floor and Jane glanced down at them. It was official, her life was strange.

VANAHEIM

Fandral strode for the bar, ordering their tallest mead. A sultry voice asked him quietly. “Buy me a drink?”

Looking to his right, he smiled to see a lusciously curved form leaning on the bar. Her dark hair cascaded down her back and though he was partial to blonds, it didn’t exclude anyone else from his appreciative gaze. Not to mention this was Vanaheim, not Asgard, and variety was in aplenty here. “Hello, beautiful.”

Turning slowly, dark green eyes sparkling of mirth. “Fandral.”

His eyes widened an instant later in recognition. “Queen Hela?”

He’d come to Vanaheim for a little relaxation, perhaps to find a willing playmate while he was here. He wasn’t afraid of Hela, necessarily, although she was quite intimidating. And intoxicating. Beautiful. Engaging. Judging by the amusement in her eyes and the light blush ghosting her cheeks, she’d picked up his thoughts.

So no, he wasn’t afraid of her. He was more concerned with how painful his death would be if Loki were to find out. It was easily arguable that Hela could take care of herself but both Loki and Thor were very protective of her.

She wrinkled her nose playfully, reading his body language easily. She slipped away from Helheim every so often to dress up like the other immortals and mingle amongst the living. They never held her attention for very long…so predictable. “Running away so soon?”

Fandral’s mustache twitched. “Loki would skin me, bury me, and then kill me.”

*Interesting,* was all Hela could think. Not squeamish about who she was but rather her overprotective father. “I’m pissed off with him right now.”

He blinked twice, the words falling out of his mouth without permission. “Revenge sex?”

“The first time would be.” She winked and the pitch of her voice lowered slightly. “We just won’t tell him.”

He looked at her but she just stared right back. She’d never been shy a day in her life. Before the spell didn’t count, since that was Loki’s life. Her life began on the library floor and never once had she been shy or afraid to look someone in the eye.

“What do you drink?”

She smirked, displaying perfect white teeth. “Whatever’s in front of me.” He smiled charmingly and turned to order for her, stopped when her hand grabbed his jacket and jerked him around. “Even think about anyone else in my bed and you’ll never have need of another partner.”

She never hesitated in taking what she wanted, but she also wasn’t cruel enough not to give fair warning. He would have accepted her company and conversation, this was taking a
delightful turn. Usually he was the one to pursue so her forward confidence was a refreshing change. Taking the hand gripping his jacket and kissing the knuckle lightly. “Milady, I do not doubt your skills in keeping me focused and inspired.”

She gave him another glance. Average intelligence. A skilled warrior. Overconfident. Daring and bold. So typical for an AEsr and yet there was something else there. A restrained sense of humor. In her mind Loki’s childhood was firmly his but that didn’t mean she didn’t remember that childhood. A friend who had outgrown his need for a trickster in his life. The AEsr were so boringly predictable.

But her eyes did catch the necklace around his neck and quickly came to a conclusion. So he knew Loki was alive, but since Asgard still mourned he’d kept that information to himself. Perhaps a friend once more, which is not what she would have expected. He was different and she liked that. A very interesting playmate indeed. She smiled with an animal’s cunning and let him order her a drink.

**Author Notes:**

With Hela I tried to write her with Loki in mind; just a freer, perhaps one might say wilder version of him.

700 hundred years without anyone able to tell you what to do is bound to have an effect.

**Next:**

Tony connects a few dots; Amora tells the truth
Chapter 24

ALFHEIM

“Wait, dada!”

Jane blinked her eyes open, yawning and stretching just a little before sitting up. _So far so good, no painful twinges_. Scooting to the edge of the bed, she eased down her feet and then grimaced. _Cold floors. Always hate those in the morning._

Loki’s even tone drifted from somewhere beyond the room. “Indel, if you fall I will not feel sorry for you.”

Jane snickered to herself. _Yeah, right_, was all she could think. Loki may be prepared to die before admitting it but that little boy had him hopelessly twirled around his fingers. She could see it in his eyes. Hear it in his voice. He was deeply in love with that child. Just like the night before when he’d come into the bedroom she was occupying to read to Indel and she found herself getting all warm and fuzzy just watching them, no potion needed.

She shook her head to banish such thoughts of the trickster prince and tested out her feet. _Good so far._

“Dada? When can Jane train with us?”

She cocked her head slightly to listen to Loki’s response as she carefully swayed to a stand and idly wondered what training they were doing. “Jane may not like to learn these exercises.”

“Then why do I have’ta?” Indel’s voice was full of a whine.

Jane grinned, easily imagining Loki wincing with Indel’s last word. He spoke differently than Thor and the others in Asgard, his phrases more relaxed and not so…old fashioned, she guessed she could stay. Still, he seemed to draw a distinct line between a more modern twist to speaking and slang.

Loki’s voice was filled with instructive correction. “Have to…and you do because you are going to learn to be a warrior whether you are agreeable to it or not.”

Carefully she took a few steps, growing more confident when not even a twinge of pain stopped her. She made it to the door and peered out to see a Loki shape just off the porch.

**Peep. Peep. Peep.**

She grinned in spite of herself and looked back to see all four chicks following her in a single file line. She could hear the pout in Indel’s voice. “But you don’t wanna be-…”

Loki cut his son off firmly. “Indel, tuck in your elbow a bit more and speak properly.”

Indel sighed quite loudly and Jane muffled her giggles with a hand over her mouth. “But I don’t _want to_ be a warrior. I _want to_ be a mage like you.”

Jane just continued to shake her head to herself, taking small steps to the outer door. _How was a boy so small able to talk so well?_ She had a feeling Indel was a miny replica of Loki in that respect since he certainly didn’t seem to have any hesitation in talking to the boy like an adult.
She stopped at the door jam, watching as father and son stood side by side, completing different moves that seemed simple enough but the way that Loki was forming his hands and holding his balance left her thinking of fighting maneuvers. She blinked and felt her mind flash back to Svartalfheim. He’d moved so fast, fighting the dark elves with a single blade and killing them with laughable ease. It had been rather remarkable to watch.

“I am a mage, Indel, but I know how to fight no matter what my idiotic brother may think to the contrary. If your magic is drained, you must know how to defend yourself.”

They both turned at the same time in her direction, Indel waving. “Hi Jane! Come play with us.”

Loki rolled his eyes up to the heavens and sighed. Jane giggled.

**MIDGARD**

Tony reviewed the video feed over and over again, his hands shoved in his pockets. Even without JARVIS online at the time, the surveillance system worked on a completely separate power grid and he was thankful for Pepper’s foresight. There were three different fail safes on his program for Jane’s project. There was just no way this should have happened. Nor could he figure out why the power crashed but bigger problem first. Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow) and Clint Barton (Hawkeye) were going over the lab right now. They were the world’s best assassins but they were both SHIELD agents on top of being Avengers, if there was anything suspect they would find it. Sighing and turning to slowly pace. “Alright JARVIS, open a project in my personal hard drive with encryption and locking codes, file name Janie.” His personal drive would have less chance of being hacked.

“Yes, sir.”

Holding up a single finger. “First priority, I want the launch program triple checked for coding errors.” He had to know if this was his fault.

“Running now, sir.”

Tony nodded as he pivoted to walk in the opposite direction. “Good. Secondly, I want an analysis of Jane Foster’s interactions with anyone in the last 30—no, 60 days. Focus the parameters of the search to on or off site. I want a background check down to the DNA of every person.” If this wasn’t his fault, then no doubt they’d gotten to Jane’s research. The easiest way was through her but he wouldn’t put it past some asshole using one of her assistants to gain the access they wanted. He was going to have to recheck everyone’s background.

“Right away, sir.”

“Stark.”

Blinking but not even looking up when Natasha’s voice came in through the comm. “Yeah?”

The assassin’s voice was clipped and sounded like she was harboring suspicions. “I thought you were out of the weapons making business.”

Pausing in his pacing to frown. What in hell kind of question was that? Well, technically it wasn’t a question but he heard one in there somewhere. SHIELD wished he was still in the weapons business. “I am,”
“Did you happen to get a look at the weapons that discharged in here?”

He winced. *Shit*. He wasn’t sure why he’d been hoping those two wouldn’t notice that. It was a given they would since the holes in the glass weren’t exactly subtle and he hadn’t had the time to switch out the panes. Mama Fury was going to be more of a pain in the ass than a colonoscopy when he got wind of all this. “Nope.” Then he frowned at the way Widow worded the question. “Why?”

She responded immediately, sounding slightly confused. “No shells or casings. High powered and the rounds the right size to mimic an uzi but no bullets, the holes are too clean.”

*Great*, was all Tony could think. *Aliens who went to the trouble of blending in with humans. Just what this world needed was yet another reason to be paranoid.*

There was a pause and when she spoke next he knew she was talking about something else. “You should come see this.”

Waving his hand a bit in the air, spinning on his heels to pace the other way again. “Bit busy right now, Tasha, can’t you just tell me?”

She sounded befuddled. “The black substance on the arch is inching off the metal and disappearing.”

Tony blinked and froze. “WHAT??”

“Sir, I have an unknown analysis that cannot be verified.”

He refrained from responding to JARVIS for a moment. “I’ll be right there. Stark, out. JARVIS, what do you mean cannot be verified?”

Jarvis’ response didn’t have a hint of sarcasm. “We have no further background nor DNA data collected on Loki Odinson, sir.”

Tony hated it when his AI took him too literally. He also hated it when he’d been set up to look like an idiot when it was another idiot’s fault. Snarling as he picked up a paper weight and hurled it at a window. The glass broke and gravity proved it still worked. “Son of a bitch!”

Tony kept his thoughts to himself for now, looking with silent fascination as the exotic matter was indeed inching its way across the metal like small inch worms. Once at the opposite side the slivers disappeared. His eyes moved around, as if expecting to see that smug bastard’s smirking face. God, he hated that Norse idiot. He was going to have to see if he could get ‘Gorgeous’ involved in this. He would give away his entire fortune just to see her wipe the floor with the trickster. He made a mental note to watch the video of Hulk tossing Loki around like a rag doll in slow motion.

Natasha’s face was blank but her eyes were intent. “Any idea what is causing that?”

What: nope. Who: he had a good guess. He tried to pick up a sliver with some tweezers because even he wasn’t stupid enough to touch it with his bare hands. As soon as he did, it disappeared. Well, there was no collecting it. And from what he could see, almost all of it was gone. Frowning. “Exotic matter is a bit outside of my expertise. From what I remember, when the arch worked the energy field was keeping it in place and calibrated.” He tapped the section that had created the energy field. Whoever had set this part up hadn’t thought to hook it up correctly or it would have been supported on the emergency power along with everything else sensitive. Almost
everything in the tower was functioning but he’d been forced to bypass his energy clean system to syphon off the New York power grid until he could get the reactor working again. “If I had to guess, this is how this stuff decomposes when it isn’t being contained.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

Tony turned to give Bruce a small smirk. As tempting as it was to bring all three of them into his theory of Loki, until he had something to go on he would keep it to himself. Not to mention Bruce would probably Hulk out and Loki was already responsible for enough property damage to his building. He was totally blaming him for the recent window breakage. “Not at the moment. JARVIS is debugging my program, checking for mistakes.”

Clint and Natasha shared a look. He knew a lot that he didn’t notice passed between the two of them in that one instant. “We’ll debrief Fury.”

Nodding absently to himself. “Yeah, you do that.”

Tony was being petty and he knew it but he just had no interest in sharing with people who clearly had no problem lying to his face. Not to mention the sad fact was that other than file a report there wasn’t a whole lot anyone could do. Jane was gone, possibly dead. The wormhole was a bust and he had no idea how she’d gotten her hands on the exotic matter. It wasn’t in her notes and no one had a clue. One day she’d simply walked into the tower with a box in her hands and voila. Loki was, for the most part, untouchable as long as Thor was MIA. Damn he needed a drink but he needed a clear head more, at least for a couple of hours. Bruce narrowed his eyes a little to himself, a man full of quiet intelligence and more perceptive than most realized, but walked quietly away back to his lab.

Once they were off the floor Tony spun around. “JARVIS, lock the doors.”

“Yes, sir.”

Looking intently at the screen. “Show me Loki’s interactions with Janie.”

Outside of Stark towers, at a local coffee shop, the two shared a table and talked for several hours at a time. Daily. Tony frowned. How can Jane not know who this is? There were some subtle differences but it was a little obvious to him. Or maybe it was because he knew who it was and anyone else could just pass off a similar appearance. “Do we have any audio, JARVIS?”

“Regrettably, no, sir.”

Tony sighed and rolled his eyes. “Figures.” Frowning thoughtfully. “Is this all the interactions they had together?”

“The location was the same, repeated almost daily. With the exception of a conference in Norway.”

Tony felt his eyebrows hike up even further. The conference that she’d gone with Bruce to? He started getting a bad feeling that Bruce may know more than he was saying. He grimaced. As if he had any room to judge about withholding facts. He exhaled slowly. Get the facts and then confess to the rage monster that the Avengers were falling apart at the seams. Gritting his teeth. “Get a closer view of his face.” The video feed was magnified, no audio, but Tony watched carefully for facial expressions. The lift of an eyebrow. The crinkling around his eyes as he smirked. Eyes flashing of passion over a specific subject. And then, just as she turned to leave. “Freeze it.” Tony blinked in shock. “Well I’ll be damned in a tutu.” He knew that look and he was suddenly glad he
hadn’t jumped the gun about letting anyone, yet again, get misdirected by the Loki-shaped distraction. Loki was a coincidence, something else was going on. The look on Loki’s face mirrored the same feeling that coursed through his heart every time Pepper stepped into the room. “You have no idea you’re in love with her.” Tony crossed his arms over his chest and shifted his weight back onto one foot as something occurred to him. “JARVIS, we have video of Janie coming in with the tropical stuff, right?”

“If you are referring to the package containing the exotic matter, then yes, sir.”

Grinning, glad that at least his AI understood him before looking thoughtful. “Do we have footage of Loki giving her that package?”

There was a pause, JARVIS no doubt searching through the video footage. “We do, sir, shall I play it for you?”

He exhaled slowly, back at square one. But then something else occurred to Tony and he tucked it into the back of his mind for now. Loki may not be an idiot after all. And if he had the brains to keep up with Janie he had to know his New York plan was full of gaping holes. Not to mention he’d all but given them the location of the portal. Tony had other priorities right now but that thought was going to have to be investigated. Glancing around the room again. “JARVIS, take Loki off the list of suspects concerning Janie’s accident but keep digging, also start using the surveillance system from here and work backwards. I want to know where those alien creeps came from.”

“Yes, sir.” Tony huffed but headed for the elevator. Time to see why the reactor was still on the fritz.

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ASGARD

It wasn’t often that Odin went down into the dungeons, in fact the last time that he had was in the dead of night, to secretly watch Loki sleeping fitfully in his cell. But this particular errand needed to be handled with discretion. He located the glowing cell easily enough since it had been the same one that Loki had been placed in, just without the accommodations he’d afforded his son.

Amora was feeling decidedly miserable and it hadn’t even been a week. How had Loki handled almost a year and not gone insane? The magic containment made her skin itch and the nature of the enclosure left her slightly claustrophobic. There was no one to talk to and nothing to do. It just wasn’t fair. A few lies, that was it, and I receive an entire week in the dungeons?? Not to mention Loki had done far, far worse things before and not received punishment. It wasn’t fair. Somehow, I will have my revenge, All-Father.

She cut off her dark musings when she noticed the king approaching unescorted, scrambling to her feet from sitting on the bare floor and looking suitably pitiful. “All-father.”

Folding his hands behind his back as he stopped in front of the cell. “I think sufficient time has passed for a more honest dialogue…would you not agree?”

If it got her out of this cell she would do anything, ANYTHING. Nodding her head enthusiastically. “Oh yes, sire, I will speak of any topic you desire.”

Holding up a hand. “Have you encountered Thanos?”

Amora ducked her head down contritely. “No, sire.”

Odin nodded, no surprise on his face. “I thought not. Do you even know if he is on
Titan?” He highly doubted it. Thanos hadn’t dared return to the nine in a millennia.

Remorse in her voice. “No, sire.” Then brightening. “But I can speak of his emissary, the Other.”

His brow furrowed as the name didn’t even sound remotely familiar. “The Other?”

She clasped her hands together. “He works on Thanos’ behalf…I believe the Chitauri were originally his before he gifted them to his master. He is a bit of a Seer if I’m not mistaken.”

His expression cleared. Of course. The leader of the Chitauri that had tortured Loki into submission. He’d known what the creature looked like but not his name. Forming a frown. “And why would Asgard have interest in such a creature?”

Her fingers toyed with one of the bracelets on her left wrist. Loki was a practical mage, everything that he wore having a specific purpose. Amora had several pieces that had no function except for looks. “He plots on Midgard with Thanos’ army of Skrulls…I believe he is after an infinity gem for Thanos.”

He couldn’t stop himself in making a small scoffing sound. “The Tesseract was already retrieved by Thor.”

Speaking softly while being careful not to let the ‘you idiot’ she was thinking escape. “There are six gems, sire.”

Odin stood up a little straighter, blue eye glinting and clearly knowing exactly what had crossed her mind. Perhaps she hadn’t been careful enough in her tone. His voice rumbled as he spoke. “Be wary, Amora, there was much lenience my son was afforded that you shall not be.”

Also true. Even at his worst, freshly returned from Midgard and facing sentencing, Loki had said things that anyone else would have faced beheading. Clearing her mind and bowing. “Sire.”

“Good. Now, to the gem. Do you know this for fact?”

Amora swallowed nervously. “I know of the number of gems, but not if that is his true plan. Merely whispers and suspicions. But to assemble the Infinity Gauntlet is all that Thanos craves…other than winning death’s favor.”

Odin shook his head, bemused. “Thanos is ever more the fool for believing he will ever be granted that.”

“Sire?”

He raised an eyebrow at the witch. “Just who do you believe Lady Death is?”

Amora blinked. “She—ooh, I see.” A crafty smile crossed her lips. She did see. Thanos would be in for a very nasty surprise if he threatened the World Tree with the Infinity Gauntlet. Hela for the most part remained neutral on a great many matters, with the exception of all things Loki. At the same time, threatening the stability of Yggdrasil would cause her to act and she would unleash her army of the dead on the living to prevent it.

His voice gruff as he asked. “What do these ‘whispers’ say concerning this gem on Midgard?”

She didn’t even have to guess this part. She’d been on Midgard just long enough to see
how fascinated humans were with the internet and YouTube. They must have recorded Loki from long range on more than half a dozen angles fighting Thor on Stark Towers with his scepter. She knew that gem as soon as she’d seen it. “The mind gem, sire.”

Nodding. “Very well.” He would have to send Thor to retrieve it before the Other, and therefore Thanos, got their hands on it. “One other matter since you spoke of Chitauri. Do you know if they submit to Thanos’ rule alone?”

A bittersweet smile crossed her lips, not even considering not telling Odin what she knew…and hoping the truth burned like bile in the back of his throat. “Prince Loki was innocent. The Chitauri follow Thanos’ will alone, and your son was nothing more than a tortured puppet.”

She wasn’t surprised she couldn’t see a hint of sorrow. Odin was very good at hiding his emotions when he wanted to. Instead he nodded slowly, his tone void of emotion. “Your penance is ended in the morrow. You will be brought before court and give them the truth of Prince Loki’s innocence. Once your duty is concluded you may return to Asgard as a courtier…” His eye narrowed. “If you can refrain from further ploys.”

It was more than Amora had hoped for. She gave him a deep curtsey and her most winning smile. “Most assuredly, your majesty, you will not regret it.”

He didn’t say it out loud, but his doubt was easily seen on his face as he walked away.

Author's Notes:

Yeah...I wouldn't believe Amora either.

Next:

Jane trades the secrets of the universe; Malekith ponders
Jane smoothed down the dress, checking the back just to be sure Loki hadn’t done something to it: like removed the back or something prankster worthy. It was a beautiful, light material of soft blues and ambers and it flowed almost to her ankles. She had no idea where he’d gotten the material but this dress and several others had been in a bureau that had appeared along the wall. There were a few breaches matched to tunics as well but for now it was still warm enough in the day for the dresses. She smoothed one finger over her necklace and tucked it under the material. Slipping on a pair of simple tan shoes that were almost ridiculously soft, she walked through the house and sat down on the porch next to Loki who was looking up at Indel who kept shouting ‘Look at Me!’ every few seconds and performing gymnastic worthy stunts along the branches. If that were her little boy she would have died of a heart attack several times over by now. From the corner of her eye she could see Loki was smiling ever so slightly, mildly amused and nothing more.

Yeesh. Demi-gods. Jane let her mind drift away from the ever-present worry of how dangerous her current company was and let herself pretend that this was all a strange dream, complete with dream-Loki whose snark and snarl was much worse than his bite. “So how does the whole age thing work?”

One of the little chicks rested quietly in Loki’s hands. Two of them were tucked into Jane’s lap and the fourth one had somehow managed to climb or crawl or jump on to Jane’s shoulder. He calmly raised both eyebrows. “Excuse me?”

Huffing. “You’re centuries old, right?”

He tilted his head slightly in an affirmative motion. “I am a little more than a thousand years old, correct.”

Gaping. “O-okay…geez you’re well preserved.” He huffed in amusement and fixed his eyes on Indel swinging from a branch like a little monkey, blue tail swishing. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I mean, how do you age?” He glanced at her and wrinkled his nose just slightly in confusion even though his eyes were amused. “On Earth, uh Midgard, one year is an orbit around the sun. Childhood until we turn 18…how does it work for AEsir?”

He’d figured out what she meant well before now but, well, he was the God of Mischief after all and he liked to toy with people. “Ah. Well, Indel is a primary example. AEsir and elves have similar aging cycles. He is not quite four of your years and he resembles a mortal child of similar age. When he is perhaps five or six his growth will slow dramatically so that several decades will pass before he begins to appear older. As he gets old enough to enter his first proving ground as a warrior, I believe you call it a teenager, the rate of change will slow down even further so that almost a whole century can pass before he appears to age a year. For AEsir and elves, maturity occurs around…well it will be many centuries.”

He was dancing around something but she was too excited in learning to dwell. “How many?”

Waving a hand. “Thor. He is one hundred and fifty-two years older than me, but was a seven year old in appearance when I was but an infant.” Amusement tugged at his lip as he spoke. “Seven years later his little sibling was not so little.” His amusement faded when he realized where his train of thought was leading. “He was old enough for his coronation just before he was sent to
Thinking about how Earth royalty were usually crowned. “Huh…so Thor’s like 21 in human terms?”

Loki shrugged casually, answering honestly and not giving much thought to it at first. “Something to that effect…as adults our appearance of aging slows down even further. Someone with the appearance of a 40 years old will in actuality be over 4,000.”

She paused to look at him a little closer to see his expression slowly but completely close off. It didn’t take her more than a second of backwards math to realize that by AEsir standards he was a lot younger than she expected, possibly only 19, even though both he and Thor looked to be in their mid-twenties. She thought about asking, but it occurred to her by his lack of expression it would only end with him getting defensive and probably ruining her chances in learning about Asgard and the universe from him. Blinking. “What about your father?”

His stiff posture eased at her acceptance to his unspoken resistance. Yes, he was young for an Asgardian but compared to humans he was ancient. He was not about to be mocked for his youth by a mortal and he appreciated that she respected that. He appreciated it enough that he was willing to answer most of her questions truthfully. “Odin is more than 7,000 years old.” Jane’s eyes widened incredulously and Loki smirked. “Impressive, I know, even by our standards.” His smirk faded. “He is approaching the end of his reign, then Thor will take up the mantle and his first born will ascend… etcetera, etcetera.”

“How long—…I’m sorry.”

Waving his hand lightly, reciting what his mother had often told him. “Death is a part of life.” His voice softened, tinged with regret. “Considering the prevalence of his Odin Sleep, if he lives another century I will be surprised.” A worry had been rising steadily in the back of his mind that his anger had pushed to the side. Without mother, who would watch over him when next father slept? Certainly not Thor. The thunderer never did understand that a sleep not carefully monitored could lead to Odin drowning in his own power and slipping away quietly. Not at all a fitting death for such a great warrior.

Indel came bouncing up to them, holding a tree lizard in one hand. “Look what I found, da-…” He looked down at the lizard before scrunching up his face. “Da-a-da.”

Loki raised an eyebrow at his son’s whine. “Yes?”

“He pooped on me!”

Jane slapped a hand over her mouth to muffle her giggles as Loki sighed indulgently. “Let him go.” Indel visibly considered the merits of letting the gross lizard go as opposed to keeping him and opened his hand. The lizard dropped to the ground and scrambled away. All four chicks ‘peeped’ aggressively and gave chase, following the lizard into the forest. Indel moved to wipe his hand on his pants leg and Loki instantly caught him at the wrist. “Wash your hands.”

Indel pouted up at his father. “Magic it away?”

Jane slapped a hand over her mouth to muffle her giggles as Loki sighed indulgently. “Let him go.” Indel visibly considered the merits of letting the gross lizard go as opposed to keeping him and opened his hand. The lizard dropped to the ground and scrambled away. All four chicks ‘peeped’ aggressively and gave chase, following the lizard into the forest. Indel moved to wipe his hand on his pants leg and Loki instantly caught him at the wrist. “Wash your hands.”

Indel pouted up at his father. “Magic it away?”

Pushing him lightly towards the bathroom. “No. Wash your hands.” Indel pouted harder but stomped inside. Jane was frowning a little at him and Loki sighed before explaining. “If I indulged him he wouldn’t learn not to pick up everything within reach.”

The little chicks returned, one of them walking triumphantly with a lizard tail in its small
beak. The rest of the lizard had no doubt been devoured. Thankfully Jane’s back was to them but Loki made a mental note to upgrade their diet without telling her. He could already imagine her screaming if she found out what those ‘cute’ little chicks were going to turn into.

Her brow furrowed slightly, eyes full of curiosity. “Where would it go if you ‘magicked’ it away?”

Loki felt his lip curl, answering vaguely. “It depended on the spell I used.” She lifted a challenging eyebrow and he decided to indulge her curiosity. “The simple spells could apply water to it…or toss it into dimensional storage where it would decompose.”

Jane felt her eyes widen. *That was a simple spell?*

Loki continued on, not commenting on the stray thought from her he’d picked up. “If I wanted to be creative I could break it down into individual components…or perhaps just disperse it on an elemental level.”

She frowned thoughtfully as she asked. “Elemental level?”

He nodded slowly and clarified. “Yes, the water that we drink, the air that we breathe, it is comprised of life itself.”

Her brow furrowed to merge with the frown. “Molecules-atoms. You can break matter down to its individual molecules.” An evil little smirk curled Loki’s lip, as if he found her words amusing…but not that he found them wrong. Jane mentally shrugged and just decided to be blunt, her need to know overpowering her caution. She was in the presence of the expert, how could she pass up such an opportunity? Rubbing her hands together excitedly. “Magic.” He raised an eyebrow, intrigued by the brightness of her eyes. “What is it? How do you do it? How long did it take you to learn it—just, tell me everything.”

“Everything?” She nodded enthusiastically and he bared his teeth in a very wide, very evil smile.

Jane squeaked and grabbed ahold of the trunk as she felt her balance wobble. She couldn’t believe she’d exchanged the secrets of the universe for his insistence that she accompany them hunting. He was getting back at her for something, she just knew it. And granted, just on the few topics she’d gleaned from him had left her mind spinning in new and creative directions but was it worth this?

*Yes. Yes it was.* She also couldn’t believe he’d put some type of sleeping spell on the baby chicks but he’d been insistent that they would scare all the prey in the area away. The sound of hooves running echoed her sudden movements and she groaned. Or maybe he was a masochist because she was pretty sure she was noisier than the baby birds would have been.

She was going to get Loki yelling at her again if she kept this up. Indel frowned from his perch, blue tail flicking in irritation and hissing. “Stop moving.”

*Easy for him to say. Wait, he wasn’t even four. This was embarrassing.* Maybe she should just accept defeat and sit quietly in the cottage.

She eased her hold and moved her foot, squealing as she toppled and grabbed for the nearest branch. She clung to it, hanging upside down, and winced as another stampede ensued. There was a cracking sound, a tree toppling over, and a burst of loud words in a language she...
couldn’t understand but she knew that voice and she had a feeling he was swearing. At her, or at least about her.

“Uh oh. You’re in trouble.” Indel said that in such a way it just confirmed in her mind Loki was definitely swearing.

She squeaked again as the branch she clung to moved downward. She was suddenly nose to nose with a pissed off Loki, even if she was upside down. His eyes kept flashing green, lips pressed together so firmly they were white from the pressure. He talked through gritted teeth. “Get out of the tree, right now.”

Suddenly afraid for her life, she shook her head and clung stubbornly with arms and legs, squeezing her eyes shut. His head tilted slightly before he gripped the bark just in front of her and *snap*, the front of the branch disappeared and she knocked her chin into the rough bark as the limb jarringly moved up and down a few times. Ow. She felt his hand hold onto the limb near her stomach and with another *snap*, the entire branch fell.

She screamed, only to find herself held up by the branch and slung over his shoulder. Loki’s tone was clipped, barking the command. “Indel, let’s go.”

“But da-da.”

Struggling to keep his tone even, not sure if he was madder at her or himself at this point. “There is no conceivable possibility there is any game left in the vicinity, we will have to suffer lentil soup tonight.”

Indel jumped to the ground, lip out in a pout. “Lentils are icky!”

Loki growled back at the boy. “I know they are.”

Crossing his arms and following as his fur puffed up. “Stupid mortal!”

Loki froze and slowly turned to glare down at his son. “What did you say?”

Jane opened her eyes in surprise, knowing a ‘father’ tone when she heard it. Indel did as well and froze, large green eyes blinking before ducking his head. “Nothing.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed, deciding to address this because he was not getting his ass chewed out by G’dath when he can point the finger at someone else. “I do not speak that way, where did you hear that?”

Indel shrugged just a little and toed the ground. “The other kids in the village. They said mortals are stupid-and she is! We have to go hungry ‘cause she couldn’t be quiet!”

Jane’s brow furrowed in concern, gasping softly as Loki carefully swung her off his back and kept the descent slow enough that it didn’t hurt, her back resting on the ground and the branch cradled in her arms. He knelt down and held onto both of Indel’s arms. “First of all, you will not go hungry, we have enough honey for you tonight-…”

Indel’s chirping voice was full of distress. “But you need meat, too, you’ll go hungry!”

Loki felt his lips curl, Indel too young to understand the dark look flickering in his gray-green eyes. “I have gone a year without food before, I will be fine.”

“But you share with Azni and G’dath! They’ll go hungry!”
He chucked his boy’s chin. “Azni and G’dath eat vegetation more than meat, they will be alright tonight. Secondly, would you call a toddler stupid?”

Indel looked unsure. “No.”

“Well, humans are a little like toddlers. Until you teach them, they’re clumsy and make many mistakes but they do not do so to be mean…and Jane is by no means stupid.” It was also poor planning on his part. He’d dragged her along to torment her a little, knowing she was completely inept when it came to such activities. He hadn’t taught her anything and this was a lean season. It was his own fault they were going hungry because of his insistence in dragging her out when every kill right now counted.

Jane frowned silently, not sure she appreciated the comparison. There was an offhand compliment in there, but she could do without being compared to a toddler. Indel sighed softly. “Sorry.”

Loki quirked an eyebrow. “I am not the one you should be apologizing to.”

Indel tilted his head in Jane’s direction, lower lip sticking out slightly. “Sorry, Jane.”

Loki didn’t wait for her to gather herself together to reply. “Better.” Indel held up his arms and Loki picked him up with one hand. He glanced to see Jane still holding onto the branch and he couldn’t decide if her muscles had just locked that way because he’d scared her or if she was really just that stubborn. Shaking his head to himself, he picked the branch up with his free hand, ignored her gasp, and carried both of them home, grumbling to himself the entire way. “…how is this even my life…this is the Norns getting even for every prank I ever pulled…better punishment than anything Odin could have conceived…”

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OUTSIDE OF THE NINE REALMS

Malekith turned his gaze away from the distant cities burning in ruin, watching the turquoise skies fill heavily with smoke and ash, blocking out the cursed light from the distant devil stars the planet orbited around. He smiled and it was a terrible sight. Soon the end would come and once more the darkness would return. He eagerly anticipated that moment.

Thanos was having a few of his ever present mercenaries line the surviving citizens in front of one another, using one of the weapons he created to accumulate cosmic energies in an attempt to kill them all in one shot. It wasn’t the most imaginative method he’d seen but he wasn’t going to mention it. Since Lady Death had yet to appear apparently she wasn’t impressed either. He had to keep reminding himself to be patient. He’d waited this long, what was a little longer? He glanced down at his arm and felt the familiar rush of anger. At the audacity of Odinson. At Asgard. And yes, at Thanos. If the titan had a single brain cell in his skull he would have yanked him back from present to past while he still possessed the Aether. That would have made sense. But no, Thanos didn’t utilize his brilliant invention until after Malekith had been defeated and seconds from death. One instant there, his death assured and the Aether lost, the next he was yanked back in time by several years and across distant space to a scorched asteroid and unable to change his defeat.

Something crunched under his boot as he walked. A rock? A skull? It made no difference. The Skrulls dug furiously, already ten feet down and making impressive headway. Supposedly the Gem of Reality was here. He had his doubts but he wasn’t about to utter them out loud. Thanos already had the Gem of Souls and the Gem of Power. Once he had the third, he would make his move to attack Asgard and Midgard.
The dark elf paced and the Skrulls toiled. Beneath the layers of thousands of years of dirt and sediment was a thick lining of rock that would take them a month to break through. Beneath that was an entrance to a set of maze-like catacombs that would take them even longer to navigate.

In the furthest chamber, covered in cobwebs and dust, a marble pedestal stood erect in the center with a card lying neatly where once the Reality Gem had been displayed. It might be Loki’s writing. It might be Hela’s since the two had identical penmanship.

_The thought of being outmaneuvered by a mere Jötunn runt must burn._

_See you in Asgard,_

_Loki_

Author's Notes:

_Since we still have some hungry readers out there I'll post another chapter. Grab a fork!!_

Next:

_Hela and Thor...squabble; Indel pouts_
Thor looked around with a frown, the familiar runes under his feet left by the Bi-frost on the desert of New Mexico. Where to begin his search was the question. Son of Fury? One of the Avengers? Frowning, he turned as he felt an odd sensation. Magic. He didn’t have the ability to use it but centuries fighting alongside Loki had left him sensitive to it. Familiar, but quite a distance away. Why is Hela on Midgard? Swinging Mjolnir quickly, he threw himself into the skies to talk to her.

She appeared on top of a building in a large city he was unfamiliar with, he navigating to land carefully enough to not damage the roof. She didn’t even turn around to look at him. “What are you doing here, Thor?”

He kept Mjolnir in his hand, not because he was concerned about her attacking him, but to discover her purpose so he could quickly return to his own. “I have been sent on a mission.”

Odin was ever so predictable. “Obviously.” She waited a beat but he said nothing further, looking around with a frown. Sighing a second later when nothing more was forthcoming and asking him. “What is your quest?”

He turned his attention back to her. “The All-father commands the return of an infinity gem currently on this planet. I am here to find it and I will succeed.”

Tilting her head slightly, lip twitching. “What…is your favorite color?”

“Green.” Then he frowned at her. “Why do you ask, niece?”

She smirked, knowing he knew nothing about popular human culture, nor the genius that was Monty Python. “No reason. Why couldn’t you just say all of that to begin with?”

“You did not ask.” Thor’s reply was as if it were an obvious answer. “Why are you on Midgard, niece?”

Hela crossed her eyes in exasperation. She loved them but the AEsir were a headache inducing breed. Ignoring his question. “Which of the infinity gems are you searching for?”

“You have knowledge of the gems?”

She shrugged loosely before she answered. As if Odin was the only one who knew about the gems. “I, like my father before me, know a lot of things about many things. Six gems in total…blah, blah, blah…”

Thor frowned at her, distracted. “You talk so strangely niece.”

Shrugging again, studying her nails before flicking the digits outward. “I’ve been here for a while, unlike you I adapt.”

He took a second glance at her, just now realizing she was in a human form. She, like Loki, was very skilled at changing her shape at will. Not that he’d taken a great notice, even as children when Loki would sometimes spend days as a little girl instead of a little boy…although when his brother had decided to be a fox for several months that had gotten his attention. He sighed softly, saddened. It was why hearing the truth that Loki was Jötunn had done little to phase him. He
had loved who his brother was, it had never mattered to him what Loki chose to look like. “I seek the mind gem. I will journey to the man of iron’s tower. He is a much learned man and I am confident he will help me locate it.”

No doubt Tony Stark already knew where the scepter was. It wouldn’t take him long to realize the mind gem and Loki’s scepter were one in the same. Which would lead them back to New Mexico, possibly flushing the Other out since that was ultimately what he was after. All this other nonsense in stirring up the council and the layers of discord the Other had orchestrated within humanity were just for his amusement. If Thor died at that creature’s or Thanos’ hands it would ruin everything. If Thor killed the Other before Loki had the opportunity the trickster would never forgive his brother for stealing his revenge and would likely leave the nine realms in a snit.

And the day had been going so well. Hela shook her head once, voice firm. “No, you won’t.”

“Yes, niece, I shall.”

Crossing her arms over her chest. “No, uncle, you will not.”

“You know where it is.” She raised a single eyebrow at him. Of course she knew. Part of her job was to make sure it stayed right where it was. He crossed his own arms and glared. “The Allfather commands for its return, Hela.”

Hela stopped breathing for several heartbeats, staring through Thor before blinking slowly. He commands me? He commands ME? Who in Helheim did Thor think he was talking to? Snarling lowly at him. “I hardly think you or he is in any position to order me around.”

Rumbling with authority. “He is the king of Asgard—…”

Snapping at him. “So what?”

Pointing Mjolnir at her. “You will show him respect.” Slowly that eyebrow inched up. Odin and Thor lost the right to order her around a long time ago. “I have been charged with a duty and this gem is clearly dangerous to the inhabitants here. I have no wish to hurt you, niece, just tell me where it is.”

He hurt her? Oh that was absolutely adorable. Purring as she asked a simple question that was very dangerous to answer incorrectly. “Is that an order, prince?”

“Aye.”

Eyes flashing emerald. “Who are you to order me?” Hela snatched away his voice with an impatient gesture. “If you say prince of Asgard, I say so what. I am not AEsir, and no longer welcome in your golden kingdom. Nor am I a cowering princess who must obey her elder. I am a Queen you ignorant gorilla. Queen of Niflheim. Queen of Helheim. Goddess of the Underworld. I am your superior and not even your father, who is a king, would be so foolish as to attempt to order me to do anything, particularly while not on his own lands. Nor do we stand on Asgardian soil. It is not yours by conquest or default. Midgard is under protection alone and none of these people owe you allegiance or genuflect, so bite me! I can say, however, that the gem is safe and sound for now and only at the appropriate time and in the appropriate manner will it be leaving this surface. Now, since you have succeeded in testing my temper I think that you should go home and learn some manners.”

Her hand relaxed and Thor audibly growled. “You are only as strong as Loki ever was.
Do not force me to defeat you in battle-"

Her green eyes narrowed. “Battle?” Voice rising in pitch as her outrage spiked. “Do you truly believe you have any hope in defeating me??” Eyes flashing again as a rumble traveled through the ground and dozens of car alarms went off, obviously insulted as she growled back. “You have two choices, Thor, and I do not suggest the latter. The choice is to leave under your own power—or not.” A deadly little smile pulled at her lips. “And yes, I am only as powerful as father i-was.”

Thor hefted Mjolnir upwards. “Might will always triumph over tricks.”

Her tone flat, no expression on her face. “Tricks.” Oh, look…there went her temper.

Hela shook her head slowly while cracking her knuckles. She found it foolish of uncle to not realize while Loki had been disadvantaged on Asgard with only books as his guide she had more than five hundred years of learning the spells and tactics of the dead magic users of Helheim and Niflheim up to and including the likes of Morgana La Fey. Not to mention she’d fully embraced the Jötunn side of her heritage two hundred years ago, a secret she kept from Loki for him to discover for himself. Hela’s eyes flashed red, smiling and showing off her sharply pointed teeth as her skin flushed blue.

Thor didn’t even have enough time for the unease he was feeling to cross his face. She flashed from point to point, a coat of ice spreading under his feet just enough for his balance to wobble. With two hands she enhanced her own strength, grabbed an ankle, and hurled him into a neighboring building. She stood tall, watching and waiting. Within seconds Thor came flying out, Mjolnir out front and ready to strike her in the chest.

She smirked and disappeared in a puff of smoke, Thor roaring as he went sailing through where she had been. Down into the streets he went, flipping and using his heels to slow to a stop, pavement chewed up in parallel lines in his wake.

Spinning around, eyes searching. “Tricks, Hela! Nothing but treacherous illusion. In an honorable fight, you would be defeated.”

Her voice whispered through the air. “So you would have a fight without magic?”

Glaring at nothing. “Aye!”

“Very well.” She appeared in front of him ten feet away, in full Jötunn form just as Mjolnir became so impossibly heavy it dented the street as it hit. Thor tried to lift his hammer before looking back up at her in shock. She shrugged and idly eyed her fingers, the nails sharp, black points. “Your little toy is uru, a magical metal. Next time be careful when you choose your words with me.”

Jaw set in determination. “I do not require a hammer to best you in honorable combat.”

A gleam leapt into Hela’s eyes. He had met and easily defeated the Jötunns of Jötunheim, but then none of them had been female. Thor was in for a rude awakening at just how strong the female of the species was. A small, viciously evil little smile pulled at Hela’s lips, revealing sharp teeth.

ALFHEIM

Jane was actually starving and the soup was delightful but she noticed that Loki didn’t even bother making a bowl for himself and Indel just played with his before sighing and quickly finishing as fast as possible. He pushed the empty bowl away, pouting. “Is it not any good?” Not that
she was terribly surprised. There weren’t many children who liked their vegetables.

Indel glanced at her before sighing again and shrugging. “It keeps my tummy full.”

She frowned lightly. “But vegetables are good for growing boys.”

It was Loki’s turn to sigh. “Would you feed carrots to a wolf?”

Jane gave him a look. “No, but wolves are carnivorous.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “So are we.”

She made a face at him. “I’ve seen what Asgardian’s eat, Loki. You guys may eat a lot more than me but it was all pretty normal looking.”

He made an irritated noise and turned to her fully. If he had his way she would never find out what he was but that didn’t mean he would concede her point. “The AEsir are not mortals and do not follow the same rules in many respects to weak, mortal constitutions. Asgard is not home to just AEsir, for my mother was Vanir. We may all appear to look the same to you but I promise you that there are differences in my origins that make protein vital. Even without that consideration, Indel is an elf so yes, he is carnivorous.”

Loki stalked outside, grabbing a jar and a couple of spoons as he went. Jane nibbled on her lower lip. He’d been the one to insist she come but she was feeling a little bit guilty. Should she apologize? Indel grinned and scrambled after him, the door partially closing behind them. She watched Loki climb onto the awning over the porch and Indel follow after him. Frowning, she took the empty bowls to the sink and stepped onto the porch, wrapping a blanket around her. She could see Loki dipping a spoon into a jar of honey and offer it to Indel. The boy grinned and shook his head and Loki sent him a mock glare. But Indel wasn’t even four just yet, the boy’s name day a month away, he could indulge him. Fingers charging with a light amount of green energy, he dipped two fingers in the honey and immediately relinquished the digits to Indel who sucked on the honey as contentedly as he did as an infant.

Shrugging to himself, Loki polished off the spoonful of honey, setting it to the side as he kept his eyes and ears alert for any sign of prey. He was hungry enough he’d hunt in the middle of the night if he had to. Just because he was capable of surviving without food didn’t mean he was eager to do so. A year of tumbling through the abyss and Thanos and the Other and Midgard had shown him his limits. He could survive a long time without eating, not that it was a pleasant experience, but Indel was too young. Indel tugged at his hand and he obediently dipped them again.

Jane watched Loki in silent fascination as his mouth opened ever so slightly, pulling in a short breath and tongue running along the roof of his mouth. She couldn’t be sure without asking him, but she wondered if he was actually scenting by taste. What a fantastic ability if it were true. It would certainly explain what an adept hunter he was. She shivered as the temperature started to drop and a cool breeze tickled her neck, retreating back inside.

By the time Indel was full and sleepy, Loki was pensively worried. Nothing anywhere near here. He was going to have to hunt in the under-forest, not a place to be taken for granted. Not even if Indel were 200 years old would he take his son there and Jane was absolutely out of the question.

“Dada?”

Loki answered Indel absently, his focus already on what tomorrow would bring. “Hmm?”
“Are we hunting tomorrow?”

Loki’s brow furrowed, blinking once before sighing and answering his son. “No, tomorrow you and Jane will be staying with Azni.”

The little boy’s head lifted, suspicion in his eyes as he asked, “Why?”

The mage kept his tone innocent. “Because I need to travel light so I can be back by nightfall.”

Indel made a protesting noise and pouted hard. He always got to go hunting unless he was in trouble. “I won’t slow you down! She’s the slow one, dada!”

Loki sighed again but decided the truth would have to be told, knowing he wasn’t going to have much of a choice since Azni would insist on knowing before he went. “The herds have moved on so I will have to track through the under-forest.”

Indel’s eyes widened in horror. “No!”

“Indel-…”

The boy was shaking like a leaf, fingers formed a death grip in Loki’s tunic and tears trickled down his cheeks. “Pat’l had a dada and his dada died there-NO!”

Loki pulled Indel to his chest and swayed lightly. “And I am Indel’s father, I will be just fine.” Indel whimpered and Loki shushed him, rubbing his palm up and down Indel’s back. “Shh…I am fully capable of slipping between the cracks of reality and dancing amongst the stars, nothing in the forest can harm me when I am careful…and for you I will be.” Little hands wrapped desperately into his tunic and he gently moved his fingers over the tips of Indel’s ear in a soothing rhythm. “Indel, I can and have gone a year without food, the rest of you cannot. We have no meat and our honey is exhausted, there is no choice.”

Indel’s voice wavered as he pleaded. “I want to come.”

Loki maintained a firm but gentle tone. “Absolutely not.”

Hiccupping. “I can help.”

“No.”

His young voice now teeny-tiny. “…please?”

Loki had never had such a hard time forming a single word like he did now after that tone. “No.” It was the quiet defiance that Loki sensed that had him saying anything further. “Indel, I have never had to truly punish you but if you follow me…I will. Do you understand me?” The boy was disturbingly quiet, much like himself when he was young. The only difference is what Odin accepted as compliance he knew to be plotting. “Indel. I do not care if the Valkyries pick you up from Azni’s home and deposit you in my arms, if I discover you came anywhere near where I have forbidden you, sound punishment will await you.”

Indel wilted with tears in his eyes, burrowing under Loki’s jacket until he was partially hidden. “Dada… please come back. Don’t leave me, dada…”

Loki smiled sadly, knowing that Indel had no idea why he was so afraid of being abandoned. It was the same as his boy’s desperate need to be carried whenever possible. An
instinctual fear, ingrained in his young mind because of his being stolen from him as a newborn. A
human infant would have no memory of such an event…but Indel wasn’t human.

Odin would have insisted Indel was old enough to stand on his own two feet. His father
might have even said that indulging Indel would only make him soft. That Indel wouldn’t be a
proper warrior being coddled. But Frigga would encourage Loki to be the father that Indel needed,
rather than what AEsir society demanded.

As was often the case, Loki used his mother as the example for how to be a good parent.
Loki hugged Indel as he rocked, kissing away his tears until he was resting against his chest tiredly
with an unhappy moan. “Would you feel better if Mischief stays with you, too?” Indel nodded
quietly, looking hopeful. “Very well, but I want you on your very best behavior for Azni, do not
encourage him to run amuck.” Not that Mischief required much encouragement.

Indel yawned. “Okay…”

Standing up and flashing down to the ground, speaking softly. “Bed time.”

Little fingers tightening their hold. “Not without you.”

Loki rubbed his back, turning with Indel safely tucked in his arms. “Oh, I will be joining
you. We will be leaving early.”

MIDGARD

Hela dragged an unconscious man by his boot with one hand, his armor leaving deep
grooves in the sand and his arms limply dragged along with his red cape. She felt sorry for the
humans in Illinois. She’d tried to keep the damage localized and thankfully it was just property
damage. Not so much as a single splinter had befallen the screaming bystanders. Plus now they had a
good excuse to repave downtown Chicago. And the five buildings she’d demolished with a Thor
shaped imprint were abandoned anyway.

There was no reason that could be seen physically for why he was unconscious. Not so
much as a bruise remained on his skin. Odin would have to retrieve Mjolnir later because she wasn’t
even going to bother trying. The wind disturbed the dry earth, whipping a cloud of it around them as
she dragged Thor into the runed circle at the Bi-frost site.

She released her hold, his thick boot thumping to the ground as she dusted off her hand,
and placed two black envelopes on top of his chest before stepping outside the circle and looking up.
She knew Heimdall was watching, and probably worried. She flashed him a smile and spoke softly.
“Odin needs to work on his parenting skills and Thor needs a lesson in manners. And tell him from
me the note is a promise, not a threat.”

She turned and disappeared, a few seconds before the Bi-frost opened to bring Prince Thor
home.

ASGARD

Odin looked in confusion from Thor who lay unconscious on the observatory floor, to
Heimdall who had requested his presence. Not in all the centuries of Thor’s battles had he ever been
knocked unconscious. And from what he could sense, it was an impressively strong spell to keep
him that way. The tall man was almost tentatively holding out a black envelope pressed with a red
seal. He noticed the Gatekeeper had one of his own. Sighing, he took and opened it…and made a
Dearest Darling Odin,

First of all, father and I know he’s your favorite but please teach Thor some manners. It wouldn’t hurt if you brushed up on them yourself, particularly the parts about practicing what you preach.

Second of all, since he FINALLY got around to chatting with you about the binding bracelets…what in Helheim is wrong with you?? I know you don’t have any respect for the powers you have but you couldn’t have asked grandmother her opinion on the matter? Do you have any idea what I would have done to the people you pledged your life to protect if he’d died?

Lastly, timing is everything and the gem stays right where it is until I decide it moves. Do not send Thor back down here until he learns how to properly address his betters if you wish him the ability to produce an heir one day. The penalty today is a bruised ego and a day unconscious. Next time I will turn him into a ball-less gecko. And though you will no doubt be able to return him to AEsir form not even father (yes I know you are aware he is alive and well) will be able to grow them back for him.

Lots of Love,

Hela

Why did he start having children? He supposed it could be worse. All three of them squabbling would be worse. He frowned to himself. How did Hela know about his conversation with Thor concerning the bracelets? He supposed since she was the one who brought it to Thor’s attention he’d mentioned it but Odin was doubtful. A breeze whipped around him, a hint of lilac in the air. He was very familiar with that scent, it one of Frigga’s favorites. And suddenly he knew. Frigga. His late wife was gone but that didn’t mean she wasn’t watching. Frigga was in Valhalla and Hela was Queen of the Underworld. She may not be the guardian over Valhalla but the two women could much more easily engage in conversation now than when Frigga had been alive.

He was far too old for all of this. Odin glanced at Heimdall who showed the letter in his envelope, a series of dates of who would be permitted to go where and when. Struggling to keep his tone even. “I was unaware she now controls my Bi-frost.”

Heimdall’s deep voice resonated within the observatory. He was the bravest man Odin had ever met but there was a definite difference between bravery and stupidity, and the Gatekeeper was not stupid. “The Queen of Helheim has her father’s temper, sire. Would you suggest I act in any way beyond her command?”

Pride demanded retaliation and confrontation. As he was several thousand years older than her, her capitulation should be the only permissible recourse. But he wasn’t stupid either. “Considering neither of them have ever failed to follow through on a threat…no.”

“She requested I inform you it was a promise, not a threat.”

A familiar sigh of exasperation that was usually reserved for Loki escaped him. Of course it was. And it wasn’t an idle one, either. He was going to have to talk to that child about her temper.
But she had the same temper Loki did so he supposed he should just wait and lecture them as a pair. Although he could already picture the response, since they both would argue that they’d inherited his temper and wasn’t it hypocritical of him to lecture them when he failed to control his own.

*Why did I begin having children?* Glancing at a young page boy. “Summon Eir and the healers to transport Prince Thor.” Sighing tiredly as the boy ran off, mumbling to himself. “…this is going to be a long week.”

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**Author's Notes:**

This is one of my favorite chapters, mostly because it was so much fun to write. Do you have any idea how much I would pay for something like this to be cannon.

Can't happen. Won't happen. **sigh**

**Next:**

Jane meets Mischief; Hela chats with the sister fates
MIDGARD

The little café near Greenwich Village was a rather unassuming eatery in New York but it did have some rather divine curry. Hela was not prone to indulge in cuisines of other worlds but this particular treat she always made an exception for. “Milady.”

She smiled slightly and held out a hand towards the empty seat across from her. As the mortal sat she crooked a finger and a waiter hurried over. “Do try the duck, Stephen, it is one of the few reasons I visit this planet.”

Doctor Stephen Strange noticed the waiter didn’t even twitch at the wording of her suggestion and nodded graciously. “That will be fine, and some tea, please.”

No pleasantries or preamble. He placed the small brown box on the table, intricate spells in place to contain the power within. At the time her request that he leave earth to retrieve the infinity gem had made perfect, logical sense. She had supplied the means for him to go and volunteered to stay behind. Now that he was again on earth his easy capitulation to her request made less sense.

Hela ignored the confusion she could see plaguing him. Compulsion spells were ever so useful, and mixed with her own brand of persuasion made her irresistible to most species. Hela lifted the lid with a flick of her finger before extracting the citrine colored gem. Dr. Strange didn’t even flinch, watching as intricate silver metal wrapped around the gem to hold it, a long chain attached. She glanced up at him. “I trust Thanos is none the wiser.”

She slipped the necklace over her head, the yellowish colored gem flashing before quieting against her pale skin. Anyone else in possession of the Gem of Reality would make him afraid for the billions of lives he was responsible for on this planet. But this was not just anyone. This was death herself, who already held such sway. If anyone were to be the right protector for this gem she was the perfect choice.

“Considering the amount of searching he has ahead of him, it will be several months before they realize the gem is gone and move for Asgard.” Frowning as his tea arrived, asking her softly. “How will you ensure that evil being will not come here?”

Hela took a careful bite of her duck. “There are two reasons that Thanos will focus on Midgard first. If both the Mind Gem and the Avengers are not on this planet, there will be only one place he will go.”

“I will not be able to assist you in this matter. This planet needs my protection.”

She shrugged casually. “I do not ask you to, I acquired your assistance for a different reason.”

His duck arrived and she was right, it tasted divine. He glanced at her curiously, voice polite as he inquired. “Which would be?”

“Discord runs rampant on this planet, and the effect is cumulative. It is like a small ball of snow in the palm of your hand. Harmless. But let it slowly roll from the top of a mountain and it forms an avalanche of power and destruction. Sending you off world will limit its effects on you for a time. Perhaps long enough for me to do something about it. Plus I thought it only fair for you to warn the Avengers to stay out of my way.” Hela’s green eyes flashed. “I will put them in traction if I
have to, but these machines will be destroyed one way or another.”

Stephen frowned, lips pressed tightly as he asked, “What machines?”

It was actually a fairly well executed plan. No doubt Thanos had created them, placed here by the Other, but now they worked independently. Then he and his minions spread out to keep the momentum of paranoia going. What better way to defeat your enemy than to make it impossible for them to fight together? Holding out her hand, a mystical outline of one hovering above her skin appeared. “Technology advanced far beyond your capabilities by centuries. It channels cosmic energy as its initial fuel source, now it is sustained by the psychic effect. Mistrust. Discord.”

“And the root cause?”

_Oh, the irony of it all._ “Lies. Whether they are innocent little white lies or whoppers doesn’t matter, since it always takes more lies to maintain them. It attacks on both a psychic and magical level. Few will be able to avoid its pull, save perhaps myself.” Smirking as she explained. “And that is mostly because I do not trust your people anyway. For their own sake, I would like you to warn SHIELD not to interfere. Once I have pinpointed all six I already have the assistance I need to turn them off.”

“And this other assistance is trustworthy?”

Hela smiled at the almost fatherly tone. Laughable considering he wasn’t terribly old for a mortal and she was (if you counted Loki’s childhood as her own) almost 20 times older than him. “He is an advanced human who remains immune.”

His duck finished, Stephen held the tea cup and took slow sips. “Not Magneto.”

Blinking before chuckling softly. “No. Erik has an impressive physical ability but he is just as susceptible… perhaps even more so given his current paranoia. No, Charles I found to be a much better choice, deliciously powerful, and easily convinced since it would benefit your kind.”


Finishing off her own tea, Hela reached into the ether for Midgardian currency and held out a small wad of it. Strange almost choked as the server was quick to take it since it was well over a thousand dollars. That certainly explained why the staff here didn’t even flinch with Hela’s strange talk. “Well, I must depart. No rest for the wicked and all that.”

Putting down his cup. “I must ask. Are the stories true?”

Hela was already standing, sliding on a black coat with silver trim over her red dress. “Which ones?”

“There are ancient tales that you and Loki are related.”

She adjusted the gem around her neck and watched him with piercing eyes, waiting for him to get to the point. “Perhaps.”

“I have heard rumors of his death…and I wondered about Ragnarok.”

She smirked bitterly and shook her head as she asked herself. “Does everybody know about that?”

Taking her question as rhetorical and continuing, “If it were truly a prophecy then there
would be no possibility he could be dead.”

Her voice deepened, the sense of danger sharpened. All this time, it had hovered as an afterthought in the air. A tame wolf sleeping in the corner. Tame, perhaps, but never domestic. The danger had teeth now. “You would be wise to contain your curiosity.”

Jaw tightening, warning in his tone. “If he returns to subjugate this world I will defend it.”

Baring her teeth and retorting. “Why Stephen, you make it sound as if you have even a chance against him.”

Arrogance in his poise as he raised an eyebrow. “I am the Sorcerer Supreme for a reason.”

Leaning in a little. “And we are mages, silly mortal. A sorcerer is but a child with a stick compared to the weapons we wield. The only creature who has a chance to defeat him in a magical battle is me, and I am not inclined to even try.” She walked around the table slowly, leaning down to nudge against his temple with her own and arms loose around him. He stiffened, but didn’t fight her, as she spoke softly. “I will tell you something more since you have done me a favor. If he were truly dead after living the kind of life he’d been given… I would have unleashed my army of the dead on the living.” Head turning, her lips lightly brushing his skin. “You should all pray against that day, because if I succeed in my scheme…there will never be Ragnarok.”

“Why would…” Stephen paled, realizing what she meant. Without Ragnarok, there would be no opportunity to start again. The universe would simply come to an end.

Hela cackled mentally. She loved playing evil and she was ever so good at it. Would she have any remorse in punishing the living? No. Was she planning to destroy the universe if the cycle of Ragnarok was broken? No. Still, it was better to let this little sorcerer know just how viciously she would protect Loki.

She smirked in amusement as she stood and turned. She read the understanding, disappeared, and her voice echoed in her wake. “You’re clever for a mortal.”

ALFHEIM

Jane’s jaw flopped open when Mischief appeared from behind Loki. She knew that face. The boy had a little more growing to do but she could easily see the same nose and the cheekbones he would grow into. She might have dismissed him for a simple illusion if he wasn’t leaning into Loki, his weight moving Loki’s jacket. She kept looking back and forth from one to the other before the boy looked up at his adult self. “I like her, Loki, she’s funny.”

Pointing and stuttering. “Wha-…y-…n-…uh, wait, I-…”

It took effort not to smile. It took even more effort not to let himself get sidetracked with thoughts of how he could accomplish inspiring her to do it again. Loki rolled his eyes and turned her around, hands lightly on her shoulders to steer her. The little chicks, having grown in size but thankfully not in volume, followed silently after. Indel had climbed onto Mischief’s back and the two of them were already whispering conspiringly. Sarcasm dripping as he spoke. “His name is Mischief. Just treat him like a very small Loki and you will survive the day. If all else fails, Azni will be able to keep you alive.”

The path was easy enough to follow, a small house soon coming into view. Azni was already standing in front of her gate, looking everyone over. How does she always know? Jane’s steps stuttered, brown eyes wide as she took in the adult elf who was smiling that small little elf smile
of amusement. It was that ancient feeling of intimidating power that swept over her that faltered her steps, the exact same feeling when she encountered Odin for the first time.

She blinked at the mortal, lip twitching, before focusing elsewhere. Loki silently gave Azni an assessing glance even though he hid it. Elves fell into two categories: those that tolerated mortals, and those that didn’t. If he was just leaving for a few hours he’d have Jane and Mischief watch Indel but the under-forest was far enough and dangerous enough that he would be lucky if he was back by nightfall with anything to show for it. He was relieved to see no lingering animosity in Azni’s eyes. He was almost positive Jane meeting G’dath wouldn’t go nearly as smoothly, simply because G’dath was a passionate woman. Azni looked at everyone thoroughly before a chiding look crossed her face as she focused on Loki. Well if she already knew then he certainly didn’t feel like explaining himself. “Azni, I truly need to go.”

Her eyes shot down when one of the chicks ‘peeped’, brown orbs widening in horror before turning to glare mildly at Loki who put a finger to his lips, standing out of Jane’s eye sight. Hands slowly on her hips. “And you will return before nightfall?”

Relieved that she wasn’t going to bring them up. “Yes, and I will wash behind my ears, too.” She swatted at him and he dodged, grinning as he kissed her lightly on the cheek. “You are a saint.” Jane stared at Loki with wide-eyed surprise. Mentally he rolled his eyes. “Jane, this is Azni.” He frowned slightly as she continued to stare at him, as frozen as a statue. “Breathe.” Jane sucked in a sudden breath and he turned towards Indel to hide the wide smile spreading across his face. He didn’t even bother to separate them, simply wrapping both boys up in a hug until they were both squirming. A kiss to Indel’s head and Loki started off. “Mischief. Indel. Behave yourselves. Jane, do try not to offend anyone while I’m away.” Jane inhaled sharply and turned to glare at his back. With conviction she firmly decided she wasn’t apologizing to him for anything. “Azni, you have full authority over them.”

He disappeared around the corner and the two boys shared a look. Azni smiled gently and took a still stunned Jane’s hand, leading her past the gate before calling over her shoulder. “Boys, come help an old woman set the table.” The boys froze mid-step, about to slip away into the town. Both had their heads down, Indel still riding on Mischief’s back as he followed her with trudging steps.

Jane felt like her head was swimming, her thoughts running around like scared jack rabbits. Azni moved a chair out for her, helping her sit as Indel and Mischief gathered plates and silverware, whispering to one another. Her hands still shaking, still staring at the make-believe child like one would a cobra. “That’s Loki.”

Azni smiled kindly. “Did you have an imaginary friend as a child, dear?”

Chewing on her lower lip, distracted from her shock. “Um…not really, no. I used to make up stories about all the different planets in the universe. I would find a star and imagine an inhabited planet and what a little girl would be like out there.”

Azni went into the kitchen to retrieve drinks for everyone. “Well, lots of children have imaginary friends. They find a doll or a rock and they imagine that their friend can be told all their secrets, and eventually they outgrow it. But a mage is an entirely different creature.” She returned with tea for them and milk for the children. “Little mages that are clever enough to create their imaginary friends do not outgrow them. They are always there, but it is a good thing for them. Little tricksters without friends to help them spread their pranks around become…unhappy.”

Jane shook her head, blowing lightly on her tea. “Do I even want to know why he’s called Mischief?”
“I am certain you will learn soon enough. Boys, find a chair at the table, please.”

Talia soundlessly slid down the banister and slipped into a chair across from the two boys, playing with a spoon silently. Jane was still trying to wrap her mind around the impossibility of a creation that was solid and worked independently of its creator. “How is he able to interact without Loki here??”

Azni’s brow furrowed as she tried to put into words what little she knew on the matter. Having grown up on Alfheim it was far easier for her to accept Mischief’s existence than most others. “He’s magic, Jane. And he’s very old magic. After a while, magic has a mind all its own. Mischief, please put the sugar down or Indel will not be the only little boy taking a nap today.”

Talia grinned and stuck her tongue out at Mischief who immediately retaliated. Pouting at Azni. “I don’t sleep. And I’m not little, I’m over a thousand!”

Moving to stroke her palm across his left temple gently. “And I am almost ten times your age, Loki is just as much a little boy to me as you are.”

Mischief’s eyes were huge, green emeralds sparkling from a pale face. “Wow.”

Indel bounced in his chair. “Are we having eggs?”

Azni nodded slowly. “You and Mischief are.” A glance at Talia who nodded quickly. “As is Talia. Jane, what would you like?”

Shrugging, still distracted. “Whatever you are having is fine.”

Mischief frowned a little, looking up at the older elf. “I do not wish to use up all of your supplies, Azni, I am not technically real.”

Jane gaped and almost screamed. “He’s self-aware enough to know he isn’t real??”

He flashed Jane an irritated look, green eyes sparking. “He is sitting right here and yes, he is.”

Azni’s voice pulled the boy’s attention away from the mortal who had seriously put her foot in her mouth. “You expend your strength to be here independent of Loki, do you not?”

Squirming. “Um…”

Tapping the underside of his chin gently, smiling. “You will eat.” Turning, Azni gave Jane a reproaching look, who had the good grace to blush in embarrassment. “You should learn caution, dear…this is not Midgard. Much of what you see is not as it appears, and the realms are much more dangerous than you realize.”

Mischief frowned. “I thought you didn’t have magic.”

Smiling a little. “I may not be able to do all the wonderful things you and Loki can do, but I am old enough to know the rules.”

“Huh.” He shrugged. “Makes sense.”

It didn’t take Jane too long to relax around Azni, who just seemed to naturally have a soothing presence. She couldn’t, however, relax around an impossible magical creation called Mischief. Those eyes were so intimidating, even from a young face. Perhaps it was because his face
was so young that those cautious, searching, knowing eyes were almost frightening. “Why are you still afraid of us?”

She was curled up in a chair, an actual English translated book in her lap. Both Indel and Talia were sleeping in a bed on the other side of the room for an afternoon nap. Waving her hand lightly at Mischief. “I’m not afraid of you.”

He nodded slowly. “Yes, you are. We both frighten you, although I think you might be afraid of me more, why?”

As perceptive as his creator. Closing her book and deciding she might as well try to be honest. “Because you’re pure magic and I don’t understand how you can be here.”

“Hmm…” He sighed and his thin shoulders slumped, moving to the bed. “I wish humans had the words for it but the concept is beyond you. Your mortality makes you too limited. You never live long enough to ‘see’. Do not feel bad. Most AEsir cannot ‘see’ either.” He shrugged again, hand moved over Indel’s head who was sleeping peacefully. Talia was snuggled on the opposite side of the elfling.

“Try me.”

Mischief looked her over for a moment, measured the determined gleam in her eye and spoke. “How are you alive?”

“What?”

A crooked smile curled his lip. “Not in the classic sense of genetics or creation but more base than that. Two people make a baby but what is that spark of life? How life is sustained, yours and anyone else’s, is the basic principle for how I live. Imagine a tree. A mighty tree. And on its branches hang fruit. The life. Energy. Magic, that flows through that tree are what sustain the fruit. Only the fruit are the different realms. Magic sustains everything and Loki is more closely tied to that magic than most. The best way to describe me is that he borrowed a small bit of that cosmic energy, tied it to his own magic, and gave me his personality, frozen in childhood. I’m sentient because Loki wants me to be that way, and self-aware because magic chose to keep me that way, but even with all that I’ve seen and lived I cannot exist without him.”

Did my head just explode because…wow. On an intellectual level what he said made sense, but it did nothing to answer the question of how. It also did nothing to reassure her because if the trickster was capable of something as monumental as that, then she wondered what else he was capable of. “I’m not afraid of Loki.”

His eyebrow slowly rose. “But you’re afraid of what he will do.”

“Any sane person would be.”

Mischief shrugged loosely. “Azni isn’t afraid of him. Neither is G’dath.”

“Good for them.”

Sighing again, Mischief stepped lightly from the edge of the bed to a window sill and leaned there in a lazy pose as if his position wasn’t impossible. He was quiet for several minutes, thinking, before seemingly deciding something. “I am going to give you the best present imaginable mortal, so don’t expect me to ever give you anything for your name day.”

Murmuring to herself. “Name day?”
“Does Loki ever grin for you?”

Jane blinked several times in confusion. “What?”

Amusement tugged at the corner of his mouth. “You heard me. Does Loki ever grin for you?”

Looking genuinely befuddled. “Wh-no?”

“Does he grin for Azni?”

Blinking slowly, then thinking of his rather shocking greeting with the elf this morning. “…yes?”

Mischief nodded firmly. There were those wide fake smiles and teeth baring grins that Loki threw at everyone, but he was talking about something else. A true grin. Something Loki had rarely offered. His truest smiles had been for Frigga alone but he had bestowed those special grins on Azni and G’dath more than once. “When you earn enough trust for him to grin for you, you never have to worry about him hurting you. Ever.” Jane’s brow furrowed. “He rarely does. A grin is what he offers a friend. It’s what he offers someone he will protect because he values their existence. He healed you because he wants to teach Indel to be a good person. He feeds you because kindness reminds him of who he used to be as a child, but he doesn’t grin because he doesn’t trust you.”

Huffing. “How am I supposed to trust someone like him?”

A flash of emotions rushed across his face and eyes before he shut down. Young face closing off, mirth in his eyes disappearing. “Forgive me, I had forgotten you’re like everyone else in Asgard.” He turned his face away from her, and refused to pay her another moment’s attention until Loki returned and he faded.

HELHEIM

A gesture and a throw rug tossed itself to one side, revealing ancient runes carved into the stone before light and dark had separated the universe. Walking to the center, Hela knelt down, dressed in her typical silver armor for court. Her black dress under the armor pooled around her, the inner lining of emerald green hidden, and whispered softly words in an ancient tongue almost forgotten. A red haze surrounded her before fading and Hela cautiously stepped onto ground that wasn’t ground, shrouded in mist that wasn’t mist.

Most would lose their minds just being here, in a place that couldn’t exist, seeing what couldn’t be. But Hela embraced much of what couldn’t be explained. Looking up, she paused to study the tapestry of golden threads of life sewn into Yggdrasil’s bark. So many golden strands, molding and twisting around one another, the ancient tree too impossibly tall to see the top of. Some threads were cut short. A rare few smoothed over and extended. Others still that splintered into many.

The yarns of life. The golden threads of each being that was, is, or can be. The three caretakers of life barely even took notice of her, focused on their task of guiding fate. The Norns, the sisters of fate: Wyrd (past), Verdandi (present), and Skuld (future). All three of them were identical in appearance, just frozen in different stages of life. Wyrd looked to be a young girl, a few years before adolescence. Verdandi was a vivacious young woman, and Skuld’s golden hair had just turned flowing silver.

Mentally Hela smirked. These poor bitches had no idea what they were in for.
They turned as one, their voices harmonic in greeting. “The lady queen of the dead.”

Nodding slightly to them in greeting. “Sisters of fate.”

“No.” All three voices were in perfect sync.

Hela felt an eyebrow hike up without permission as she asked. “Excuse me?”

Verdandi shook her head as she answered. “We know why you have come. No. The fates make no exceptions, even of one favored by death.”

Hela’s spine stiffened. “And what request do you assume I will make?”

Skuld’s eyes held too much knowledge, too much resolve for Hela’s liking. “The trickster will bring Ragnarok, his fate is set in the bark long ago.”

Clenching her fist as she retorted softly. “And yet his life is not over so choice is still before him.”

Skuld made a scoffing sound. “You are not mortal, and the illusion of choice is a mortal failing. There is no choice. There is no chance. There is only fate.”

Not true, was all Hela could think. The fates had control over many, but time and again humanity had proven that the sisters didn’t have nearly as much sway over mortals as they liked to believe. It came down to belief. Many humans didn’t believe in fate, and so were able to thwart its design. For the AEsir the price of knowledge came with a loss of control over their own destinies. But then Loki wasn’t just anyone. Scratching her chin with two fingers. “Uh huh…and where in your design did I come in?”

The three shared a brief look before Wyrd answered. “You were destined to be his daughter. As he took no wife, your conception was re-directed.”

A smile lightly teased the corner of Hela’s lips. “Mhmm…but still a choice.”

“Our choice.” Skuld glared as she corrected Hela. “Ragnarok is an absolute.”

“And the prophecy is as well I suppose.”

Verdandi brushed her fingers lightly against the World Tree. “It is sewn into the branches. As we will it, so shall it be.”

Hela hid her smile now. Such arrogant sisters, to believe that would actually stop her. The trick with prophecy is that it went hand in hand with fate. To negate one negates the other. Snagging a golden strand not woven, still on its spool, she carefully smoothed it between her fingers as she examined the strands touched by Loki’s life.

So many strands cut short. But he was a warrior and it was to be expected. So many others, direct or indirect, whose lives he touched. And she could see the time of the fate’s long anticipated Ragnarok. The root cause was a single thread that diverged from his own, less than a finger length and cut short. She brushed her fingers against the end and received the image of a vined predator-plant with luring flowers on Alfheim’s moon. Those evil bitches were going to kill her little brother.

“I do wish that it was not to be but the end is nigh.” Hela ignored Wyrd, brushing her fingers against other lines near and dear to Loki, seeing possible dangers that would need to be
subdued. She pursed her lips thoughtfully. Some things couldn’t be stopped…but they could be re-directed.

Wyrd looked almost sad but Skuld was quick to approach. “But think of all the beauty in the end, sister. The nine realms begins fresh, the circle complete. We may finally rest.”

_How many cycles had Skuld been using that argument to sway the other two? How many times before had Ragnarok come?_ It was almost impossible to defy fate. They held the power of three. Even humans knew it was a mighty number. Hela smirked a little: fate just had no idea Loki now had the power of three at his back as well.

The child Wyrd looked at her, but if she suspected what Hela was up to she said nothing. While the sisters concentrated on her, their threads, and each other, her true form slipped past them, invisible. Just a few alterations. Ones that hardly anyone would notice. Instead of one tiny, fragmented line diverging from Loki’s life she gave him two that extended well beyond his due time. One thread that began quite a distance from his own but not nearly the same length as his, brushed up against his for the tiniest of moments before fading. She touched Jane’s line, frowning at a possibility before feeling inspired. Hela smiled and smoothed over more thread, lengthening that life and spiraling it around Loki’s.

And from that spiral the thread spun itself and splintered five more golden threads, each one extending down longer than the last. And the threads that resulted from them…it was breathtakingly beautiful.

“No matter how you try to alter the threads, what was will be again.” Hela glared at the woman, Verdandi, who pointed to the knot in the wood, crossing over Loki’s line. “Perhaps not the child’s death will be the cause. Perhaps the father. Perhaps the brother…the end still happens and begins again.”

She gave up the pretense and dispersed her shadow sprite. Tapping on the spiral surrounding Loki’s life. “This negates that.”

“Nay. It extends the life of another but does not stop his path.”

Hela tilted her head slightly, face blank. “He is a child of prophecy.”

Wyrd stepped forward and nodded. “Aye.”

Hela stepped forward and nodded. “He is a child chosen by fate.”

Skuld came closer and nodded. “Aye.”

“Whose fate now lies in the embrace of humanity?” Verdandi jerked around to stare at the spiral as Hela continued speaking. “Fate has decreed the prophecy is true…yet if the end should truly befall us by one now outside of fate’s demand…” The women looked up in terror and Hela smiled cruelly. “…it will destroy the three of you.” Eyes flashing green. “I truly embrace a cycle without the three of you around to fuck things up.”

Verdandi shook herself. “You fail to see that he is not free of fate as this bond you have created has not occurred.”

Skuld picked up her sheers. “It cannot occur.” The sister fates were not someone she could fight and win. Hela couldn’t stop Skuld and she didn’t even try, willing with every fiber of her being that the sheers wouldn’t cut Jane’s life short. Skuld moved to cut the thread, to keep Loki firmly rooted in fate’s embrace, frowning when the sheers couldn’t even fray the thread. Hela could see
sparks of green and two shades of gold surrounding the thread protectively. Hela hid a smile. Even Yggdrasil was in agreement with her.

Skuld wailed at the great tree. “We could perish eternally if this is not done!” The World Tree ignored fate.

But then Hela frowned. She’d deduced the green had been Loki’s own magic, since magic has a will of its own and one of the shades of gold had been Yggdrasil…she just wasn’t sure who else was interfering with fate. But then Hela smirked as reality sank in. Now if the fates wished to continue existing, it would be in their best interests for Ragnarok to never occur. Hela tuned them out and put a hand on the knot. Dozens…hundreds of cycles. Hundreds of each of them, all of them making different choices…and yet always coming down to these last few years before a heart breaks beyond hope and tears everything apart. The end…and the beginning.

The first Loki, for it all started with him. The God of fire who became AEsir as Odin’s blood brother, not his son. A sad, twisted, angry creature more than twice father’s age, who was never truly understood by those of Asgard that had accepted him at first. Tricks and mischief, his sly cunning always the first to be sought out to solve problems but threats of death always quick to follow if a plan went awry. The final act, imprisoned and held down by the intestines of his slaughtered son after the death of Odin’s son, Balder. The yellow gem around her neck glowed, the laws of reality released, and a moment in time expanded around her.

Hela took a step and a cave expanded around her. She stared at Loki as his children freed him, the serpent dripping poison already destroyed. Siblings she had never known. Jörmungandr. Fenris. Sleipnir. And they slowed to a stop. He turned, green eyes shining brightly of madness. That was why. It wouldn’t be just anger that would cause him to destroy the AEsir. Not just loss and heartbreak. Losing his sons had broken his sanity. She nodded to herself. Losing Indel would be no different. Her father was sane and whole but he’d already been broken by madness once. Something, once broken, is never as strong as it was. He loved that boy too much to live without him. But why should Asgard not suffer as he had suffered? Death was too easy for them.

Loki’s eyes moved back and forth between daughters, one who appeared half in a state of death, the other daughter who looked no more remarkable than any other AEsir. “Hela?”

She gave him a small, lopsided smile. “Hello, father.”

Blinking, eyes too bright, too clear. “Are the walls of reality collapsing?”

Why did he have to sound so hopeful? She shook her head slightly. “No, I wished to see what was.”

He pouted and considering the setting it just looked so wrong. “So I fail, the end doesn’t come.”

Whispering softly. “No. You succeed. A thousand times over you succeed.”

He snarled savagely, nearly scaring her with the sudden intensity. “They deserve it.”

Hela fought to keep her tone even, replying smoothly. “I do not dispute it. You didn’t deserve this.”

He shrugged loosely. “I will kill them or die trying, the end.”
“And the beginning.”

Such fervent hope in his eyes now. A wish that would reverberate through each cycle. “Perhaps next time we shall get it right.”

Swallowing hard and releasing the past. “...perhaps...”

Other chances. Other tragedies. The same end. Not even in the full depth of depravity could she have designed a more hellish fate. Loki, always so desperate in his search for love, and the loss of it was what ultimately destroyed all of them. Tears dripped down her face, free falling down her chin to be absorbed by the World Tree. Better to end than for this cycle with no victory to continue.

Wyrd frowned up at her. “The alternative is death. He is your favorite, is this not preferred?”

What an absurd question, was all she could think and Hela angrily swiped at the tears clinging to her chin, voice hoarse. “No. Better for love to live, than to destroy it. Better that his children live and grow. Better that his family survives. Better that there is life to give it meaning, than to be cursed by you and yours.”

The child studied the tree again before nodding. “Then to break the cycle of fate, he must choose death.”

Hela blinked slowly and nodded. Death. She turned and smiled so they could not see it, golden spool hidden still in her hand, and used the runes to return to Helheim. Fate would still try to interfere. Those closest to Loki would be the most in danger until the bond would be formed to break fate’s hold on his future. She would be keeping a very close eye on them for now.

But her steps were lighter, now. She’d arrived being told the cycle of fate was sealed and left with an alternative. Death. She could work with that. Take that, bitches.

Author's Notes:

I read through a ton of stuff about Yggdrasil and the fates. Hopefully the result is at least partially understandable. Perhaps a bit of artistic license thrown in there as well but this is a fan fic after all. It's allowed. If you're confused don't worry, this is the setup for later. Just keep this in your back pocket for now.

Next:

War on Asgard; A trap on Alfheim
Chapter 28

ASGARD

The golden city of Asgard held an unspoken tension to it, not easily explained. It wasn’t noticeable by everyone, the council as a whole largely oblivious. But the warriors found themselves scanning the perimeter out of habit after centuries of battle. The servants scurried to their duties, looking uneasily over their shoulders. Mothers instinctively kept their children close and even children were not prone to wander.

All at once the tension shattered.

It was the animalistic snarls and growls, sprinkled colorfully with curse words in a dozen languages that turned heads. The double doors to the throne room opened, the figure bound at the wrists and neck in chains dragged in by two guards. Gasps. Shrieks. In the great distance even beyond the palace gate, one could hear the people were wailing in outrage.

Mjolnir slipped out of Thor’s hand, his fingers numb and his face slack in disbelief. Sif yelped and the warriors all tensed. Odin sat up straight and felt the ground disappear out from under him, almost losing his hold on Gungnir. Where is Indel? Where is Lady Jane? What in Hel has happened?

Loki snarled with a feral gaze, dark hair wild and dressed in his signature green and gold armor, pinning Odin and son to their places. Sneering hatefully. “Hello, All-fool.”

Fandral’s hand inched up to the necklace around his neck, wincing to feel a magical charge building like static electricity. He looked down to see both strands of magic crackling and moving rapidly in agitation. He looked back up and grimly set his jaw.

Odin blinked slowly, unable to accept what he was seeing and whispering distantly. “Loki?”

Thor’s jaw clenched before snarling at the guards. “Get those chains removed from his person—…”

Holding up a shaky hand. “Thor.” The court froze, desperately looking to their king for calming guidance. Amora had already testified before king and court that the Chitauri were not Loki’s to command. With some careful leading of her answers he decreed that Loki was exonerated of his crimes, posthumous. It wouldn’t return his title as prince, but it would allow for Loki to return to Asgard free and as a member of the house of Odin.

Odin agreed whole-heartedly with Thor but something was amiss and no matter how long it took he would figure it out before acting.

Loki sneered hatefully at the king and prince of Asgard, the chains rattling. “What did you think would happen during my exile? Did you truly expect me to return more civilized than when I left?”

Odin firming his jaw. “Why have you returned, Loki? What has happened?”

Thor was horrified that that was the first question his father would ask. Months of regret. Speeches and wishes about changing to make things better and that was all Odin had to say? “Father! Brother, why would you allow us to think you dead? We mourned you.”
Loki’s sneer grew. “Please. You would never mourn a moment of this runt’s death.”

Odin visibly stiffened at the self-insult, listening closely to a very subtle sound as Loki spoke.

Thor roared. “Of course we mourned!”

Sif growled a moment later. “You’re a poor excuse of both prince and warrior. You should grovel and beg forgiveness for the strife you cause all.”

Loki didn’t truly react to Thor, batting his eyelashes mockingly at Sif. “Including yourself, lady?”

Sif’s eyes narrowed but Volstagg held out a hand to touch her arm and forestall her in continuing. “Do not waste your words.”

 Odin’s voice thundered through the throne room. “ENOUGH. I asked you a question, Loki, an answer is required.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed. “I answer to no one, least of all you.”

Thor felt like his world was coming apart again. Loki never knew when to shut up. He would keep talking until father’s temper snapped. He would be banished, or executed. He was back, just to die again. “Loki…”

Loki’s head snapped back around to Thor, baring his teeth. “You oaf. *click* You never learn. *click* We are *click* not *click* brothers! *click*” Turning, blue eyes filled with hate and disgust. “And as for you, Odin One-eye, a present from the true ruler of the nine realms.”

A poison tipped dagger appeared out of nothing and was sent hurling with deadly accuracy for the All-father’s heart. Two actions occurred simultaneously: a blade sharp enough to make air bleed slipped all too easily through armor and flesh…and a weathered hand effortlessly caught the hilt.

Fandral was breathing hard, shakily holding the hilt of his rapier which he’d just thrust through Loki’s back. Thor and several warriors rushed to Odin’s side who was silently examining the dagger. He made a tutting sound to himself even as Thor looked back at his brother and froze as blood collected and dripped down his chin. Odin’s voice was eerily calm. “Sloppy…very sloppy.”

Baring bloody teeth, the neon-blue liquid strange against white teeth, and voice no longer matching Loki’s at all. “What is?”

Odin lifted an eyebrow. “You really are a poor copy of my son. You have no seidr, which I would be able to sense if you truly were Loki. Also, my son passed by that pillar on a number of occasions and you managed to shrink two inches.” Eyes moved to the pillar Odin had pointed to, all of them realizing the truth at once. He lifted the dagger. “But this is simply insulting. This may be his dagger you’ve stolen but the blade is dull and there are no spells in place to prevent the target from grasping it. Have you anything to say for yourself?” More blood dripped and the shape shifter made a gurgling sound before collapsing on his side and stilling. Odin gestured briskly, giving orders. “Have the healers identify the species, then burn it to ash. I will not have that abomination masquerading as a prince of Asgard. Thor, go calm the people. Reassure them that was not their prince in chains. Tyr, assemble the warriors. After we discover the how we need to tighten Asgard’s defenses. Lady Sif, speak with Heimdall, I want to know how this creature came here…”

Amora continued to watch silently. Thor was shaky at best and an uneasy tension was
filing the air again. War had come many times to Asgard before but this was the first time the battle hadn’t been formally accepted and met on the open battlefield as was honorable. This was bad for Asgard. And ultimately, that meant it was bad for her.

ALFHEIM

Jane smiled slightly as she took a deep breath. It was midmorning and she could see Indel climbing the front tree just like the little spider monkey he was. The room was filled with the usual sounds of a pen scratching paper and the rustle of pages, all the normal sounds of Loki hard at work when he wasn’t hunting. It was scary how normal this all seemed and how easily this was starting to feel like a routine. In fact, ever since that day at Azni’s house with her introduction to Mischief, Loki hardly said anything to her. It had allowed her to relax in his presence but it made for truly boring days since their lack of conversation meant none of her curiosity was sated. If she didn’t know any better, she would think he was avoiding her.

Outside of the house, Jane pulled in a larger breath, knowing she’d have to start working on some convincing arguments to get Loki to change his mind and take her home. But later. It could wait a little while. She felt a tugging sensation and turned towards the tug. It wasn’t physical, yet it was like her body was being tugged in a certain direction. Without conscious thought she followed the tug. She picked her way carefully through the bushes at the edge of the forest, taking a few steps inward towards a group of flowers. “Jane?”

Jane blinked and paused, turning her head. “Yes, sweetie?”

Indel giggled. “You’re supposed to stay here.”

Smiling gently as the words came out softly. Words that didn’t feel like they came from her mouth or her brain. But it was alright. There was no harm. Just a little stroll to find…something. Flowers. Yes, she wanted to pick flowers. “Tis alright. I shall not go far.”

A worried look passed over his face, watching her from the branches. It didn’t sound right and even at his age Indel could tell even if he couldn’t figure out why it sounded wrong. She was a human but she was an adult and he wasn’t supposed to talk back to adults. Well, he could to stupid adults but he knew Jane was almost as smart as his dada. “…okay…” Even the little chicks paused, huddling on the ground with mournful peeps but refusing to move beyond the shield.

As soon as she had crossed the threshold Loki had laid his head on his table, his jaw clenched tightly. ‘How am I supposed to trust someone like him?’ He wished her words didn’t sting as much as they did. He didn’t give a damn what the rest of the universe thought about him but for some reason her opinion mattered. She wouldn’t say it to his face but since Mischief’s memories became his own she unknowingly did.

The problem was he didn’t know. It had been his problem for centuries now. He’d made such a name for himself as a liar and a trickster that he didn’t know how to convince her to trust him. She trusted him in his dreams and she trusted him in disguise, but as frustrating as it was, she and everyone else always got tripped up when it was him. He was pathetic, is what he was-

Get up, Loki.

Loki frowned to himself but obeyed the impulse, brow slowly furrowing in confusion. He took a slow look around but there was no one and no clue for why he needed to stand. Then he caught a scent. A hint of magic and something else. Something vague. But it wasn’t from his impulse to stand. That had been something else and if he didn’t know better he would think Hela was toying
with him. He could see Indel outside, perched on a branch as usual. Then he blinked and his eyes scanned the front yard. No Jane.

*Go.*

It seemed too chilly outside for the delicate plants to exist but Jane mentally shrugged. This wasn’t earth, after all. Just something simple to put in a vase. She ducked around a tree that had thick vines wrapped around it and crouched down to gather flowers. Purples, red, even a few white daisies. She picked up a handful but the daisies were stubborn, almost like they didn’t want to leave the soil. She frowned and tugged a little harder, and heard an odd hissing sound.

She paused for a second, waiting and listening but didn’t hear anything. A *snake? Strange.* Just to be safe she grabbed a thin stick and tapped the tall grasses around her. Nothing but a few of those vines, but she should hurry just in case. She gave another good tug and heard a sharp whistle along with rapid thumps, yelping as something solid hit her back and almost flattened her.

She tumbled onto her back and looked up, seeing Loki looming over her and slapped the ground with a fist, heart thundering in her chest as the flowers disappeared in the grass. “You almost scared me to death!”

*Stupid. Idiotic. Mortal. She never listens.*

His left hand trembled as he grabbed her wrist and pulled her to her feet, grip sloppy as he tugged and then shoved her out of the forest and back into the clearing. She yelped in pain as the bones nearly ground together. Wincing, feeling bruises forming on her wrist, she cradled the injured limb and glared at him. “Could you be a little more-…”

The protective spell that formed a shell over the house shimmered around both of them and she blinked with a start of surprise, spinning in a circle and instinctively raising her arms over her head protectively as it collapsed, large chunks falling as if it was shattering glass hitting the ground, disappearing seconds later.

*I must be insane. Why? I’m not brave. I’m not a hero. I’m a trickster. I’m Loki.*

Whywhywhywhy…

But he knew the answer. As skilled of a liar as he was, he was tired of lying to himself. Only for the people he loved, would he shield their life with his own.

Jane looked around, brow furrowing. “Loki?” Tremors were running up and down his body as he fell to his knees, his jaw clenched tightly in pain and eyes squeezed shut before he started panting, a trickle of sweat ran down from his temple. *He never sweat. Ever.* Worry filled her eyes, pushing everything but concern to the side. “Are you okay?”

*Who will look after him? Who will protect him? She can’t possibly take care of him…*

“A what?”

A thud and Indel ran towards Loki, but he grit his teeth and snarled fiercely at the boy, holding out a halting hand. “No.”

The little boy skidded to a halt a dozen feet away, frightened and trembling, blue tail wrapping tightly around his waist. Loki had never raised his voice at his son like that. Ever. “Dada?”

*Thinkthinkthink…use your brain for once. Someone to help. Someone you can trust-*
Starting to gasp for breath, fighting with his jaw to make it work. “G’dath. Bring… G’dath.” A violent convulsion overtook him and he collapsed to his side, body and limbs twitching and swinging wildly. Jane jerked forward before stopping herself, putting a hand over her mouth and reaching out desperately for Indel, picking him up. Loki was easily twice as strong as she was, there was no way either of them could control his thrashing… and somehow he knew what was going to happen.

Backing up in horror as his eyes rolled back, the little boy weeping in her arms before turning to run. “We’ll get help, Loki. I promise! We’ll be right back.”

The path was as easy to find now as the first time but it seemed to take an eternity. Jane ran the entire way, her heart thundering in her chest. Indel’s sobs were a constant sound near her ear but she pushed it all to the background. Her burning lungs. Her sore feet. Indel’s weight that was normally easy enough to bear became heavy the longer she ran.

Move. Move faster. She couldn’t get the image out of her mind, no matter how hard she tried. His normally proud, tall body crumpled to the ground and shaking. Face normally filled with mischief, contorted in pain. She felt her eyes burning at the thought of something happening to Loki and she couldn’t explain it.

Later. Think later. Finally the little house came into her view and she nearly broke the gate opening it. Azni opened the door before Jane could even cross the length of the garden, brow furrowed in concern. Jane panted in gasping breaths. “Loki… help… G’dath—…”

Indel turned and wailed. “G’DATH!” Azni jerked back in surprise at the volume of Indel’s spell amplified voice. A few thumps and Talia appeared at her side with wide blue eyes. There was no time for either of them to react, all eyes looking to the west.

The little pond within Azni’s gated yard bubbled and Jane paused in her panting to gape as an elf walked out of the waters without a drop of it touching her skin. G’dath froze to stare at Jane, her eyes turning flat and feral. Anxiety and primitive elven instincts collided as she asked gruffly. “What are you doing here unescorted?”

Jane opened her mouth, backing up from the elf whose entire being projected fury. “I need—…”

G’dath had seen Jane’s image in Loki’s mirror enough to know who she was on sight. “You idiot.” Fist clenched, baring her teeth as she stalked forward. “Do you have any concept of what will be done to you if other elves see you??” And what her death would do to Loki, was all G’dath could think. Jane paled and held Indel tighter.

Indel frowned before wrapping his arms around Jane’s neck protectively, baring his teeth and hissing at the healer, who pulled up short. “Mine.” Talia ran down the steps and skidded to Jane’s side, baring her own teeth in a silent snarl.

“G’dath. Get ahold of yourself, you are not five hundred years old anymore. Her being here is hardly her fault.” Azni spoke with brisk authority, not moving from her spot.

G’dath blinked and turned to look at Azni who was giving her a severe look of disapproval. By the stars, Loki will never let me hear the end of it if he ever found out. Pulling in a calming breath and inclining her head slightly to Jane, highly embarrassed. “My apologies…” Then she made a sweeping assessment. Indel’s tears. The distress pouring out of Jane as she panted that didn’t have anything to do with her. It took her less than a second to realize something was very, very wrong. Frowning as she buried her elven instincts that always chose the worst moments to
appear. “Where is Loki?”

Jane gulped in enough air to speak. “He was having a seizure. He asked for your help.”

G’dath froze. “That’s impossible! The only way-…”

Poison. *Magic leeching poison that would cut off oxygen to the brain and lead to paralysis and eventual death.* The tremble started in her spine before spreading as she turned white. Turning, the healer dove back into the water, the fastest way to travel to Loki’s home. Jane’s knees gave out, arms wrapped tightly around Indel and burying her face in his hair.

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Loki had no idea when he lost consciousness or how long he was out. He wasn’t even truly aware of what was going on. Sound was a distant din. Smell and sight was completely disconnected, hazy and dim. Just sensations. Heat that was boiling his skin so that he felt like a cooked lobster. Water caressing along his skin up to his chin. Cool and comfortable and wonderful…

Touch-NO!!

He was weak but he still struggled. *Evil and forbidden.* Large hands, male hands, on his wrists that did not ask permission! *Not again…*

“Lokhi, the fever must be quenched. We will not harm you.” A male voice that tried to sound reassuring, but his mind too foggy to label a name to the voice. He bared his teeth and blindly growled at the other male.

A second voice, female, interrupted the first. “Leave me with him.”

The male sounded almost scandalized. “He-…it is not *appropriate* healer-…”

The female voice held steely resolve. “I said leave me with him, Trax. Find and destroy the plant the barb came from.” The hands that returned were smaller even though there was no lack of strength in them but he found himself soothed by a feminine touch as opposed to a male. G’dath, he somehow knew it was her even if he couldn’t see her with his gaze so shrouded in fever. He could trust her. She was his mentor. She was his friend.

She was as professional as she was thorough. The tepid water did wonders for extinguishing the fire burning up his skin. She murmured into his ear, focusing him. “I will require help to lift you, Loki. The touch will be brief but I will have your hand the entire time. I will allow no one to trespass on your person, prince.”

He tried to swallow before shakily nodding and gritted his teeth until he was sure they would crack as he felt hands lift him. The contact was brief, soon laid out on a bed and surrounded with layers of blankets. He lost consciousness almost immediately and the two elves quietly left his room.

G’dath stood next to the hearth, her back to Trax. “You destroyed the plant.”

It wasn’t a question but Trax nodded slowly and replied anyway. “Yes, and there were no neighboring blooms. No spors.” The two shared a brief look. If the plant was in full bloom, there were always spores. G’dath paused in her movements for a moment. A trap. And considering the lure it was obvious the fates wanted Jane Foster dead and Loki had interfered. She couldn’t imagine why one mortal would be considered so important to them but it left her curious.

Trax was at a complete loss, and not just concerning the plant. G’dath was a traditional
elven healer, adamant in her belief that certain matters were tended by the same gender. She tended to the broth and glanced at him once, easily reading his confusion. G’dath’s voice was quiet. “My father fought in the last great war. He and many men went into the battle against a beast whose depravity knows no bounds. The war was won, but my father was captured for a short time before being freed. There are heinous acts that are committed during war that no man talks about…I saw the look in my father’s eyes, and Lokhi holds the same look.”

Paling in horror. “You cannot know for sure.”

“No, and you will never ask him.” Of course he wouldn’t. Not even with a brother he would ask of such a thing. G’dath gave him a considering look. She didn’t have a gift to see the future, but she knew eventually Loki’s secret would be discovered. “I will tell you something more. It will not make sense now, but it will later. Do not put emphasis in a name. The man that you know, the man that has become your friend, is the same no matter what name he carries. Remember that, Trax.” She handed him a cup and he nodded with a confused frown.

They both went silent as Azni brought back Jane and Indel. The little boy had cried himself sick, now curled up in Jane’s arms and refused to leave them for anyone else. Trax nodded in her direction silently in greeting before taking the broth to Loki. He didn’t even appear phased that a human was wandering around, but then he wasn’t the most observant of people.

Jane sat quietly at the table, Indel’s arms wrapped tightly around her body and face buried in her neck. Rubbing his small back with one hand, her brown eyes were filled with worry as she met G’dath’s gaze and asked, “How is he?”

G’dath looked the mortal over for a long time before placing a barbed thorn almost as thick as her arm on the table. “This was lodged in his shoulder, how would you be?” Jane’s eyes widened further and further in horror as G’dath started speaking quietly. “It is common in the wilds, a plant that hides like a vine in the trees with a most unusual trap.” Jane blinked rapidly, remembering the vines in the grass and attached to the tree. G’dath twirled the stem of a daisy between two of her fingers. “The harder you tug on the white flowers, the closer to death you are. I take it you were gathering something pretty.” Jane blushed and her stomach dropped, wrapping her arms more firmly around Indel. Loki had warned her repeatedly not to go beyond the barrier. This was all her fault. Although for some reason this didn’t feel like her fault. Like someone else had been pulling the strings. G’dath continued as if oblivious to the turmoil she was creating. The healer was anything but. “You were lucky. Had he not taken the thorn aimed for you, you would be dead. The poison would have stopped your heart instantly.” She tilted her head slightly. “I believe the AEsir call it a life debt…we shall see if there is any honor left in the mortal world.”

Jane looked up in confusion but Azni softly whispered the healer’s name. Sighing, G’dath pushed herself away from the table and retreated into Loki’s bedroom. The healer watched as Trax tried to coax more broth into the trickster, who had paled chalk white. Trax frowned. “This won’t even buy him time, will it?”

G’dath crossed her arms to hug herself. “No.”

Trax lowered the bowl into his lap as he asked. “How long does he have?”

She was a professional so she refused to even acknowledge the tear that escaped except to hastily brush it away. “Two days at most.”

He pulled in a slow breath as he pressed. “Is there anything I can do?” He was willing. Lokhi wasn’t his closest friend in the village but he was still a friend.
Frowning to herself after a moment before nodding slowly. “Yes, contact Talton and have him here by morning. Tell him to bring a bow and a sword.”

Trax nodded in agreement. “Of course but...why?”

“Lokhi has one chance, and it’s in the under-forest.” Trax’s eyes widened in horror.

Author's Notes:

...we now enter the hurt/comfort portion of our evening. I know some of you are particularly excited (you know who you are).

Next:

Jane wants to be more; A conversation with the heart of Alfheim
Chapter 29

ALFHEIM

G’dath sat down in the chair Trax had hastily vacated, looking over the prince as he slept restlessly. She closed her eyes briefly, tugging at his magic with her own and opened them as Mischief swirled into existence. A trick that only worked for her because of Loki’s condition and the fact that she knew of the imaginary boy’s existence. He gave her a cautious look, eyes flitting between her and Loki before stiffening.

“Something is wrong.”

She didn’t even attempt to offer Mischief a smile. “A mortal created trap, do you really believe it is so easy for me to cure?”

Ancient eyes from a young face widened. “He’s dying.”

G’dath’s lips thinned. As much as she wanted to deny it, it was true, and not even the Allfather could prevent it. “If I cannot retrieve the curative sap, yes. He will.”

Mischief’s jaw clenched, his back stiffened, and he looked every bit the warrior prince he was modeled after as he asked, “What do I need to do?”

She folded her hands in her lap and answered. “As I said, this was created to kill a mortal…”

Nodding slowly and continuing the thought, knowing the principles of magical poison. He may forever retain much of Loki’s innocence but Mischief was privy to much of Loki’s knowledge as well. “…so only by mortal hands will the cure be realized.”

“Correct.”

Mischief’s head cocking slightly. “Where?”

She closed her eyes for a moment in dread. A place that defied all conventional laws of reality. “There is only one place this particular tree grows here…the under-forest.” The trees that were tied so intimately to the heart of Alfheim existed on Alfheim proper, of course, but it would take far too long. Asgard had gifted her children with long life with the special apples of Idunn. Other worlds held equally special gifts. Alfheim’s gift was a cure for all illness and injury. The under-forest was the only possibility even close enough. At the very center of that unexplainable connection between Alfheim and this moon grew a tree greater than all the rest.

A defeated look crossed his face. He knew Jane would never survive. He was as good as dead. “Even with my help she will never survive such a journey. Indel, could never survive there, for pity’s sake, and that little mortal is…hopeless.”

G’dath agreed one hundred and fifty percent…yet Jane had come this far. She had a feeling that this silly girl had simply never been tested. “That does not sound like the trickster prince.”

“If the journey doesn’t kill her the creatures that guard the tree will.” Mischief crossed his arms and shivered. “Even I can be a realist at times…she will never do it. Why would she?”
It never ceased to amaze G’dath that for all the ego Loki threw around the utter lack of confidence Loki had when it came to others measuring his worth. “If I can convince her, will you lead her?”

Mischief shrugged easily but looked no more hopeful. “If Loki dies, I die. Of course I will.”

Jane watched G’dath warily as the healer sat down across from her again. Blue eyes as cool as ice, movement as fluid as a predator. This didn’t bode well and she wished she’d followed Azni when the older elf had taken a sleeping Indel back to her home. “I believe I told you that you owe him a life debt.”

Yep, this definitely didn’t bode well, Jane thought, but she nodded anyway. “I remember.”

G’dath folded her hands on the table. “I know of a way for you to pay the debt.”

“Oh?”

The healer tapped the flower still on the table. “A daisy is not a flower found on Alfheim, nor any other realm save your own. The trap was designed specifically to lure you, as was the poison that he took in your steed.”

It felt like her brain just divided in half. She was by no means a botanist but she suddenly had a thousand and one questions about how such a thing was possible. But she wasn’t going to even consider asking. Jane felt butterflies start to nest in her stomach at the reminder of such a selfless act. “You can’t cure him, can you?”

G’dath nodded slowly. “You are surprisingly bright, Jane. Impressive. I see why he likes you.”

Jane blinked owlishly at the healer. Loki liked her?

The elf sighed and answered Jane’s question. “No, not with what I have. I require sap from a tree that grows in the under-forest.”

Jane winced. She hadn’t been told much about this infamous part of the forest, but from what she knew not even seasoned hunters went there. “Will it take you long?”

She was a sorceress, she didn’t have the capability of going there. No one with a magical affinity did…which certainly didn’t explain how Loki had managed it but it was a secret she had yet to extract from the trickster. G’dath shook her head at the mortal. “You misunderstand. I cannot go to the under-forest. Very few can, and even fewer can survive there.”

Jane thought to say that Loki just went there to hunt, but she stopped herself. She had a feeling that when it came to Loki, most of the rules didn’t apply. “Who can, other than Loki?”

“She was a sorceress, she didn’t have the capability of going there. No one with a magical affinity did…which certainly didn’t explain how Loki had managed it but it was a secret she had yet to extract from the trickster. G’dath shook her head at the mortal. “You misunderstand. I cannot go to the under-forest. Very few can, and even fewer can survive there.”

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“Me.” Jane turned in surprise to see Mischief, expression rather solemn for such a normally joyful face. She blinked, always stunned to see a small replica of Loki. She wanted to protest that he was just a kid, but thought better of it.

G’dath speaking again grabbed her attention. “Now for the other difficulty. Because this was a trap designed for you, your mortality, only a mortal may procure the sap…guess how many mortals are on Alfheim.”
Eyes widening in horror, rapidly shaking her head as Jane jerked to her feet. “Oh no. No, no, no—you’re really asking the wrong person for this. I can’t even climb a tree! Indel’s right, I’m just a stupid mortal. I—I’m a researcher. I think and I dream but I never do anything. I’ll just screw this up and he’ll die!”

Mischief frowned, lower lip trembling ever so slightly. “If you don’t go, Jane, we’ll die anyway.”

Her head whipped around, her stomach sank towards her shoes and she bit her bottom lip before sitting down and resting her forehead in her hand. “There has to be another way.”

G’dath snapped. “There’s not, so Loki’s life literally rests in your hands.”

In her brain it went and out her mouth she blurted. “You’re in love with him!”

Mischief tensed but G’dath just cocked her head slightly before bursting out laughing. She slapped a hand over her mouth to muffle her giggles, her shoulders shaking, before fighting to compose herself. “By the stars how are you not dead already?” The healer took several deep breaths, a smirk curling her lip. She gave the human a glance before chuckling softly. “Yes, I love him like a brother…or a son. It really depends on my mood and his.”

Jane’s frown deepened. “So you’re not in love with him.”

G’dath huffed. “I am an elf, Jane, we have but one mate in the entire span of our lives. After their death we will have friends and family but the part of ourselves that desires a partner shuts off, and my mate died many years ago.”

“Oh.”

The healer continued her thought. “Could I have loved him if I hadn’t met my mate all those years ago: yes. Easily. But then I have found that those that understand him find it impossible not to love him.”

Jane looked as dumbfounded as she sounded. “How—…HOW??”

G’dath’s brow furrowed for a moment. “I think the more pressing question you should be asking yourself is: what am I missing? Azni was ready to adopt him as soon as she met him. I find it difficult some days not to just snuggle his attitude away.” The last part she said dripping with sarcasm but it caused Mischief to cackle softly.

Jane shook her head slowly. “I just don’t see it.”

The healer shrugged, un Concerned with the human’s confusion. “Stop looking with your eyes, then, because you are obviously as blind as Asgard. I have already sent word for my son who resides on Alfheim itself, he should be here in the morning to possibly assist you…you have until then to decide if you are willing to act to save his life as he saved yours.” Jane looked up and fire flashed in her eyes at the reminder before she pushed herself to her feet and out the front door. Mischief frowned at G’dath who shrugged again. “She needs incentive.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Or coaxing.”

Sighing at the boy. “She is holding herself back, what she needs is a kick to the ass.”

Mischief’s eyes narrowed. “You are really going to invite that idiot here?” G’dath’s lips thinned but she didn’t really have a defense for Talton’s earlier actions so she said nothing. Mischief
batted his eyes at her. “You love me?”

G’dath instantly scowled. “Oh, shut up.”

Jane shivered and wrapped the cloak a little tighter around herself before carefully tugging at the chain around her neck. The AEsir locket came free and rested lightly in her palm. On Svartalfheim he’d saved Thor’s life but even fighting as enemies they were still brothers and it made sense. He would move heaven and earth for Indel so doing something like this for him wouldn’t phase her…he did this for her. He took the poison meant for her and now he was dying. She didn’t understand. From what she’d seen of his actions in New Mexico and New York, this didn’t make any sense. She wondered if Thor would be surprised. She had a feeling he wouldn’t be. And if Loki was capable of doing such good, then why…WHY?

He was gruff but patient. He loved mocking her but his words were designed to sting, not wound. He fed her with only minimal teasing. He clothed her without even being asked. Up until recently he was highly indulgent in her questions and curiosity—...

Her head hurt. She kept fighting to remind herself of what he had done when she really just wanted to treat him like dream-Loki. The Loki she had liked. The Loki who was smart and funny and curious and exasperating and engaging. He was an arrogant, entitled brat at times but he was a prince so she’d ignored him when he’d started acting like a jerk. She could happily spend the rest of her days just sitting and talking with him, but she already had someone she was interested in and he was on Midgard and she was still convinced Loki had dragged her here just to ruin her life—

She sighed. Closing her eyes to push her confusion to the side, she whispered softly. “Odinson.” And there they were. Two brothers, opposites and yet it was easy to see the loyalty and the love.

“Where did you get that?”

Not looking over her shoulder as she felt Mischief sit next to her. “Your mother hid it in my clothes.”

She heard a sharp intake of breath, before a sad chuckle. “That sounds like her.” She felt his chin rest lightly on her shoulder, green eyes staring at the image. When Thor silently laughed, so did Mischief. “I forgot about that…”

Jane frowned and asked, “What did you forget?”

She felt him shrug. “I can’t remember the joke anymore. None of the ones that I knew were ever really funny but it always made him laugh.”

Jane felt her breath catch in surprise, hearing the quiet longing. “You miss him.”

He sighed and turned his head to rest his temple on her shoulder. Mischief didn’t even consider not telling her the truth, a truth that Loki would never have admitted to. In a way he was answering for Loki but if it made it easier for her to talk to him he wouldn’t correct her. “Of course I do. We were inseparable for centuries before all of this mess.”


Mischief looked thoughtfully at her for half a second before shaking his head. “Ask me something else.” He might answer if he trusted her. As it was, it was an answer that only Loki would
give when he was ready.

‘I didn’t do it for him.’

The words that he’d said to Thor as he was ‘dying’ on Svartalfheim came to her and suddenly she had to know. If he hadn’t acted so honorably, saved both her and Thor’s life, just to impress his father then why? As if the answer would decide what she would do, she asked softly. “Who did you do it for?”

He was quiet for several long moments. She wondered if he even remembered saying that to Thor. Did he mean it, or was he just saying something dramatic before his supposed death? Another lie? But then he sighed softly. “I killed the elf to avenge mother…but I followed Thor because he asked me to.”

The disk was now resting quietly in her hand and she slipped it back under the cloak.

Dream Loki: rude and questing but an amazing sense of humor. Alfheim Loki: snarky and guarded but he loved that little boy so much. New York Loki: an insane ego-manic who killed without care and betrayed without flinching. Svartalfheim Loki: stayed true to his word, saved her life, and loyally protected Thor. She couldn’t reconcile them. The one that didn’t fit, that made the least sense, was New York. There was a reason that Thor and Frigga loved Loki as much as they did. G’dath. Azni. Neither of them were blinded by blood ties but they still loved him. Was he worth it? She wasn’t sure…but she couldn’t let Indel grow up an orphan when she was the reason he might lose his father.

His fingers found the ring on her left finger, smoothing it with the pads of his fingertips before he slowly shook his head. Loki had seen the ring before, but he’d dismissed it at the time. “She gave this to you as well, didn’t she?” Jane nodded silently with a small smile at Mischief’s question. “She never ceases to amaze me.”

Jane frowned delicately at the boy. “Who?”

Giving the ring another stroke. A Vanir tradition. With each son she’d created special rings and kept them safe for when the time was right. The ring that Frigga had kept for Loki all this time, for the woman he would choose as his bride. “Mother.” A sad, crooked smile crossed Mischief’s face. “She was the smartest person I’d ever met.” Jane smiled gently and wrapped her arm around him without thinking. He snuggled into her shoulder and the pair of them stayed that way until the sun set.

Mischief walked silently into the bedroom, pausing to smile slightly. Talia had wandered her way over, now curled up tightly against Loki. She was a wild little thing, growing up the way she was. Not disobedient, just independent. She was making it painfully clear this was where she wanted to be.

A worry for later. Right now survival was Mischief’s current worry and it wasn’t looking promising. G’dath wasn’t seeing the big picture. Pressing Jane to do this was all fine and good but the mortal wouldn’t last five minutes. The under-forest was deadly for a reason and it wasn’t just the inhabitants. The barrier that protected a magical being from the leaching power of the heart of the realm was too thin. An elf without magic could travel there and he could protect himself, just as Loki could. Alfheim’s heart would suck the potential right out of Jane and take her mortal life with it and not even he could protect her from that.

Leaning over the bed, closing his eyes and touching his forehead to Loki’s temple, hoping Loki was conscious enough to hear him. “What do I do? I-I don’t know what to do.” There was a pause, and the boy who wasn’t real held his breath.
“What you do best…cause mischief.” Mischief sagged in relief. He was worried Loki wouldn’t be able to hear him. He welcomed that familiar voice of the trickster in his head. “So are you going to tell me, or do I have to guess?”

Grinning bitter-sweetly, happy and worried all at once. Loki’s voice sounded strong, but he was going to lose ground quickly. Mischief swallowed and explained his worry, hoping his adult self had an idea. “We have to go to the under-forest…and since it was a poison designed for Jane-…”

“She has to be the one to harvest the sap. No.”

No. Two little letters was all it took to tell Mischief everything about how Loki felt about Jane Foster. Self-sacrifice wasn’t exactly in their personality for mortals and strangers. But if there was love involved then that changed all the rules.

Nodding and sighing, hands moving up to twist in the sleeve of Loki’s tunic. “I’ll be with her every step of the way but there’s no other way and no other mortals on Alfheim. Think about Indel, Loki, he needs you.”

Loki’s voice paused, taking a few moments to consider the options. “Then the only alternative is for me to beg permission from Alfheim’s heart.”

Mischief physically jerked, wanting to shake his older self for even suggesting it. “NO.”

“Be practical Mischief. Either this is done-…”

“And reduces your length of survival in half!” Mischief’s fierce reply was half snarl and half yell.

Loki ignored Mischief’s distress. “…or I do nothing and we die in two days anyway.”

One day. Loki doing this would mean he’d have 24 hours to live or die. Mischief grimaced, knowing there really wasn’t a choice. “I’m a terrible guardian.”

Loki’s amusement was easy enough to hear. “I certainly didn’t make your job any easier. Either I succeed or I fail. If I fail, you will refuse to go and bind yourself to Indel.”

Tightening his hold on the trickster, his retort a plea. “No.”

Loki’s voice was oddly patient. “Mischief…I want Indel growing up protected. I would love it to be me, but failing that, I choose you.”

The price of not being truly real. As real as he felt, it was the illusion of independence since a part of the life giving magic that kept Loki alive also kept him alive. His life was tied to Loki’s and they would die together. Unless he attached himself to Indel as Loki wanted. Mischief squeezed his eyes shut but could feel Loki slipping from him, using up precious magic as his consciousness moved outside of his body.

IN BETWEEN

It was the most curious of sensations, to walk without actually using your body. But Loki had certainly partaken in stranger magical rituals. His surroundings were a misty gray but he knew he was going in the right direction. A meeting between the God of Mischief and the heart of Alfheim. There was a fierce, magical connection between Alfheim and this moon, and it centered in the under-
forest. He had a feeling there was a very interesting story there, but made it a mental note for later contemplation.

If there was a later.

He stopped a respectful distance from the figure that walked out of the mist. Female, because it seemed without fail that at the heart of every realm was the feminine of the species. A she-elf with devastatingly intimidating gray eyes and a feral grace. All the cunning of the species, combined with the fierce intelligence.

Her voice was colored with the accent of high elvish. “Who are you?”

“I am Loki.”

Her gaze swept over him, assessing and analyzing. “What do you want, child?”

And didn’t that title chafe. Loki kept his tone even, bowing slightly. “To seek protection for a mortal.”

A deep chuckle escaped her, an eyebrow rose as she asked. “Why would I care about a mortal? They mean nothing to me.”

Loki felt his spine stiffen, the words emerging without his permission and he mentally winced. He was giving too much away. “She means something to me.”

Her eyes swept over him again. “Mhmm…you are not one of mine.”

He’d gone into this meeting anticipating that argument. “No. But I have recently been accepted as a citizen—…”

She waved her hand at him, dismissive. “The politics of my children mean nothing. You are either mine or you are not. You are not.”

Gritting his teeth in frustration. “I mean no disrespect, but several of your children struggle to save my life and require—…”

Mist swirled around her and she moved like air, reappearing next to him. “Do you know to whom you speak? I am the heart of Alfheim, one of the old of nine. Your pitiful existence flickers like flame in the wind compared to the majesty of elf-kind.”

“He’s mine. Now will you hear him out?”

Alfheim’s heart tilted her head slightly to the Goddess of the Underworld in acknowledgement. “The Lady Death.”

Hela curtseyed mockingly before glancing at Loki, standing next to him. “He’s mine. Now will you hear him out?”

Elz looked between the two of them, noting the way their eyes flashed emerald in sync with one another. Both of them independent beings, their origins different and yet not. She nodded to them slowly. “I will listen.”
He might resent having to have Hela’s help just to gain an ear if he didn’t desperately need all the help he could get. Modifying his tone as his Silvertongue went to work. “With the utmost respect, I ask for permission for a mortal to travel into what your children call the under-forest, to gather sap from the great tree. She is mortal, yes, but her potential is great. I ask that it not be succored in sacrifice for her entry.”

Elz tensed to reply but Hela beat her to it. “And I ask the same as a favor between realms, for Helheim will always welcome him as its master.” Then narrowing her eyes so that this thought only went to Elz. “And my army will burn this realm to ash if he dies because of your refusal.”

Elz blinked once. “Doing so will destroy all realms.”

Hela smirked the tiniest bit. “You doubt my resolve, so speak your answer and find out how eagerly I will embrace Ragnarok. For his life is all that I care about.” If Loki died when she was so close to her goals there would be no tomorrow. She would ensure this cycle would end and the next would begin again. It was selfish of her, but it wouldn’t stop her.

That stopped Elz from instantly saying no. Her children mattered more than anything and there was nothing she could do to oppose Hela. She noted the bracelet around his wrist, a link to the Great Hall. Perhaps he was more like her children than his appearance suggested. Snapping with a snarl. “It is agreeable, she may enter.”

She vanished an instant later and the two shared a look. Hela sighed almost mournfully. “Elz has no manners.” Loki stumbled a step and Hela caught him at the bicep, then pulled him into a hug without a word. He shakily exhaled, face turned towards her hair to hide, if only for a moment. Hela felt her lip twist. Even around her he pretended to be fearless. He’d been hiding his true emotions for so long it was all he knew. So she didn’t call him out on it, just held him. Just long enough to soothe his fear, she used her magic to push him back into his body and whispered softly. “Save your strength, father, we will make certain Jane succeeds.”

ALFHEIM

Mischief pulled himself into the saddle, Loki’s soft words of warning echoing in his mind.

“Be careful, Mischief. I won’t have the strength to sustain you for long…and if you die before I awaken…”

It sucked not being real. Because if Mischief didn’t make it through this little journey there would be no second chances. Hela had no hold over him because there would be nothing for her to give life back to. He wouldn’t just be dead, he’d be gone. That meant being careful of not just mortality but conserving his magical use. He knew he’d have to use some of it to mask their scent and sounds from predators, but it meant conserving as much as possible because when his magic dried up…

He wasn’t unfamiliar to a full gambit of emotions just like any other real person, but it had been quite a while since he’d felt true fear. And certainly never mortal fear. But he was Mischief, created to model after the God of Chaos. What bravery he didn’t feel, he would pretend to have and push fear to the side.

He held out his hand, helping pull Jane onto the horse behind him. She was dressed for practicality, the breeches warm enough for the weather and G’dath had ordered her to wear Loki’s hunting jacket. As soon as Jane had put the jacket on, she was ready to get down on her knees and beg Loki for one of her own. She absolutely adored this jacket.
Jane wanted to protest riding behind a twelve year old but there was no denying that Mischief was an accomplished rider. Not to mention she didn’t want to get anywhere near Talton. The elf had only glanced at her when he arrived before growling in a feral tone and almost lunging for her.

Mischief had shoved her behind him, bared his teeth and snarled back with one impatient sentence. “Touch her and I’ll rip off your fucking balls.”

It had pulled the elf up short and he hadn’t been a problem since. Idly she wondered if Mischief was truly capable of seeing his threat through but decided she wasn’t brave enough to ask. So she swallowed any residual indignation and wrapped her arms around him as the horses moved quickly down the path that wound around the village and through the forest.

Why am I doing this? What can I hope to do, other than die gruesomely…for Loki? She kept reminding herself it was to pay him back for healing her and taking the barb meant for her, but it was a lie. That wasn’t the reason. Or at least, not the only reason. But it wasn’t because it was the right thing to do, either. She was doing it for herself. She was doing it to prove everyone who had ever dismissed her or tried to label her and put her in a box that they were wrong. She was Jane Foster. She was a scientist. She was clever. She was human…but she wanted to be more.

Mischief smiled just a little to himself. This close to her, he could hear an echo of her thoughts as if they were his own. It wasn’t a talent he used often and unless Loki was trying to influence a mind it wasn’t one he indulged in either, but he knew he needed to understand this human.

So, the mouse wanted to be a lion. He could help with that. Loki could as well if she would let him. It would take careful planning. Part of being a predator was to understand exactly how the universe worked, without blinders. She was clever, but she was also blind. She would have to see not just what she was capable of, but to see the ugliness that was hidden behind civility.

Not even G’dath truly understood what Mischief was but that was fine, he liked being unknown. He wasn’t just a mage created fantasy but he wasn’t truly Loki either. An anomaly. An undefined enigma that the All-Father would be afraid of as much as he’d feared the potential danger of Hela. His mind constantly filled with some of Loki’s experiences but not everything that Mischief knew was returned to the source. Some things were private and he liked that. Loki was aware of it but respected it.

Mischief knew what the mage needed, more than he did. Loki had managed to hold onto his fractured mind but his heart was still in tattered pieces, scattered to the wind. He needed to learn to trust her, not just to heal but because he needed her. Mischief knew the reason but he pushed it aside for now. She needed to be stronger. Not just to survive, but to put up with a trickster prince whose mercurial moods could try a saint’s patience.

The under-forest would indeed be the perfect start. With the initial danger gone, if she couldn’t even muster up enough courage for this there was no hope for her. He could just transport her to the tree, collect the sap, and pop back out again…but where was the fun in that? Besides, if he was truly going to make her worthy there should be some personal risk to himself. It was only right. Loki needed to learn from this as well.

Author's Notes:
RANDOM SNUGGLES!!

Next:

Adventure through the under-forest
Chapter 30

ALFHEIM

Hela swept across the ground swiftly, walking into the cottage without pausing. Trax stiffened where he sat, before pitching forward across the table, sleeping. She smirked just a little in satisfaction. G’dath felt the muscles in her shoulder tighten but she was only smiled at thinly.

G’dath bowed slightly. “Queen Hela.”

Hela smirked at the healer now and inclined her head in greeting. Searching with her eyes and ears, Hela opened the neighboring door and the chicks scrambled outside before freezing and huddling against one another.

“Do they know something we don’t, my dear?”

Not glancing at Azni, kneeling down as she replied. “I need their pelts.”

The older woman made a disapproving sound. “Their fuzz is shed when they reach adulthood.”

Hela’s head tilted slightly in the elf’s direction. “For Jane’s life I’m willing to sacrifice them.”

Azni tutted in disapproval. “Or you could simply age them.”

Lifting an eyebrow, green eyes outraged and looking at Azni fully. “Simply?!” Did Azni not understand the involvement in that type of spell?

Azni smiled that small little elf smile. She wasn’t a spell caster, but she knew the spell was taxing. The older woman said nothing and after a moment Hela huffed and gently scooped up all four of them. Azni tilted her head slightly. “He rests within.”

Hela sniffed dismissively as she asked, “What makes you think I wish to see him?” Azni’s eyes were too knowing for Hela’s comfort level. She narrowed her own eyes. “You remind me of grandmother…and no, it’s not a compliment.” Still saying nothing, Azni took a step to the left as Hela stood and after a considering moment the younger woman swept passed and paused at the threshold.

She’d seen Loki sick. She’d seen him pale. His skin was slowly approaching an unhealthy grey and Hela bit into her lower lip before easing into the room and sitting down in the chair next to the bed. A little blond head lifted, summer-sky blue eyes narrowing as they evaluated her. Hela’s lip quirked in amusement, knowing who little Talia was by sight. After all, Hela had been the one to give Loki two little golden threads to look after, not just one.

Her choosing to tie him to a second child hadn’t been on a whim. A sibling so Indel would have a companion, no matter if Loki chose to remain on Alfheim or return to Asgard. A traumatized little girl that Loki could assist…which in turn could help him to overcome his own traumas. Not to mention having two children with similar elven features would help to camouflage Indel, who even though he was only half dark elf it was his strongest resemblance.

Speaking to the girl of Loki. “You want him to be yours, do you not?” Hela slowly smiled, knowing the answer without needing a reply. “I cannot blame you…but you must learn to share.”
Reaching out to gently move a midnight lock off his forehead, Talia not moving as she listened. “Sometimes father doesn’t know what he needs. If you wish to keep him, little elf, you’ll have to be more stubborn than he is.” Talia nodded slightly with a yawn as if she understood and curled back against Indel who was sleeping fitfully, his head resting on Loki’s chest.

Hela reached out hesitantly with one hand and gently tucked a few strands of white hair behind his delicately pointed ear. Her lip quirked as she did the same to Talia. Hela felt herself smile softly as she looked over the pair of them. Talia would make a fine sister for her little brother.

Closing her eyes, she reached out with her magic to find Loki’s own stores dangerously low. Brow furrowing, she gave just a little to him, enough to ease the discomfort without giving him so much to cause the poison to spread. Her hand returned to Indel’s head, frowning to feel him nearly drained. Then it became obvious and she sighed softly. Indel had been transferring his own magic to Loki instinctively. She stayed for a few minutes longer before standing, pausing in the main room to glance at Azni. “Indel shouldn’t be here when Jane returns.”

G’dath hugged her arms around her torso and muttered to herself. “If she returns.”

A savage grin crossed Hela’s face. “Of course she will. She’s stronger than she thinks she is…it’s one of the reasons why father loves her.”

They stopped in the middle of a clearing at the end of the path. The horses, a pair of beautiful bays, standing a few paces apart. Talton climbed off his horse and pulled together his supplies, careful not to look in her direction. Mischief debated mentally for a moment. “Did you know that Loki knows what I know?” Jane froze for a moment before meeting green eyes as he turned in his seat to look at her. “That little remark about trusting him he heard.” He didn’t say it, but she took in the unspoken message. He’s been avoiding you because you hurt him.

Quite frankly she was surprised Loki cared a flying fig about her opinion. Once again she was reminded of dream-Loki who was a lot of talk but bruised easily. She was starting to toy with the disturbing thought that her dreams hadn’t been all her fevered imagination. Maybe she had unconsciously picked up on the man behind the trickster. The Loki that she’d imagined seemed as real and viable as Mischief and the Loki she was playing house with. “He knows everything you know?”

He tilted his head slightly. “Well, what I choose to give him.”

Brow furrowing. “And you know everything he knows?”

Shrugging. “I suppose he keeps things from me. I don’t recall much after falling from Asgard before Midgard…” He frowned. “…actually, I don’t really remember much of anything before Svartalfheim.” Then he shrugged. “Just as well.” Mischief waited until Jane had hesitantly climbed off the horse before pulling his feet out of the stirrups and performing a backflip, grinning when she blinked at him in shock. He shrugged off the look and pointed. “The under-forest.”

Her mouth slowly dropped open. It wasn’t possible. What she was seeing defied every law of physics that had been ingrained in her since high school. The trees in terms of shape and height were no different than any other part of the forest here. The sky was the same color, with a few sparse clouds. It was just…reversed. If you can imagine a section of woods as a picture, from ground to skyline, and then turn it upside down, that was what she was looking at…except the roots pointed upward, buried in a layer of dirt, grass, and sediment which ended sharply in black nothingness… and the sky was reversed as well. “How is that possible?”
Talton grimaced to himself. “No one knows. The only agreement to be had is that no one comes here.”

Shaking her head. “No, I mean…I mean how is that possible?”

Mischief glanced at Jane. “Magic, Jane. Remember…some things just can’t be put into human words. You don’t have the translatable structure for understanding.”

Talton pointed, ignoring Mischief. “Be careful. Within that stretch, if you lose your balance you fall through the branches to nothingness.”

Jane’s eyes bugged. She couldn’t balance on a single branch without moving and they wanted her to walk on the branches. Loki wouldn’t even let Indel near this forest. Jane saw Mischief wink at her before pulling out a length of rope from the ether and tie an end around his waist before holding it out to her. “Here, you will want to tether yourself to me.”

She was going to faint. She really was. Or maybe throw up. Her stomach rolled. “Um...maybe this is a really, really, really bad-…”

“Jane.” She bit her lip and looked back into his green eyes. Big, sad green eyes, looking up at her mournfully and sporting a slightly trembling lower lip. “Please?”

She felt her stomach plummet. Suddenly she felt very sorry for Frigga. How could you say ‘no’ to a boy capable of the saddest puppy dog eyes in the universe? Loki had been a very, very spoiled little boy…and she suspected he’d been able to wheedle his mother as an adult with that look. Heck, she would cave to that look. Why the hell had he used an army to try to take over earth? Most of the planet would have surrendered immediately to that look.

She pulled in a slow breath. “Give Loki a message for me.” Mischief’s eyebrows rose slightly, intrigued. Pulling in a second breath. “Tell him from me that he owes me two-no, three days of knowledge. Uninterrupted. I ask a question, he answers.” Her jaw firmed when he grinned a little, yet still managed to look tragic. “The truth.”

Swallowing, she grabbed the rope and wrapped it around her waist, forcing her breath to remain even. His face instantly reverted to mischievous delight and she felt like kicking herself for falling for it. Mischief tried to sound reassuring. “Just walk where I walk. I’ll go as slow as you need and I won’t let you fall. You’ll get your answers, Jane.”

One more quick breath before she nodded and set her jaw stubbornly. Mischief smiled shyly and nodded in return before walking forward with Jane trailing after. Talton stared at the pair of them in confusion before shaking his head to himself, pulling out a bow, a sword already attached to his belt, and a collection of quivers to his back.

It was a tragically short walk to the edge of the forest and Jane was seriously afraid of being sick, mumbling to herself. “Don’t look down.”

It was too disconcerting to look down and see blue skies. It was dizzying to look up. All she could do was look forward and walk very carefully. Thankfully the branches were close enough together that she used several of them as a rail but her hands were still shaking. Talton followed and made disgusted sounds, which wasn’t helping and he was really starting to annoy her…worse than Loki was capable and that was saying something.

Mischief glanced behind her, annoyance contorting his features. “Elf, I can shield you from notice as I am doing with her until we reach the tree but if you don’t stop annoying me your
journey is about to become very exciting.”

Talton narrowed his eyes but wisely refrained from commenting. Jane felt herself smile a little, though it slipped as the minutes of silence stretched out again. “Can you talk to me?”

Mischief grinned and turned on the single branch he was walking on, not using the other branches for balance. “Obviously I can. Was there a particular topic you have in mind?”

Forcing her breathing to remain even, teeth clench. “Anything. Just…distract me?”

He pursed his lips before shrugging, tone taking an instructive edge. “Magic is in everything alive. Trees. People. But some people can pull it to their command like a pet. The more you use it, the tamer and more malleable it is. That’s why magicians will spend hundreds of years on simple spells before graduating to complex ones. Small magicians are capable but the results can be disastrous and the backlash deadly.”

Talton scowled. “It is not just the caster, it is the source as well.”

Sighing at the elf. “No, the magician is the control.”

His tone insistent. “But the origin is the source.”

Mischief raised an eyebrow. “You don’t have a thimble-full of magic in your blood, how would you know?”

Talton’s scowl deepened. “The source sets the severity of the flow of magic. My mother, G’dath, is the only elf to travel to all nine realms to study magic so extensively.”

Both Jane and Mischief looked at the elf, intrigued, but it was he that asked the question. “What did she find?”

Puffing up a little. “Alfheim and Svartalfheim have a similar feel to old magic. It is powerful, but reluctant to be used by non elf-kind. Jötunheim has a savage edge but a feel of bitter cold.”

Jane was fascinated, hesitation forgotten. “Earth?”

Glancing at Jane. “Midgard is young, as are your people. The magic is unrestrained, powerful, but unpredictable.”

An evil grin curled Mischief’s lips. “So what did G’dath do to you for trying to kill Indel?”

Jane wobbled in surprise and horror while Talton scowled. “It is not your concern!”

The boy continued, knowingly taunting the elf. “She must be pretty scary to risk your life for a dark elf’s father.”

Talton snarled. “I should leave you both here to rot.”

Mischief shrugged easily. “Go ahead. One way or another G’dath will know she has an oath breaker and a coward for a son.” Mischief clutched both palms together and sighed mockingly. “She must be so proud.”

Jane felt her body tremble, whether from horror or fury she didn’t know. “Why would you hurt a little boy?”
Mischief shook his head. “Kill, not hurt. He was going to cut Indel’s head off.”

She stopped breathing, staring at Talton as if he were a monster that had just come crawling out from under her bed. “Why??”

Snapping at her, having no interest in defending himself to a human. “Because he is a disgusting dark elf. They are the most vile, evil creatures in existence. They covet the dark and worship death with the mad Titan. Yggdrasil made a mistake in creating them.”

Jane was shocked to the core. She’d never been slapped in the face by such blatant, ignorant prejudice. And it was against a child. It disgusted her. It sickened and angered her. She opened her mouth to fire off a retort but something in her paused and reevaluated. No. She had an idea suddenly and she pushed aside her normal hesitation of confrontation.

Her tone surprisingly calm. “Where do light elves come from?”

It was Talton’s turn to pause. “What?”

Shrugging slightly at the elf who just look confused. “Did light elves and dark elves start at the same time?”

Mischief smirked, seeing where she was coming from and loving it. He answered for Talton who was just staring at her in shock. “Light elves evolved from dark elves.”

Her tone leading. “So then…if dark elves are vile, evil creatures…and light elves come from dark elves…does that mean…” The glare that Talton threw at her was designed to roast meat off a bone but the smirk on her own face was as cold and calculated as some of Loki’s best.

Mischief’s smile was elated. There is hope for Jane Foster yet.

But it effectively shut Talton up, Mischief continuing to talk uninterrupted. They paused as a few creatures, a pack of wolf-like animals, crossed their path without pausing. Jane slowly exhaled once they had disappeared deeper into the forest. Mischief grinned cockily. “Told you we were shielded.” Jane gave into the temptation and ruffled his hair, forgetting all about her fear and hesitation.

They started walking again, Mischief turning before exhaling in relief and ignoring the beginning fatigue.

The hours bled together as they walked, deeper into the forest, which grew darker the further they ventured. The predators ignored them, the plants not as easy to fool. But walking slowly and silently kept the creeper vines and venus flytraps from reacting. At least that’s what she was calling them because she couldn’t even pronounce the names Mischief had told her.

An icy wind blew through the branches, making them creak and whistle. A bird took flight, but its progress slowed until it froze in mid-air. Jane’s eyes widened and she shivered. Loki’s jacket was warm enough. That wasn’t what made her shiver.

What. The. Hell.

The world stuttered to a halt. The forest darkened around her but she could still see Mischief and Talton, only they had also slowed, poised to move. She shivered, goose bumps on her arms and icy fingers trailing up her spine. The cold seeped in gradually. It kissed at the tips of her toes. It caressed her ankles and ran icy fingers along her thighs. By the time she saw the fog roll in, her breath was stolen from her lungs by the figure standing next to her.
A figure dressed in black, and if she weren’t in the middle of an impossible forest on another planet she might laugh. But this, whatever it was, had appeared out of nowhere and it made her wary. On a primal level she felt fear, as if just a word or touch from this creature could steal her life from her. The head turned, the hood obscuring all but glowing green eyes. The face was covered in shadows but Jane could see the outline of the features. Lips curved and formed words and Jane shivered again. “It will come down to you, Jane Foster of Midgard. For Midgard and Asgard to survive, we need him…but to defeat the enemy of the nine realms, we need you.”

Shaking her head and swallowing. “Me? I’m not a warrior. I-I’m a scientist.”

The woman, for her voice was undeniably feminine, continued speaking. “One question that needs answered. You must say the name, to save his life. Are you ready for the question?”

Swallowing, voice wavering as she whispered. “I don’t understand.”

The figure continued speaking softly, with no discernable accent. “It is unnecessary for you to understand. All that must be is to answer the question when the time is right.”

Confused. Frustrated. This felt like a strange dream that was completely disconnected from reality. “I-…who are you?”

There was no reply at first, just those piercing green eyes holding her in place. A small smile. “Yes. What once was whole…strong and fair, halved cleanly, yet two walk whole. What is the name of that who is daughter, yet birthed by none?”

A strange piece of leather appeared in her pale hands, the outside hard but the inside a strange, soft green. Familiar green. Without comment the woman slipped the piece into Jane’s hair, pushing her hair back like a headband would, who flinched. “Wha-…”

Chin gripped firmly, a voice like steel stilled Jane with an order. “Keep it there if you want to live.” The figure stepped to the right and disappeared into golden nothing.

“Wait!”

Talton sighed. “What is it now?”

Jane blinked and refocused to see both Talton and Mischief looking at her strangely. Hesitantly she reached up, her fingers brushing against the leather head band. Shaking her head slightly, looking around just to be sure. “Sorry. Never mind.”

Azni reached down for Indel who whimpered in his sleep as she picked him up. Talia scooted closer to Loki, curling up against him and resting her head on his shoulder, her small fingers smoothing over the top of his round ear. Mentally Azni groaned. They forgot his elven disguise. Thankfully Trax wasn’t observant enough to notice. Keeping her voice low as she adjusted the child in her arms. “Talia, come with me, dear.” She was privately worried about Indel, who barely stayed awake. G’dath had assured her there was no bond between them that caused it but it worried her nonetheless.

Be stubborn. Talia didn’t lift her head, just shook it and wrapped her fingers in his tunic.

Sighing tiredly and glancing over her shoulder. “G’dath, can you retrieve Talia?”

G’dath appeared in the doorway, looking surprised. Those blue eyes narrowed at the two women, baring her teeth at them. “Talia, you can stay the night with Azni-…”
“No.”

Both women physically jerked. It had been so long since Talia had spoken they couldn’t even remember when. She hunched down, her ear pressing against his chest over his heart. Azni felt the realization tear through her. Losing her father had devastated Talia, traumatized her almost to the point of catatonia. Somehow, and with such brief interactions she couldn’t fathom how, little Talia had latched onto Loki as a father figure and wasn’t letting go. Losing him might be a loss she wouldn’t recover from.

“If you stay here now I won’t return until morning.”

Talia wiggled her fingers as if to tell her goodbye, closing her eyes and holding Loki tightly.

G’dath and Azni shared a look before retreating, partially closing the door behind them. Within seconds of their retreat, Loki’s lips parted with the softest of whimpers escaped. Indel couldn’t explain it and the adults didn’t know, but as Loki lost more and more magic it hurt him. She’d been watching Indel give Loki magic donations every time he woke up so she knew what to do. Talia frowned and reached for his hand, her own glowing a soft orange. The pained distress quickly erased from his face and with a yawn Talia closed her eyes.

As soon as she’d met him, she knew he didn’t fit quite right. There was something clever and dangerous and more about him. He didn’t smell right, either. Before her pop died he’d taken her to all sorts of villages and wilds on Alfheim. Azni and G’dath smelled like the lakes of the north. Indel smelled like the forest here, woodsy with a hint of ash. She wasn’t sure where the ash came from. But Loki smelled like pine and mountains and snow. There wasn’t anywhere on Alfheim that had such a blend so she’d known he wasn’t an elf.

She was a big girl now, nine years old. Not all that old for an elf but older than Indel. Old enough to know what she wanted. She loved her mother, but she didn’t think her mother loved her back. It confused and hurt her but having a papa would make her feel better. He had to be funny and smart. He had to tell good stories and fuss a little. He had to love her.

Loki didn’t exactly smile, not like her pop had. Loki’s smiles were small secrets. But he had the creases around his mouth and eyes so even if they were fake, he did smile a lot. Loki lied, a lot, but so did Indel and he was her best friend so that was okay. He growled a lot. He was quiet… but he was funny. He was good at cuddling and didn’t scoff at carrying Indel whenever he wanted. Indel said he told the best bedtime stories. He was really, really smart and he knew magic. She hoped he could teach her.

Talia yawned again, sinking against him and one wish followed her into her dreams. She hoped her papa woke up soon.

Talton sighed. “Finally!” They all jumped when his voice echoed eerily.

It was a massive, gnarled tree that was wider than the village and taller than any other tree. Mischief smiled tiredly, face pale and holding out a wooden tap and vial. “You have to fill it…to the top…”

Jane’s brow furrowed as she accepted them. “Are you okay?”

He nodded and stumbled, Jane snagging him around the waist before he could fall, holding onto a few branches with her free hand. “Loki’s too weak to support me and I can’t shield us
anymore.” Bird-like cries started filling the air and Mischief glared weakly at Talton. “Way to go, big mouth.”

Talton sneered, bow in hand and nudged Jane’s shoulder with a finger. “Go.” He tapped the necklace around his neck. “As soon as you’re done, this will drag us back to the beginning.”

Jane’s head whipped around from one to the other. “Wha-…”

Talton roared impatiently. “GO.”

Mischief tugged at her. “Jane, go.”

Jane pulled in a breath, thought about a universe without Loki in it, and launched herself at the tree with Mischief right behind her, ignoring the branches near her arms suddenly disappearing so that she was literally balancing on a single branch.


She didn’t think, she just moved, crying out softly when she was able to press against the large tree. She did it! She did it…no time to stop now, she toyed with the wooden spigot as Mischief fumbled with the knife in his hands until he sagged suddenly and slipped between the branches. Jane dove for him, grabbing the back of his tunic. “NO!” She pulled but the branches had a lot more give for someone falling than trying to pull them up. She froze, her breath stuttering as the cloth started to tear, his feet inching closer and closer to that endless blue sky that had darkened as the day waned.

“Leave him!”

No, was all she could think. The rope would keep him from disappearing but she wouldn’t put it past Talton to cut the rope after the sap was collected and abandon the boy. He wasn’t real but she didn’t care. He was real enough. Grunting, she sat down and used her feet to push the branches to the side. The rough edges scratched her arms and tangled in his hair but she kept shoving and coaxing until finally, FINALLY, she had him back in her arms. Fear in her eyes to see he was unconscious, shaking him. “Mischief??”

Talton danced along the branches. “Hurry up! Here they come…”

Jane looked up. “They?”

Her eyes widened in horror as hundreds of green, pterodactyl-like creatures dived for them with talons out and beaks lined with teeth wide open. Their narrow eyes were fixed on her, predator instincts honed as they screamed. Talons that looked like knives and sharp teeth like razor blades.

She had a horrified thought. If those were what the chicks were going to look like when they grew up she was going to thump Loki once he was on his feet again. She would thank him for saving her life and she’d apologize for hurting his feelings. Still, it didn’t change the fact that she would do her best to thump his shoulder for not warning her. Really hard.

Cries came from behind her and her head whipped around. Through the trees four more of them appeared but before she could react they whooshed upward, talons extended to scratch at the predators swooping downward. Then she thought about the leather band in her hair and pushed it to the side for later. She was here to do something and she would be damned if she didn’t do it. She pulled in a deep breath, grabbed the knife Mischief clutched even unconscious, and carved into the bark, chanting in her head.

*This is for me. This is for Indel. This is for Mischief-Loki.*
Jane focused on her task, pushing her fear to the side. It was distracting, this reflex to scream and duck but if she did that Mischief would fall…or the vial would. Neither was an option. With a grunt she shoved the spigot into the bark, something in her relaxing as sap started to collect and she shakily held the vial in place to catch every precious drop. She didn’t notice that the few who evaded her four winged protectors would dive for her, then pull up short with confused squawks and raptor-like screams, scenting her as one of their own. The cycle would repeat but all of Jane’s attention was on her job. Mumbling under her breath the entire time for the sap to move faster, she used her left arm to keep a tight hold on the unconscious boy who was tethered to her and barely breathing.

A growling purr rumbled in the distance, the elf pausing as the raptors gave cries of fear and flew back upwards, disappearing into the roots. Slowly a sleek, orange cat-like creature emerged, roughly the size of a small horse and resembling a panther. It hissed and bared three sets of fangs. Talton danced from branch to branch, he was out of arrows and switched to his sword to keep the creature from reaching her.

Jane blinked, eyes wide, and flattened herself against the tree, slapping a hand over her mouth to keep from screaming. Suddenly remembering something Loki had said to Indel, she crouched down with Mischief shielded by her body and turned her face towards the bark, muttering under her breath. “…blend in with your environment…” A drop of sap escaped the full vial. She nodded and tapped the cork to the top, tucking it carefully into a pocket on the inside of the jacket, right hand on the tree as she yelled over her shoulder. “Done!”

Talton took a lunging swipe with his sword, backed into her and roughly grabbed the back of her jacket while breaking the glimmering crystal around his neck. Wind and smoke whipped around them and Jane clenched her eyes shut with a scream, holding onto Mischief with both arms as the branches under her feet rolled and disappeared.

She didn’t fall. In fact the ground under her feet felt more firm than before and she cautiously opened her eyes. She blinked around with large brown eyes to see the under-forest in the distance, all three of them standing next to the horses they’d left behind. She slowly turned to Talton, Mischief leaning into her with eyes closed and his chin resting on her shoulder. The elf gave her an amused look, also obviously tired. He pulled out a knife and cut the rope keeping the two of them together. “I will take the boy. The mare will follow if you can keep from falling.”

Her jaw tightened and fire flashed in her eyes at the mocking undertone. She didn’t take that crap from Loki and she sure wasn’t going to take it from Talton. *Why would I? I’m not even the least bit attracted to Talton…I did *not* just think that.* Voice mulish as her hands tightened into fists. “I’ll be fine.”

Asgard

Odin called an end to court early, moving swiftly to the side corridor. Once there he collapsed back against the wall and almost slid down to the stone floors. When the assassin had breached the throne room, he had been worried for Loki, but convinced himself it hadn’t known his son’s whereabouts. But then a page had been sent from Heimdall, informing him there was no fog over Alfheim’s moon. Within seconds he knew matters were anything but alright.

Eye closed, he let out a shaky breath. He’d misjudged her. Jane Foster was a remarkably brave woman, risking her life as she had. He knew he was going to regret this habit of keeping an eye on Loki and just as he’d been prepared to interfere, whether or not he could do anything was...
debatable, the crisis was averted.

“Milord? Do you require a healer?”

Odin glanced to the left at a male servant who was looking at him worriedly. He pulled himself together, hiding behind his usual projection of calm authority. “Nay.”

Pushing himself off the wall, he walked stiffly down to his study and pushed open the double doors. Shutting them firmly behind him, with a sigh he crossed the distance to the balcony and walked outside. It wasn’t even late afternoon yet, and he could easily hear the men practicing in the training yard. This particular balcony provided him a majestic view of the distant mountains and the pine forest.

But he paid it little attention, his thoughts on the future. He considered the possibility of a future with his son and Jane Foster in it. Before now he’d never considered even offering her status as an Aesir. When he’d met her she had been kind and polite but she didn’t fit. She was brave but filled with insecurity and self-doubt. Not at all a good fit for goddess, let alone queen. But now he considered it. She’d faced fears and overcome them. With only minimal prodding she’d conquered adversity and returned victorious. She hadn’t lived a warrior’s life…but she wasn’t as beyond learning as he’d first believed.

And she’d saved his son’s life, an act he wasn’t soon to forget. He still stood behind his belief that she wasn’t the right fit for Asgard’s queen…but as a princess, tied to his rather unique son, she might just do. A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. Turning. “Enter.”

Heimdall’s page entered, bowing and holding out a letter. “For you, milord.”

Odin frowned to himself before taking the letter, looking it over and biting back a sigh. His work as king was never done, but his work as father and grandfather he couldn’t seem to escape. The letter was Heimdall’s reminder that Hela wished him to visit Jötunheim soon and offer peace with the frost giants. But then he thought about it and realized there was a lot of wisdom in that suggestion. He was well aware there was a new king over Jötunheim and after so many millennia of war it would be nice to truly be at peace again. It would also send a strong message, both to his people and to Loki.

It would take time to make the arrangements and it would be the perfect opportunity for Thor to observe and learn from, as the mantle would soon be passed on to him. In fact, he made a mental note that once peace with Jötunheim was achieved, it would be time for his coronation…and hopefully by then Loki would be home. He felt himself smile a little as he nodded his head. This was going to be a very interesting next few months, indeed.

ALFHEIM

Jane’s hand actually trembled as she sat down. Loki looked like he was already dead. He was so pale and drawn, his chest barely moved as he breathed. It was the fact that he was breathing that eased her worry. G’dath had said every drop counted and only because she was not going back to the under-forest did she carefully worm her arm under his neck.

Nope, it didn’t have anything to do with the fact that I’d missed him. Not at all. Or that it made me feel better to feel that he was still warm and alive. Denial, thy name is Jane. She froze and blinked in surprise, a little elf girl that looked just slightly older than Indel was studying her intently, having popped her head up from her little hidey-hole on the opposite side of him. Her clear blue eyes narrowed, studying Jane and her fingers tightened their grip on Loki’s tunic. There was a quick mind
behind those eyes and with a mulish set of her jaw she laid her head down on his chest. She
remembered her from Azni’s house but her name escaped her. *Just who the heck is this
Girl?*

Jane shook her head, forcing herself to focus. She maneuvered herself so that his head
rested in the crook of her arm, pressing the vial to his lips. As the drops of the cure slipped over
his tongue his face contorted slightly and she found herself grinning in spite of herself. It was like a
disgruntled child receiving cough syrup. He swallowed reflexively and moaned softly in displeasure,
head moving to the right a little. “Shh…drink it, Loki.”

His hands twitched on top of the covers and she tipped the vial further. The more he drank,
the more he moved. Almost as if he were waking from a deep slumber like those fairytales she’d read
as a child. She tipped the vial so that every drop disappeared down his throat and with a last swallow
a full grimace crossed his face as he slowly blinked open his eyes.

Her eyes unknowingly tender, grinning as she moved back so his head once more rested
on the pillow. “Welcome back, sleepy head.”

Loki’s brow furrowed, lips parting in surprise before tilting his head to look at her. Then
the vial. Then back to her. Before he said anything, before he did anything else, he reached out with
what little magic was in him and searched for Mischief’s faint connection. Loki recalled him before
he was lost forever, and the startled cry from the next room told him the boy had disappeared. But
knowledge passed over his eyes, his surprise at all that she’d done turning to contemplation of what
Mischief knew she wanted to be before it smoothed and vanished. “Good morning.”

Sighing airily, trying and failing to look calm and collected. “Oh it’s much too late for
morning…why?” He blinked slowly. “Why did you—why??”

He considered her for an instant, hand smoothing idly over Talia’s hair where she rested
against his chest. “Why did you? I have no more reason than you do.”

Jane somehow doubted that but she let it go for now because she still wasn’t completely
certain of her own reason. She smiled hesitantly, suddenly feeling shy. “Thank you. Just—I’m sorry
you were hurt because of me and I’m sorry you’re stuck dealing with…this and just—thank you for
saving my life.”

His eyes betrayed his surprise but after a moment he nodded slightly. “You’re welcome.”
His brow furrowed suddenly in concern. “How is Indel?”

Nibbling on her lower lip a little before sighing. “He was upset at first but Azni’s been
taking care of him for you.” The locket swung free of her tunic and he was mesmerized by it. There
wasn’t anything Mischief kept from him this time and all he could feel was wonder. His clever,
clever mother. There wasn’t a day that went by that he didn’t feel regret, that he didn’t feel the sting
of her loss, but he had to admire her. But if she knew of his feelings developing for Jane, months
before he’d even met her, he had to have the tiniest of hopes that maybe she knew. He’d never been
able to lie to her before, surely his mother knew he’d loved her to the end and beyond.

Jane studied him for a moment, thinking he might be too tired to lie to her. “Are the chicks
going to grow into six foot pterodactyls?”

It wasn’t anything on his face that betrayed him. As far as she could see it was blank. But
she looked into his eyes at just the right millisecond and saw a flash of guilt. “Why ever would you
come to that conclusion?”

Her lip curled. “Fair warning, liar, once you’re back on your feet I am going to punch you.
Probably the shoulder but I will get even.”

Frowning a little. “Get even for what?”

“Trauma. Lots and lots of trauma.” His furrowed brow smoothed, eyes growing heavy and obviously needing to gather more strength before he was truly ready to be up and about. Her hand moving on its own to card through his thick hair, voice gentle. “Sleep…he’ll be here when you wake up.”

He wasn’t a prince of Asgard here. He didn’t hold a spell or potion that they wanted from him. G’dath looked after him, taught him, when there was hardly little gain for her. Trax showed him genuine concern in his eyes. And little Jane, he hadn’t been so far gone that he hadn’t heard real distress in her voice because of his injury. And now this. She’d saved his life and would have died trying. In that moment he realized there truly was still kindness, goodness in the universe.

His shattered heart pulled back together again, the cracks tentatively realigning even if it didn’t heal. Not yet. Perhaps never to be the trickster prince before he fell, but a Loki who could accept that there were good hearted, innocent people in the realm. People that were worth protecting.

He nodded in agreement and closed his eyes, body sinking back into the mattress and refusing to dwell on how good her fingers running through his hair felt. “…very…well…”

Author's Notes:

Hopefully it was suspenseful enough for you. Oh, and keep the riddle Jane was given in your back pocket. It'll be important much later on.

Next:

Indel cuteness; the Avengers discuss paranoia
ASGARD

Odin had been good on his word. Amora had been aware he’d led her testimony but she wasn’t inclined to anger him so soon and had allowed it. He’d pronounced her a courtier and reinstated the privileges that went along with it. Namely that she could attend almost any function and open court. There were rooms set aside in the far side of the castle for them, almost as if they were nobles even if it would be more accurate to say they were favored commoners. Unfortunately, it also meant she had to endure the ladies of the court. Quite frankly she’d rather spend her day watching Sif train with the other warriors…and she hated Sif.

“Lady Amora, how lovely to see you again.”

“Yes. We heard about your harrowing plight.”

Amora maintained an unaffected mask as she turned. Four courtiers swished their way over to her. She wasn’t concerned about the other three, nameless blond idiots who had found their way into Asgardian court by slipping from bedchamber to bedchamber. Lady Tia, however, was a different matter. Not quite beautiful but certainly noteworthy. The problem was she was the daughter of one of Odin’s council and a vicious little bitch. And she was smart. Not smarter than Amora, but clever.

Tia’s smile had bite. “Seven days for lying to our king, the All-father must be feeling generous.”

As if that was still news. It had been weeks ago. One of the others whispered conspiringly to Tia, just loud enough to be heard. “He always did have a weakness for lying spell casters.”

Amora’s eyebrow lifted in amusement. “I gather you object to my magical affinity.”

Tia sniffed delicately, looking repulsed. “I would rather converse with that boorish Lady Sif than debase myself by consorting with the likes of you.”

None of them noticed Sif standing just out of sight, watching and listening. Sif had as much use for the courtiers as they had for her. She had even less use for Lady Tia. And while she did on a certain level wish that she could fit the mold of a proper lady of court, for the most part she didn’t give a damn what these vapid women thought about her.

Warriors had become an increasing presence since the throne room had been breached by an imposter. The guards were more attentive, their gazes sharper. Some of the more cowardly courtiers had taken an extended vacation in Vanaheim. Amora would never make such a mistake. Now when war came, then she would hide in Vanaheim. Which reminded her. Now that the species had been identified she needed to track down Hela. She doubted she could get the Goddess of the Underworld to interfere. But hopefully she would at least confirm if Thanos was behind this shape shifter.

Tia continued, oblivious to Sif’s attention and Amora’s inattention. “It is a shame the prince is dead, the pair of you were made for one another.”

Amora blinked. “You mourn him?” Not for one second did she believe that any of the nobles missed him but she was curious to the response.
“It is fashionable to mourn him.” Amora stared at the little idiot in horror who had spoken.

Tia was nodding in agreement with her cohort. “Soon Prince Thor will be king and it will be fashionable to occupy ourselves with other matters.”

Amora felt bile rise in the back of her throat. She was selfish and proud of it. She was a liar and delighted in it…but she never pretended to be anything but what she was. “By the Norns you are repugnant.”

Anger flared in Tia’s eyes. “And you—…”

Sif walked slowly into view, palm resting on the hilt of her sword. The threat was unspoken, but since there were few warriors who were her equal it gained immediate silence. Sif’s attention turned to Amora. Even though she was repulsed by the enchantress, Tia disgusted her even more. “Courtier Tia fails to mention that her animosity to mages and to Prince Loki is fueled by petty jealousy and ego.”

“Jealous??” Tia’s voice was a shriek of outrage.

Amora’s lip curled in amusement. “Indeed.”

Sif continued as if oblivious to Tia rapidly turning purple. “I once mentioned to Prince Loki that he bedding her might make her more agreeable since he was known to be highly skilled and to…well satisfy. She was within earshot when the suggestion was made.”

Amora found this absolutely delicious, unable not to ask. “And the response?”

This was actually all true and Sif found it deeply satisfying. The corner of Sif’s lip quirked upward just the tiniest bit and Amora lapped it up like a kitten with cream. “The prince bluntly stated he would never sully himself with such an obtuse trollop for fear of her reducing his own intelligence during the act. His head was turned enough that he was observing her expression when he replied.”

Tia and her little cronies flounced away with an indignant huff, muttering about uncouth, unnatural females taking over Asgardian society. Sif and Amora glanced at one another. They hated one another, as rivals for Thor if nothing else. Still, the temporary alliance was well worth the effect. They both snickered before going their separate ways.

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**ALFHEIM**

Indél’s face was furrowed in concentration as he stared at the palm of his hand. He said the words for the fifteenth time and still nothing. He was a big boy now that he was four. But even though he tried to stop it, his lower lip trembled, tears of frustration in his eyes. *Dada can control fire, why can’t I?*

A larger body sat down behind him, hands much bigger than his cupping his own. “It’s not the words, Indel. What are you thinking about when you say them?”

Sniffing sadly. “That I want it to work.”

Loki chuckled softly, kissing the back of his head. “I want you to imagine a match.”

Indél frowned and asked, “A match?”

He nodded with a small smile, remembering his own frustrations at this age. “Yes, imagine
that the match has just been lit and a merry little spark of flame is dancing on top.” Indel giggled and 
Loki felt his own smile grow as he asked, “Can you see it?”

Grinning. “Yes.”

“Now, say the words.” Certain phrases were excellent for beginners. With practice, Indel 
wouldn’t need to say anything, just gesture and his magic would remember what to do. The boy 
squealed happily when a single flame flickered weakly against his palm. The fire was real, but it 
wouldn’t burn him since his magic produced it. Indel spun around to fling his arms around Loki but 
the mage was fast enough to catch his wrist. “What is the first rule about spells?”

Looking guilty, Indel blew on his palm and the flame winked out. “To always end a spell 
you start.”

Ruffling his hair. “Good.”

Indel grinned again and curled into his lap. “Can you make shapes?”

Manipulating the shapes of an element was a highly involved skill. It would be years 
before Indel would be able to do so, just like any other fine motor skill. But Loki had been 
manipulating fire for centuries now. Loki held out his right hand and snapped his fingers, a proud 
green flame leaping into existence. The flame grew legs and a mane, head tossing back.

“Horse!”

Smirking, Loki watched as the body elongated and a pair of bat like wings grew and 
moved.

“Dragon!”

The body shrunk, fluffy tail wagging and tongue lolling out of its mouth.

Somehow Indel’s voice grew even more excited. “A puppy-can I have one?”

Raising an eyebrow, making the flame dance in random shapes. “Whatever would you 
need a canine for?”

Shrugging, Indel leaned forward with his hand out to touch the green flame. Loki was 
quick to disperse it before his son burned himself. “To play with. I can teach him to fetch and we can 
take naps together!” Loki had absolutely no expression on his face but Indel knew what to look for. 
Turning, tugging on his tunic and pouting. “Please? I’ll feed him, I promise. And I’ll walk him and 
brush him and give him a bath—…”

Mentally Loki snorted. This may be his first child but even he knew those duties would 
quickly become his own if he yielded. Standing up, Indel on his hip. “Speaking of which, it’s time 
for yours.”

Indel started wiggling in protest. “But I’m not dirty!”

Grey-green eyes flicked up and down once. Snorting. “Indel, you accumulate more dirt 
that Thor does…and that is saying something.”

His little face formed a soft question, as if the name sounded familiar in a vague way. 
“Who’s Thor?”
Loki paused in his steps, realizing he didn’t talk about his family enough for his boy to remember their names. But he didn’t even consider lying. “Thor is the name of my older brother.”

“Do I look like him?”

Loki snorted again. “Absolutely not. You are far too handsome.”

Indel giggled. Reaching up to play with a lock of ebony hair. “Can I see him?” Reluctantly Loki gestured and one of his shadows formed. Then he manipulated it before eyeing it critically. Indel tilted his head as he studied a very decent rendition of Thor. “That’s my uncle?” Loki nodded before walking through the shadow, it dissipating an instant later. “Do you have any other brothers or sisters?”

His mother had wanted more children, but for reasons that were never explained to him it hadn’t been possible. “No. He is my only sibling.” Technically true since he didn’t acknowledge his Jötunn relations as family.

“But you have a mama and dada, right?”

Loki suppressed a flinch but wasn’t quite able to keep everything he was feeling off his face as he stopped walking once more. “Yes.”

Indel’s little head tilted as he asked, “Why are you sad?”

Sad wasn’t the word for it but Indel was young. It was easy enough to mistake simple sadness for grief and longing. “Because my mother is in Valhalla and I miss her.”

Indel knew all about Valhalla. It was where all the brave warriors went when they died. “What about grandfather? Is he okay? Do you miss him?”

Loki wished he could maintain his anger forever but he was finding it hard the longer he was away from Asgard. He had no doubt the AEsir would be quick to reignite it but for now he was finding his longing to go home increasing and the sadness that he couldn’t approaching despair. Swallowing thickly, answering reluctantly. “Your grandfather is alright…and yes, I miss him, too.”

Loki shook himself a little and started walking again. As with most four year olds, Indel was quick to change topics. “Can I not have a bath today?”

“No.”

Indel looked thoughtful. “Can I skip naps?”

“No.”

Bouncing. “Can I…have a cookie?”

Grinning at the boy, dour mood forgotten. “After your bath, yes.”

Indel asked a thoroughly logical question. “Why can’t I have it before my bath?”

“Because.”

“Why?” And the boy was primed to keep asking that question until he got an answer that satisfied him.

Ducking into the bedroom, Jane struggling to read an elven book at his work table, Loki
Indel pouted. “Oh. Did your dada bribe you with cookies to take a bath?”

Loki huffed a laugh. “No, I took my baths when I was supposed to. My brother, on the other hand, required being held down.”

Giggling. “Will you hold me down?”

He raised an eyebrow at his son. “No, you are old enough to bathe without my assisting you.”

“I could run away.”

Indel giggled again as his father’s fingers tickled him as his tunic was removed. “I’m faster than you are.”

Nodding his head firmly. “I won’t dry myself.”

Loki’s voice was calm but the complete opposite of serious. “Then I’ll burn your clothes and you can walk around naked.”

Indel pouted as he was set down on his feet. “You’re no fun.”

Loki’s lips kept twitching, leaning against the wall and watching Indel take off his shoes. “If I’m no fun, then I require a nap from you after your bath.”

The boy paused to frown and thoroughly think about that. “…okay. You’re fun. You’d be even more fun if I can have a puppy.”

Loki laughed and ruffled his son’s hair.

MIDGARD

They all spread out around the conference table on the SHIELD Heli-carrier. Tony and Bruce sat on one side, Natasha and Clint on the other. Steve wordlessly filled in the space in between as they all waited for Fury. Looks were exchanged. Bruce cleaned his glasses. Tony fiddled with his electronic pad.

Steve sighed, feeling this invisible wall of separation between them all. “This is ridiculous.” Heads rose as he asked bluntly. “What is going on?”

Tony didn’t lift his eyes as he responded with a question of his own. “What are you talking about, Cap?”

Forcing his tone to not betray his frustration. “Tony.”

The billionaire still didn’t look up, his tone too casual. “Bit busy right now, this minesweeper is just so challenging but I can probably squeeze you in between my massage and happy hour tonight.”

Clint frowned, looking between the two of them and feeling his own paranoia increasing. “Why all the secrecy?”
The inventor snorted at the archer, looking over the top of his Stark Pad. “Wow. The two agents of a super, secret-keeping organization actually calling me out on not divulging something.”

Natasha’s eyebrow rose, eyes flashing of mistrust. “I never said anything, Stark.”

Tony drawled his words dryly. “Right, like you’re not waiting with ears peeled, spider.”

“Discord, as I feared.”

Everyone stiffened at the new voice and the agents jumped to their feet. Their visitor just watched them, red cloak wrapped loosely around his shoulders. Tony grinned and relaxed back in his chair, knowing the good doctor by sight and not surprised the others didn’t. Steve nodded his head slightly. “I’m Steve Rogers, and you are?”

It wasn’t their visitor that replied first, but the SHIELD director who walked into the conference room. “Doctor Stephen Strange.”

The Sorcerer Supreme barely even glanced at Fury as the director entered the room. Stephen’s focus was on the Avengers who were struggling from the effects of the machines already. “Your lies are your undoing and matters will only escalate until resolved.”

Fury sighed inaudibly. Talking to Strange was like reading a fortune cookie. The sorcerer was good in a fight but beyond that the man spoke in riddles.

Steve frowned. “What lies?”

A wry smile crossed Strange’s face. “Only you can answer that. Lies with words. Lies with omission. It all amplifies the machines’ effects, I’m afraid.”

Steve’s frown deepened. He much preferred straight talk. No nonsense. Whoever this was, was too vague for his liking. “What machine?”

Shrugging and thinking of Hela. “Only she knows.”

Natasha frowned but her eyes were calculating. “She?”

Glancing over at Natasha. “A mage with no name.”

Tony tensed as his stomach sank. He had a bad feeling Strange was talking about Gorgeous.

Fury’s voice turned heads again, his expression saying he knew exactly who Stephen was talking about. “Not one of yours, I take it.”

Strange turned his head in Fury’s direction but didn’t look directly at him, his gaze locked on Tony and a knowing glint in his eyes. “She is other-worldly, I do not expect you to understand.”

Clint frowned. “Why drop in to scare the crap out of us?”

Ignoring the archer, turning to fully address the director. “Whatever you hope to gain, Nicholas, it isn’t worth it.”

Fury felt his spine stiffen slightly even if he gave no outward sign. “I have my orders…and even if I didn’t, the last thing this planet needs is another magical lunatic, in a dress this time instead of a horned helmet.”
Voice raising as his patience waned. “And you have no conception of the forces you trifle with. Not even I would oppose her unless she posed a threat to this planet.”

Frowning, arms crossing. “You expect me to just sit on my fucking thumbs…”

“Can you contain me, Nicholas?”

That brought a chill to the air, the Avengers that hadn’t been standing doing so. The agents were tensed enough to vibrate except for Fury. “You’re not a threat, doctor.”

Stephen asked the question again, “But if I were…can you?” Fury looked decidedly uncomfortable, answering without saying a word. “Laying my ego aside…” Smirking, amused with himself. “…and admittedly, it is formidable, she eclipses me. She has but one equal and he isn’t one of yours.”

**That** got the director’s attention. Not just one but two magical unknowns. “Who then?”

It was because he valued his life and he knew that she wasn’t bluffing that Strange refrained from giving Fury that answer. Instead he shrugged carelessly. “Unimportant. She requested I warn you to stay out of her way. I have done so.”

Strange adjusted the cloak on his shoulders while the outrage grew in Fury’s voice. “You expect SHIELD to trust an unknown?”

Smirking insolently as he replied. “I expect that you will do what is in humanity’s best interest…as will I.” Strange disappeared an instant later.

Fury knew Strange’s profile inside and out. An egomaniac who could rival Stark but who would come to anyone’s aide with all his available skills as a physician. This was not a man who would ally himself with someone who would harm others. Not that there was much he could do, because Stephen was quite correct. There wasn’t much they could do to oppose him. Quite frankly he’d been surprised Loki had stayed put as long as he had considering the hints to power Thor had vaguely alluded to.

But that was then and this was now, and if SHIELD was capable of holding Strange they would have focused on stomping Dr. Doom into the ground as a first priority. He visibly considered his options before moving. “Sit down.” The others reluctantly obeyed, all except for one. Tony opened his mouth and Fury commanded him with a pointed finger. “Stark. I don’t want to goddamn hear it.”

Tony ignored him to give him a quick, mocking grin, taking his time and looking around the table after he sat. “I behaved. I didn’t interrupt Dumbledore once, I think I’m maturing.” Eyes rolled all around.

Clint frowned, his attention on Fury as he asked, “Orders, sir?”

Tapping a button, the image of a round device about the size of a yoga ball hovered above the table. Fury planted both hands on the table and leaned towards the device. “The machine he was referring to. We know jack shit about them but several of them appeared planet-side, we’re guessing a few months ago.”

Natasha’s eyebrow quirked. “Guessing, sir?”

His voice matching the disgust that skittered across his face. “Magic. We can’t turn them off or blow them up.”
“Surveillance?”

The image changed to a graph and Fury folded his hands behind his back. “It alters brain waves and from what we’ve been able to figure out, the effect is global. Just like Strange said, discord. A neural scrambler with tech like we’ve never seen.”

Steve tilted his head slightly. “Could it be Doom?”

Shaking his head slightly. “It’s not Doom. The magic or energy or whatever the hell it is, is off the charts. We’ve seen nothing like it and the sample of metal we were able to collect before the damn thing fixed itself is an alloy unknown to this planet.”

Tony’s eyebrows quirked up to his hairline. “Fixed itself??”

Giving the inventor a look. “The metal knit back together without a scratch, what the hell would you call it?”

Pursing his lips, glancing at Bruce before shrugging. “Fix itself.”

Fury tapped a few more buttons and an image of a woman, her dark hair obscuring her face as she knelt in front of the machine appeared. “The council thinks our prime target is an unidentified woman in her mid-twenties with similar tricks up her sleeve as Strange, apparently he thinks we’re missing the mark.”

Tony clamped down on his expression, clenching a fist under the table. He knew that ass.

Steve frowned even as he studied her image. “Could he be working for her?”

Fury made a dismissive gesture. “The doctor does as he pleases but his first priority is the citizens here. If he’s working with her, she’s no threat.”

It was Clint’s turn to frown as he hesitantly asked. “Are we ignoring council orders now, sir?”

Fury stood still for a moment, no expression to give away what he was thinking. He didn’t like the idea of a super power running around on his planet, uncontrolled and unknown, but they didn’t have much of a choice. Then again he liked the idea of following council orders even less. “They ordered us to investigate and capture on sight. Get out your fucking binoculars and let me know when you see anything.”

Tony frowned. “Does anyone still use binoculars?” He yelped when Natasha kicked him under the table. He scowled and rubbed his shin. Damn, she had long legs.

Author's Notes:

Was it cute enough for you?

Next:

Thor decides; A pair of tricksters find out someone tried to kill Odin
Thor glanced left as Fandral put a tankard of mead down in front of him, sitting next to him a second later. It had been a long two weeks. Guard details to reinforce, new recruits to train. This was the first evening he had to himself, the first evening he could take a moment to think.

He took a long sip, helping his tongue to loosen. Fandral was giving him his attention even as he attended to his own drink. “I almost thought he had returned.” Thor took another deep drink. And he had been fooled so easily. He’d asked his father how he had known the imposter wasn’t Loki. Odin had absently commented that his eyes were the wrong color. Which had puzzled Thor to no end since all of Asgard had seen how accomplished Loki was in changing his appearance. “How did you know?”

Fandral sipped his own drink, knowing exactly where Thor’s mind was. “His armor was missing the golden, half-moon guard at the front.”

Thor looked floored. “Of course…” The golden piece found in the breast plate of his light armor had been a gift from their mother. The sentimental importance aside, it had been uniquely crafted by the dwarves and enchanted so it couldn’t be duplicated.

The swordsman shrugged as he continued talking, looking up to wink playfully at one of the bar maids who smiled and fetched him a plate of cheeses. “Besides, even you commented he’d started calling you ‘brother’ with easy familiarity.” Fandral took her hand before she could escape and kissed the knuckle. She giggled and whispered in his ear before slinking away. Fandral almost sighed. Hela would kill him if he gave in to temptation. But then he cheered himself up with the thought that he would be meeting her on Vanheim soon.

Thor’s thoughts were on Fandral’s words. Strange but true. On Midgard Loki had been absolutely power mad, insane. Claiming that they weren’t brothers, attempting to kill him. Thor frowned to himself. No, the Destroyer had been Loki attempting to kill him. Letting him fall out of the airship in the glass cage and stabbing him with a throwing knife had been nothing. Banter with a bite but not life threatening. If Loki had truly wanted him dead he would have found a way to separate him from his hammer. And he could admit, at least to himself, that his brilliant brother could have found a way if motivated. “Loki has deceived me before, it is not beyond him to use my ties to him against me.”

Fandral made a displeased sound and Thor grimaced. His brother was dead and here he sat talking ill about him. But then his friend continued speaking. “Of course the most obvious was his eyes.”

The thunderer huffed in frustration. “Loki is skilled in changing his appearance.”

Fandral shrugged to himself, taking a bite of cheese and chasing it with a drink of mead. “He once told me it is extremely tiring to change the color of his eyes and will only do so when impersonating others.”

Thor hadn’t known that. And wasn’t that shaming? His own friends knew his brother better than he did. His other friends arrived and the topic of Loki was dropped. Volstagg let his plate of boar thunk heavily on the table as he sat, Hogun silently joining him. Sif sat on Thor’s right as Fandral stayed on his left. They laughed and exchanged stories and Thor thought.
He tried compiling all that he knew about Loki. Thor knew his brother by sight, but apparently not well enough. There was no excuse that he could be so easily fooled. He sipped his mead and thought about Loki’s love of magic. His skilled Silvertongue and intimidating intellect. He now knew that Loki had not been behind Midgard but why couldn’t his brother tell him that. Then he blinked in surprise. Loki’s eyes had been blue on Midgard. It had changed at times, but he couldn’t remember them being their normal green. He was a fool. A thousand years and his brother was a stranger.

Thor now knew that Loki’s words that they weren’t brothers had meant more than he had assumed. Thor had guessed at the time they meant that since Loki was Jötunn they weren’t biological brothers. It wasn’t what Loki meant. Brothers stood up for one another. Brothers were close and had each other’s backs when they were needed most. His brother had been there for him on Svartalfheim and had died for him…but when Loki needed him most on Midgard he hadn’t been there in turn. And he could never make up for that.

But he could do something about the threat against his father and the throne…and he knew it’s what his brother would want. Loki had a flare for mischief and chaos, but wouldn’t abide anyone sullying his name if it hadn’t been his idea. Not to mention how important family had been to him. As angry as he’d been, in spite of his words, he would want father protected. Thor looked his friends over and decided it was time to make a few Skrull regret their actions.

ALFHEIM

Loki twirled his fingers, smirking just a little as he watched the warped board in the floor smooth over until it was a seamless transition. It was why she kept him around, after all. He would fix things forever breaking in her old house and in return she mothered him a little. Azni was currently in the kitchen, making tea. There were a few thumps across the floor before an elfling attached herself to his back. Her thin arms wrapped around his neck, that small elf smile on her face.

Picking her up was easy enough, taking a seat at the table and letting her get comfortable in his lap. Since his brush with death Talia had become his shadow. She followed him almost everywhere except during his hunts, when she would either stay in the cottage with Jane or go back to town with Azni and G’dath.

Her little face lit up with each returned hunting trip, holding up her own arms to be held. Since she was an elf, even though she was nine, by appearance she was only a little bigger than Indel so it was easy enough to accommodate her, even when he was already carrying Indel. More often than not, after dinner she would play with Indel and the pair of them would be found sleeping next to one another. He just didn’t have the heart to separate them.

“Isn’t it time for your nap?” Talia shook her head quickly while Loki smirked, well used to the fact that she didn’t talk. “Yes, I do believe it is.” She pouted up at him and he tapped her bottom lip. “None of that. But I promise to be here when you wake up.” She gave him a hopeful look and he nodded slightly. “Go on now.”

She sighed and clambered off his lap, giving him one imploring look before slouching and taking the stairs up to the spare bedroom where Indel was already sleeping. Out of the corner of his eye, just through the window he could see Mischief coaching Jane in riding a horse. The horse was little more than a mule but it was good practice for her and Mischief enjoyed the role of instructor.

“You have a question.”

He took the tea, sipping it before glancing at Azni and nodding. “Talia.”
“Strange, that didn’t really sound like a question.”

The corner of his lip twitched at her gentle attempt at humor. “Tell me about her. I’ve gathered a few facts but I want the rest.”

Azni sighed sorrowfully and occupied a neighboring seat, nodding to herself. She let the warmth in the cup caress her senses for a few moments. “She is the last of her family line. She comes from a small village south of the Enosk River. A village of farmers except it was never a skill her parents were well versed in.”

Considering how often he’d seen her here or his home lately he was beginning to wonder. “So she does have parents.”

Something in Azni’s eyes was shadowed, as if a truth was hidden there. “The three of them moved from village to village and providence to providence, all within a short span of time. Well, relatively short I suppose. Talia had barely been a month old when they started to travel. She had a father, but he died four years ago. Art’ur. She became nearly catatonic as a result. An inquisitive sprite of a girl, all smiles and giggles. She was so smart and even showed her magical potential at such a young age…and overnight that girl disappeared. They weren’t cruel enough to execute him in front of her, but they did drag him away from her and her mother. Abril, her mother, grew worse.”

There were sicknesses of the mind but it wasn’t a common affliction for elves. “Worse?”

Azni winced and explained. “They’re thieves, Loki. Both of them.”

And suddenly that explained everything. To elves thievery was a sickness to be eradicated at all cost. In small doses it was ignored since there were no prisons and thieves typically had nothing of value to seize. But stealing from someone powerful enough, or dragged before the Senate enough times for it and it was a sure sentence. He already knew how Art’ur had died before he even said it. “He was taken before the Senate.”

Nodding reluctantly. “Abril tried to come to his defense, which is why she foolishly brought Talia with her.”

And Talia was smart. Smart enough to understand that her father was dead, even if she might not understand why. But Talia was here more often than not. “Where is she?”

Now Azni sighed in frustration. “I’m not certain. Abril comes and goes like the wind. Some weeks I’m not certain if she even remembers she has a daughter.” It was unspoken, but the knowledge that Abril continued her stealing drifted between the two of them. It would only be a matter of time before the Senate came for her. “Why do you ask?”

Loki nibbled on the inside of his lower lip. “How—…” He winced and let his fingers dance over the cup.

He paused when her hand came to rest gently over his hands. “I will not mock you, dear. Ask.”

Swallowing. “How difficult would it be for…someone to adopt her?”

Azni leaned back, smiling gently. “Considering her mother’s condition, not difficult at all. I could make the arrangements if you would like.”

It was more than just a huge step out of his comfort zone, he was voluntarily signing
himself up for a commitment of more than a thousand years. He’d held a suspicion in recent years that Ragnarok was coming, which meant only one thing in terms of his purpose. He wasn’t completely sure he had the time left to live. But with that thought came the thought that always followed. The short time that he’d had with his mother, relatively speaking, anyway. If she’d known how he was going to turn out would she still have taken him as her son? Loved him as a son? For her love he never once questioned. What would happen if Talia found out who he was and what he’d done? Indel? It made his head hurt, to think of all the possible scenarios. To strategize the best outcome, not just for himself but for Indel as well.

Incorporating Talia into his life had been seamless, almost as if she’d always been there. Something about it was nagging him at the back of his mind. He couldn’t put it into words, this feeling that he had, but he’d felt it before. Almost like all the choices in his life were being brushed aside and the path narrowing to one choice. His eyes shot back up, awareness there.

Azni nodded slightly. “It’s rare that someone can identify fate interfering.”

Loki snarled his question. “Why would I do anything those bitches want?”

If Azni was shocked by Loki’s tone she didn’t show it. “Why do they anger you so?”

Loki gave a bark of a laugh, tinged with desperation. “Surely someone like yourself knows the prophecy of Ragnarok.”

Azni shrugged and sipped her tea. “I’ve never put much belief behind prophecies.”

Growling bitterly. “When you’re cursed with one, come find me and we’ll compare notes.”

Sighing and putting down her cup. “Loki, there is a simple rule that goes with fate: the more that you believe your life is not your own, the more power you lend to them. Don’t give them that power. Live your life as you see fit—…”

Snarling in agitation and hidden fear. “And in a few years when I’m held down by entrails I’ll be left to ponder if they belong to—…”

“STOP.” Azni had stood, her tone commanding and it pulled Loki up short since it was rare that she even raised her voice. “Have I ever lied to you, Loki?”

Searching her eyes while shaking his head. “No.”

“That will never happen.” He opened his mouth but closed it when she continued, holding up a hand slightly. “I will never let that happen. Do you believe me?”

And there it was again. That feeling that she was so much more than she seemed. But he did believe her and found himself nodding. “Yes.”

She smiled serenely and sat down. “Good. Now, do you want to make arrangements for Talia?”

Live his life as he saw fit. It was probably the best advice he’d ever been given. Voice a soft murmur. “I need to consider the matter.”

Azni just continued to smile as if the decision had already been made.
Hela raised an eyebrow. Amora had tracked her to New York but was strangely quiet, her normal arrogant poise subdued. She settled down in a lawn chair on top of a skyscraper. She glanced at the rune necklace around Amora’s neck, tempted to take it just to see what the enchantress would do. It was her only means of moving between here and Asgard. Amora would have to beg passage back with Heimdall and as many issues the tall Guardian of the Bi-frost had with Loki, he absolutely loathed Amora. Smiling just a little at that thought before shaking away the temptation. “Amora?”

The enchantress fidgeted but didn’t bother to create her own chair. “Who do the Skrulls show allegiance to?”

Ah. Purring softly as she asked, “What’s wrong, little girl, afraid of war?” Hela had expected a sneer or a retort. Quiet, troubled contemplation was unexpected and disturbing. Snapping at the blond impatiently. “If I wanted to be this bored, I could talk to the dead.” Waving a hand at the AElir, deciding to be helpful for once. “Skrulls are like drones now. A reptilian species but led like insects. They swarm to the nearest, strongest being and do their bidding.”

“Thanos.”

Shrugging casually, well aware the emperor of that race had sold his people to Thanos. In exchange for what, she wasn’t sure. “So it would seem. The Other needed their realm hopping technology in their ships to arrive on Midgard after his first failed invasion.”

Amora’s green eyes looked around, fear in their depths. “They are here?”

Hela shrugged again, assessing the Asgardian. “I have seen a few of them, perhaps the rest are dormant until they are needed.”

The enchantress picked up on the impatient question that wasn’t being asked and decided to answer. “He sent one to assassinate the king.”

Even though Amora didn’t notice, Hela felt her breath stutter in her chest. She controlled herself immediately, for it wouldn’t do for others beyond family to know that she played favorites, but this was a problem she would deal with swiftly. “Why would that bother you?”

“If Odin dies, Thor will be made king.”

Drawing out the word. “…a-and?”

Amora sniffed delicately. “He will most likely choose a queen. He has ever favored Sif and I have not had a long enough opportunity to reeducate him.”

Hela shuddered without exaggeration. “What a horrifying thought.”

“What?”

Lifting an eyebrow at the enchantress. “You as queen of anything.”

Loki popped into view, having been hailed by Hela with an impatient: Midgard. Now.

“Yes?” Amora jumped back on reflex with a shriek and Loki raised an eyebrow. “Not that frightening you doesn’t delight me to the bottom of my black little soul, but what was that for?”

Hela was raising her own eyebrow at the enchantress’s response. Amora glared. “A few
weeks ago a Skrull assumed your form and attempted to kill your father.”


While he said nothing else, two things occurred in Loki’s mind at the same time. He acknowledged that Amora had said **tried** to kill Odin but he had to be sure. He commanded Mischief to Asgard to invisibly check on his estranged family. Secondly, he mentally plotted the location of the Skrull’s home world, as he would be paying them a visit very soon. He kept a tight grip on his rage and his facial expressions. It wouldn’t do to give Amora that much leverage by his openly displaying just how news like that affected him.

Hela’s jaw dropped that Amora would just throw a statement like that in Loki’s lap. **Did the twit understand nothing of how Loki worked?**

Was he angry with Odin? **Yes. Obviously.** Would it probably be a cold day in Hel before forgiveness would be found? **Probably.** Would he see any attack that he didn’t arrange on Odin or Thor as a personal affront? **Duh.** Not only would it piss him off, he would get even in a terrifyingly dramatic fashion and the rest of them would be lucky not to get caught in the backlash.

Not that she was going to interfere. Hela liked her head right where it was, thank you very much. Plus she didn’t want to be late for her date with Fandral on Vanheim. She’d made a new dress for the occasion, after all. Hela shook her head and muttered. “…death wish…”

Amora continued on, oblivious. “Fandral killed it but…it made entrance to the throne room, disguised as you, as a captured prisoner.”

Loki’s voice was tightly controlled, the glow of his magic filling the irises of his eyes. “Was there a declaration of war?”

The enchantress shook her head, not sensing the current danger of his proximity. “Neither before nor after.”

“Has Asgard responded?”

Amora sighed but answered. “No, the focus has been on defense. It took time for Eir to identify the species and to my knowledge no word since then.”

Hela and Loki shared a look, she asking the question. “It didn’t revert to its natural form upon death?”

Shaking her head at the goddess. “No, it was modified by a means I didn’t understand but it wasn’t due to magic.”

Loki and Hela spoke as one, both thoroughly familiar with his technical abilities. “Thanos.”

Amora shrugged. “Most probably.”

Loki’s arms crossed over his chest, the glow not fading in his eyes. “Who were the guards that brought him?”

“What?”

Slanting a glare at Amora, having no patience for anyone less than brilliant right now. “Prisoner implies guards and chains. Who were the guards?”
Amora shook her head. “I know not.”

Hela frowned at him. “Father?”

Ignoring Hela. “How many guards brought him in?”

“Uh…two.”

His glare shifted to his daughter. “Think about it, Hela.”

Hela waved a dismissive hand. “Oh I already know where your thoughts are, I am focused on other matters. They would not have come by Bi-frost.

It was his turn to shake his head. “No, a dark passage no doubt.”

Amora blinked in surprise. “I thought only you can sense them.”

Not taking his eyes away from Hela to answer Amora. “By magic, this is true, but there are ways with technology. Thanos is brilliant, for all his insanity, he is not to be underestimated…I learned that lesson too well to repeat it.”

“What are you thinking?” He held up three fingers and Hela tilted her head slightly as she probed further. “Just from Midgard?”

He blinked once to ponder her question before answering. “We would need 24 then.”

Hela nodded. “Agreed.”

Loki smirking stiffly. “Don’t enjoy yourself too much.”

Her hand reached out to rest lightly on his bicep, an act that threatened to pop Amora’s eyes right out of her skull. Loki jerked in surprise but his anger was deep enough that his normally amusing reaction was subdued. “He is family through you and I do not accept a threat like that without reaping consequences.”

He nodded to Hela slightly. “Let me know when you have them, I’ll start brewing.” And his voice washed over her mind so that only she could hear. “Come find me, daughter, we need to talk.”

Hela smirked as Loki vanished and Amora started sputtering. “What was that? The two of you made no sense.”

To an enchantress it wasn’t surprising that their conversation was incomprehensible. But she and Loki were mages. Now that they knew the species, there was a way to bar them from ever using a specific dark passage. Three hearts and a potion Loki had memorized centuries ago. If they were going to bar passage to the other eight realms through to Asgard, eight time three is twenty-four. She would take pleasure in killing them, and in delivering the potions to the connection of each realm.

Slanting a look Amora’s way. “We make sense to one another. Now, if you want to make a good impression with Asgardian court, hint that there are most likely two Skrull still hiding on Asgard.”

Amora’s voice rose an octave in horror as Hela vanished. “What??”
Author's Notes:

Nobody messes with family...unless Loki says they can, of course.

Next:

Loki is socially challenged; Thor sucks at politics
Chapter 33

ALFHEIM

Loki sat on the roof, contemplating the lake in the distance. He came up here for many reasons, but today he was doing so to think. It was approaching midday but his thoughts were focused on the knots twisting his stomach. When he’d first started visiting Jane Foster it had been for random entertainment. But then she’d proved to be so clever, so passionate in her beliefs. At times unpredictable in her responses and questions. Having a conversation with her was as thrilling to him as fighting was to Thor. Then she’d shown up here and it had sent him into a quiet panic. Because the longer she was here, the less inclined he was to let her go.

So he had been seriously contemplating keeping her for the rest of her mortal life. What was fifty years or so to an Asgardian? But Indel was changing those plans. Loki could see it quite easily. His boy was thoroughly attached to her, his shyness being obliterated as he flourished under her attention. Indel was a mama’s boy, but considering he was as well it made sense. Just as Talia was quite evidently a daddy’s girl. How long before Indel deigned her worthy of the title was anybody’s guess but Loki wouldn’t be surprised if that was soon. It would not do for his son to become attached, only to lose her to old age before he had even grown to what amounted to a seven year old.

Which meant her mortality was a problem. He had a couple of solutions in mind, but both were on Asgard and he would prefer to have some leverage before announcing his living status to the nine realms. But one problem at a time.

The weeks had passed by quickly since she had saved his life, for what was two weeks to everyone else was two and a half months here. Jane had warmed up nicely to him. Then he scowled to himself and rubbed the shoulder that was no longer bruised. She had a hell of a punch, he would grant her that much.

He had plans within plans. For now he would live here but after Thanos was destroyed he wanted to show Indel and Talia the universe. He hoped he could do so with Jane, but she would have to lose the naïve veil that would get her killed on most other planets. She’d shown him she was brave. He knew from experience her temper…but he needed to have her as an equal firmly on his side. And the wish that Mischief had gleaned from her thoughts had been the final, convincing push he’d needed. He was a trickster and always would be. It would take time to earn her trust. Because only when she needed him, would she truly start listening to what he had to teach. From his perspective, why waste time earning what can be freely given in the right circumstances. Circumstances he had no qualms in manufacturing.

They had fallen into a comfortable rhythm of existence. There was a newfound respect in Loki’s eyes whenever he looked at Jane and she’d caught herself increasingly mesmerized by his lips. Thin but not too thin. They formed all sorts of tempting shapes when he spoke and when he laughed. They would form a tiny, knowing smirk every time she found her treacherous eyes honing in on them.

He flashed down to the ground and walked inside, pulling out a chair at his work table. She came out of the library with a small book she was trying to read and offered him a smile. It was time. A few more weeks and it would be too cold…or he’d lose his nerve. Neither G’dath nor Azni approved but it was necessary, and this was the closest thing to a controlled environment. And he knew enough about both women that they would interfere should matters get out of hand.
Here we go. Loki waved his hand and a cup of tea settled in front of her as she sat down next to him, complete with honey. She stared in horror at the cup, even as he’d already turned his attention back to his books to completely miss her expression.

No, it was not possible. She took a sip and felt herself choke as the familiar flavor hit her tongue.

He frowned and looked up as he asked, “Jane?”

Jane tightened her hold a little more on the cup, staring at the liquid as if it held the answers to all of her endless questions. “Do you prefer William or Mr. Norland, you son of a-…”

She cut herself off and he glanced at the cup before sighing, whispering ‘damn’ under his breath. He leaned back and crossed his arms, facing her eyes sparking with anger head on. “I prefer Loki.”

“Tell me why. Tell me this wasn’t some sick revenge against your brother-…”

Loki leapt to his feet and snarled down at her. “This has nothing to do with him.”

She growled back and asked again. “Why?”

He almost paced away before stopping himself, horrified to find the truth spilling out. “I was bored. My attention wandered and I decided to see if I could accomplish anything good in this life. Your cause seemed as good as any so I listened and paid attention. When your research deviated, I helped. When you became so fixated on the problem of exotic matter I provided the solution. You wanted to travel to Asgard so I made it possible.”

“Why??”

His eyes narrowed. “Because I am Loki and I will do as I wish.”

Jane shook her head in horrified frustration. “You dangle Asgard like that in front of me and then drag me here and now I can’t even get home! How is that not completely fucked up??”

He frowned, answering truthfully. “I didn’t bring you here.”

“They’re your calculations!”

Loki waved a hand offhandedly. “I never touched your calculations, Jane, I supplied your precious exotic matter.”

She made a hysterical sound. “Right, from your ‘source’."

His eyes narrowed again. “If you’re here, it is from your mistake or someone on your team, not mine.”

“You’re lying.”

Loki purred his words, letting the trickster come out to play. “I don’t have to lie to hurt you, sweet Jane. Lying is so easy it bores me. If I wanted to gut you with lies I could, make no mistake.”

Jane jumped to her feet and threw her cup. It missed him by several feet and he let it smash against the wall. “Take me home!” He made a mental note to correct that problem as soon as possible. No one should have aim that bad.
“I CAN’T.” Pointing a finger at her, his own temper in his eyes and purposefully letting a hint slip. “Continuing to harp at me with the same demand is as useless as all the prattling hours you spent in Banner’s company.”

Her jaw dropped open, looking from him to the mirror behind him. *Any available reflective surface.* He could *see* her temper as she shrieked. “You pervert!”

He bit back a grin of delight, thrilled by the fire in her eyes. Instead he smirked cruelly and ruthlessly squashed his guilt. “Considering all the charming reflective surfaces in your bathing chambers I can be when required.”

She moved to slap him but he caught her wrist. Jane tugged ineffectually. “Let me go.”

He raised a sardonic eyebrow and retorted. “So you can slap me, no. Even I am not that masochistic.”

Jane blushed and continued tugging as she asked. “What is it to you? One trip there and back. Why can’t you do something selfless for once in your miserable life?”

Real sarcasm flew from his mouth at that little comment. “Considering my generous hospitality I would say I have been indulgently selfless.”

She snarled as her temper started ruling her mouth. “Like one extra mouth to feed is a hardship to you…”

Loki snarled right back. “It is. I have to hunt longer to feed you, taking time away from Indel for you. The clothes on your back? Created by me. The bed that you sleep on-mine. You should get down on my knees and thank me for keeping you alive.”

Choking on a scream. “I saved your life, we’re even.”

Loki roared in response. “Which would have been unnecessary if you hadn’t been an idiotic twit to begin with.”

Jane jerked her hand down to try to escape, still unable to break free. “I’m inconvenient. It’s obvious. So do us both a favor and take me home. Or is it because you can’t be bothered to help Thor’s tag-a-long?”

Proverbial stick in hand, he jabbed and made direct contact. “You said it, *mortal,* not I.”

Hurt. Angry. That word, right there, lit the flame of rage. “You trashed New York, you killed god knows how many people just for a sick thrill. You tricked your brother into thinking you were dead! Are you even real? Do you feel anything? God, you really are a *monster!!*” His eyes almost became livid green flames as he stared through her and for a millisecond, she was certain he was going to kill her.

She had no idea why that had just come flying out of her mouth but as soon as it had she wished she could take it back, slapping her free hand over her mouth. He wasn’t a monster and she didn’t believe it for a second. But then he visibly reigned in his temper, shoving it down and his expression blanking. He wouldn’t kill her. He wouldn’t even hurt her, she was sure again. She’d gotten used to the idea that for whatever the reason, Loki didn’t mean her any harm, and she hated the thought that she could actually say something to bring back the Loki that scared her.

But it was worse now. There was a wall that had descended between them. An impenetrable ‘trickster’ wall, as if the small glimpses of the man beneath the façade was gone. It
wasn’t her imagination.

His jaw was tight, not quite dragging her but his hold certainly firm enough that she couldn’t have broken free if she tried. He gave her a light push and she stumbled through the barrier. She turned around, hand up and shocked to find herself locked out, the shield not yielding to her. It hurt. And she was surprised at how much it hurt.

Reaching down, he picked up a familiar walking stick and tossed it lightly to her, his face still blank. “There, now I leave you as I found you, only better off. Yet the third time I saved your ungrateful life. Some advice, the village is a twenty minute walk that way…be sure to get there before dark. I, regrettably, am not the only monster on this planet.”

He spun on his heels and stalked away, not looking back once even as she weakly called his name and she felt her stomach sink. What the hell have I done?

Loki closed the door and sighed, closing his eyes. That could have gone better, he thought to himself. As well orchestrated an argument as it was, not all of that had been for show. Monster was a harsh word and he found himself hurt by it. He knew she truly hadn’t meant to say it as soon as he’d seen her expression, but there was no denying a part of him still believed it. Indel peeked out his door with a scared expression and he felt it tear through his heart. Kneeling, his son shot into his arms and he hugged him tightly. “I apologize, you shouldn’t have heard that.” He should have thrown up a privacy bubble. Talia inched her way into view, eyes darting around warily and as soon as he opened his arm her face was buried in his shoulder.

Indel nibbled on his lower lip. “She was really mad.”

Sighing softly. “Yes, she was.”

“Why’d you make her mad?”

He was a master manipulator. He could have turned her around in whichever way he chose. But he purposefully kept pushing at her temper. The biggest problem he had with humanity is that they weren’t ready for the unexpected. As soon as something happened that was out of the ordinary they either: froze and gawked with phones raised or ran screaming in a blind panic. Herd animal mentality, a surely deadly maneuver around the predators of the nine realms.

She had to be able to function without him. He wouldn’t be able to trust Indel to her care as long as her own instincts put his son at risk. He could teach her to work around those instincts, but that meant she had to trust him implicitly. Pursing his lips slightly as he asked. “We’ve talked about how humans have to be taught to hunt?”

Indel nodded slowly. “Uh huh.”

Loki tilted his head slightly as he explained in a way his son would understand. “Well, humans have to learn that not everyone is nice. That sometimes, people are cruel. So I made her angry, forcing her to meet the people here without my protection to keep her safe.”

Indel frowned as he asked a reasonable question. “Couldn’t you just tell her?”

“I suppose I could. But she doesn’t trust me yet to listen.”

If anything, Indel’s frown deepened since someone not trusting his father was beyond comprehension. “Why?” Talia was watching silently as well with an equally puzzled look on her face.
Loki sighed softly, debating how he wanted to respond to that. He would have to say something, his boy would never be satisfied with ‘because’. “She doesn’t understand the rules yet.”

Indel thought for a moment before a hint of a smirk crossed his face. A smirk that didn’t look as out of place on his cherubic face as one might expect. There were rules amongst tricksters, unspoken, but they did exist. “So…you’re gonna trick her into trusting you.”

Loki smirked in reply and shrugged a single shoulder. “Something to that effect.” His son was a trickster as well, after all.

Talia looked up and a pale echo of that smirk started on her own face. Loki felt himself puff up in pride. A few more years and he would have her deliciously corrupted.

Indel pouted. “But she’s mine, I want her.”

Loki felt a smile bloom. He’d been hoping that Indel had taken a liking to her. This reaction was more than he’d hoped for. “After she learns we’ll keep her.”

Indel looked up warily. “And she can be my mama?” Talia perked up and started nodding her head rapidly.

“I think that will be for her to decide.”

Indel wiggled against Loki’s chest to get comfortable, making enough room for Talia to occupy the other side. “Where’s Jane?”

Loki tilted his head slightly, reaching to with his magic to locate her. He had spells in place over her for protection, making the task ridiculously easy. At the moment she was slowly trudging up the trail towards the village. “She’s going to sleep in the village tonight.”

Indel frowned as he yawn and asked. “Just tonight?”

Unless she’s still an idiot tomorrow. Nodding slowly to his son as he picked them both up. It was time for a nap anyway. “Just tonight.”

ASGARD

Odin was truly regretting having children. At the moment it was a debate of which child was giving him the worst headache. Thor for angering Hela in the first place. Loki for creating her and gifting her with his personality. Or Hela for riling up all three queens of Vanaheim just because she could.

And this was setting up to be an absolute disaster. Politics were not Thor’s strength but this situation demanded his presence. At the moment relations between Asgard and Vanaheim were tense as Odin was well aware of their attempts to manipulate him into better trade agreements. Had he been grieving for his son as well as his wife, they might have succeeded.

The throne room doors opened and Thor entered with Mjolnir on his belt. His son had been shocked and impressed when he’d woken and informed of what had happened, and what Hela had threatened (promised). He wasn’t sure if his son was finally wary of Hela but he suspected there was newfound respect.

Thor bowed in front of his father. Looking back up, he blinked twice to see a transparent Loki lounging on the steps next to Odin’s throne. Instantly there was a flare of mistrust, a worry that
this was a ruse, until he noted the two factors missing on the assassin were in place. This really was his little brother.

His brother leaned forward slightly to get a good look at Odin’s face. “Hmm…he looks upset.”

Odin’s voice was formal and controlled. Perhaps not angry but certainly annoyed. “Thor, concerns have been raised as to Asgard’s conduct on other realms…you have been asked to respond in my steed.”

Loki sat up and rubbed his hands together. “Ooh…what will the mighty Thor say? Should I get popcorn?”

Thor thought about glaring at the apparition that couldn’t truly be there, but no one took any notice of him. He wondered if this was what going mad felt like. His grief, while the sharpest edges of it had dulled, was still a constant ache that had driven him to seeing the dead returned. *But perhaps this was some type of visit from an honored member of Valhalla? Why couldn’t this version of Loki be helpful?*

Loki raised an eyebrow, hearing that thought since this was a rather special spell he was using, and snapped his fingers. He wasn’t really here, the spell taking a chunk out of time and space. It was similar in nature to his spell to use reflective surfaces. The only difference is that it was focused on a specific person.

Everyone froze and Thor looked around in shock while Loki grinned and jumped to his feet, the tails of his armor swinging. “I can be helpful…if you ask me nicely.” Holding his hands clasped together in front of him in a classic begging posture. “Tell me please, Loki, please teach me to talk like a normal biped. Please, little brother, teach me your wondrous ways.”

Thor growled at Loki, instantly falling back to their typical interactions with one another. “You are impossible.”

Snapping back. “And you are a hopeless clod.”

Thor shook his head slowly, the wish that this to be real and the ache that it wasn’t colliding. “You can’t be here. I have never heard of visits from those in Valhalla.”

Loki waved a hand casually. “Or perhaps those that are visited are sworn to secrecy.”

Frowning sternly. “Why are you here?”

The trickster batted his lashes playfully. “You didn’t miss me?”

Thor put his typical amount of warning in his tone, but a hint of a plea in his blue eyes. “Loki.”

Sighing, Loki finding it just wasn’t appealing to torment his brother as usual. “Two reasons. Seeing the disaster in the making this is going to be I decided to help out. Also to make sure you don’t do something stupid.”

“Brother, stop speaking in riddles.”

Rolling his eyes at Thor’s pathetic attempt at misdirection. “Your ability to lie hasn’t improved, I see. Thor, I know you. You plan to slip outside of the nine realms to smite the Skrulls. I’m here to tell you not to bother.”
Thor’s tone angry, fist clenched. “They tried to kill father—…”

Loki’s equally angry voice washed over the thunderer. The fact that his brother let his tone be that angry pulled Thor up short to listen. “They will all be very dead, very soon. Be smart and remain on Asgard.”

Thor stiffened. “Why would I do so?”

Sighing in frustration, cursing in his mind that he was plagued with such a dolt of a brother and glad he’d talked Hela into lending him this spell. She kept arguing that not even Thor would leave Odin at a time like this. Most assuredly he’d won their bet, but would ponder what he wanted from her later. “Use what little exists of your brain. Because if word spreads that you, the warriors 3, and Sif have left father vulnerable they will try again.” Loki wasn’t worried about the Skrulls at this point, but he was concerned that Thanos may try to storm Asgard if news like that reached him. He simply wasn’t prepared for that contingency yet. “Or worse someone will take advantage. In either case if that happens because you didn’t listen to me you will wish you had died with him before I’m done with you.”

Thor wasn’t concerned about Loki somehow breaking free of Valhalla but he could easily see his brother trying to persuade Hela to come after him. “My niece has rules against such actions, brother.”

Loki lifted one eyebrow very slowly, relishing in saying her name. This particular spell was wound within the spell keeping Hela from returning to Asgard. This was the one time he could say Hela’s name here and have no consequences from it. “We both know Hela’s rules are very flexible when family is involved.”

True. Though Thor’s eyes did widen in surprise at hearing Hela’s name. “Very well.”

Snorting at Thor, who never did have the ability to hide his true feelings from his expression. “Now isn’t that insulting? You think you can fool me, brother?” Crossing his arms over his chest. “Either you will give me your word to remain here and protect father or Hela will put you to sleep for more than just a day.”

Thor grit his teeth before solemnly nodding. “I will remain to protect father.”

“Good. Now to this affair.” Loki’s tone turned imperious. “Ask me nicely or I leave you to flounder.”

Thor ground his teeth together but found himself with little choice in the matter. “…help…”

Holding a hand to his ear and leaning a little towards Thor. “What was that?”

Thor snapped the words now, frustrated. “Help me…please.”

Loki smirked. “Was it really that painful?”

“Excruciating.”

Loki’s smirk bloomed into a grin. “Nice word choice. Alright. Assess the room and tell me what you think.”

Now Thor frowned in confusion as he asked, “What?”
And Loki’s expression shifted to annoyed fondness. “You assessed the room for warriors and weapons, did you notice at all who is in the room?”

“No.”

Again that imperious tone of his brother’s. “Look now.”

So Thor looked. Father and various guards. The courtiers and noble warriors. A few women he vaguely recognized and others that he thought might be from Vanaheim. “…other realms. Delegates from Vanaheim.”

Snorting, Loki appeared next to three of them. “Not delegates, Thor, queens.” The thunderer pulled a face and Loki appeared at his back, whispering in his ear. “Hasn’t dealing with Hela taught you anything, idiot? Queens can be even deadlier than kings, just as powerful in their own kingdoms, only they are female so they are not opposed to fighting dirty.”

Glaring at him out of the corner of his eye. “She told you about that.”

Not exactly a question but Loki feigned innocence. “I have no idea what you speak of.” Hela had visited him a couple of hours ago, catching him up on a few of her adventures. Loki had been howling after getting detailed descriptions from her about her mopping the floor with Thor.

Sighing in aggravation, not at all believing his brother. But then Loki hadn’t even been trying to be convincing. “Then what do you suggest?”

Walking around him, hands behind his back as the tails of his jacket swished with his steps. “That depends on you, brother-mine.” Thor felt a jolt of surprise. It had been centuries since Loki had last labeled him such. “I can teach you the game but you have to play by my rules.”

Thor sounded as resigned as he felt. “Aye.”

Loki clapped his hands together with a slight bounce. “The first rule, politics is nothing more than lying and stroking one’s ego. They do it to you, you do it in turn.” Thor made a repulsed face. “It’s the role of a king, Thor, embrace and move on. You must identify your target. These three. And see how this one stands slightly in front of the other two? She is the instigator. She wants to be caressed with false apology and platitudes. Win her and she will sway the other two.”

Loki hid it so well Thor never had a clue, a pain in his eyes that went to the very core of him. For one instant, he thought about ending the spell to strangle her. He actually considered tossing aside all of his carefully laid plans to be the dark angel of righteous vengeance. But his mind took over, luckily for Larnvidia’s sake, and he buried his chaotic emotions behind cool logic.

“Should I get down on bended knee and beg for forgiveness?”

Turning his grey-green eyes away from her before he gave into temptation and ignoring the subtle sarcasm. He really was becoming a bad influence if Thor was actually starting to master sarcasm. Raising a single eyebrow at Thor as he asked, “Have I ever meant an apology I made in court?”

Thor answered but there was a hint of reproach in his tone. “No…but then you have never meant an apology you uttered.”

Loki flashed him a toothy smile, pleased as he probed further. “And have I ever kneeled to anyone?”
“Not even father.”

Shrugging loosely at Thor. “Then follow my lead, brother. This is the way the game is played. Make it genuine enough if you must. That you meant no offense. That should you visit another realm on Asgard’s behalf you will always come before their court to ask their consent. This apology is for Asgard’s ears but she is the only one you must convince.”

“You would have made a better king than I.” Thor shook his head slowly as he said this, wishing it was something that he’d said to Loki in life that his pride hadn’t allowed.

The words were unexpected, but Thor’s face was sincere. Shock and pleasure passed over Loki’s face before an unacknowledged tension eased in his smile. “But I never wanted the job like you do.” Thor frowned, not believing that for a moment so Loki clarified. “I wanted father to acknowledge I was capable…he never did.” And once he had been given a taste for it, it had become an obsession…until Indel.

Thor found himself frowning as he corrected his sibling. “He knew, Loki; he is too wise not to know.”

Bitterness edged Loki’s smile. “You received Mjolnir when you came of age. Father had 149 years during and after my coming of age ceremony.” Shrugging as if it didn’t matter to him in fact it meant everything. “I’m unworthy and Asgard knows it.”

Thor blinked in surprise before shame clouded his face. “And I never failed to twist the knife in the wound - I apologize, brother, I knew not.”

Loki’s head tilted slightly, murmuring to himself as if it was a possibility he’d never considered before. And he hadn’t. Each boasting statement that Thor had made of his own abilities Loki had taken to heart. Each off-hand remark about his ‘tricks’ had cut far deeper than Loki had allowed to show. “You didn’t know…forgiven.” And he truly meant it. There were still matters between them, unsettled, but that misunderstanding gone went a long way towards Loki entertaining the possibility of a renewal of the brotherhood they had once shared as children. Grinning. “Go on, make a good impression.” Thor laughed.

But then Thor stopped to really look at his brother. A mischief maker. His clever little brother. The biggest troublemaker ever conceived in the nine realms and an undisputed pain in the ass. And even though the title had gone unacknowledged for quite some time, his best friend. Turning to Loki, putting every ounce of feeling he’d ever had into the words. “I miss you, Loki.”

For just a moment, the trickster faltered. For just a moment, he actually entertained coming back to Asgard today. His lips parted to respond but then he closed his mouth again. Then the moment passed and Loki tilted his head slightly in the other direction before walking around him until he was standing in front of Odin.

Thanos deserved death and Loki would gladly deliver it. He had little love for Asgard left but they were his mother’s people and he would do what he could. Up until now, there had been no question that this was no longer his home and in all likelihood if he lived he would settle on Alfheim. But his silly, soft-hearted and soft-brained brother might be the reason he changed his mind.

Thor followed him and frowned as Loki lifted his fingers and smiled. “Make me proud.”

A snap and Thor blinked, hearing the quiet and realizing Odin must have just stopped speaking. Turning, Thor smiled and did exactly as Loki said. Ruffled feathers were soothed and the apology accepted, he even had offered to act as escort for Queen Larnvidia during the feast this
evening. She accepted smoothly. Odin smiled at him proudly and all Thor could do was send up a silent thanks to Loki in Valhalla.

ALFHEIM

Loki closed the book on the latest trick he’d mastered, the tome a gift from Hela, and let Talia shift in his arms. He sighed softly and spoke to himself. “I miss you, too.” Talia’s thumb wandered towards her mouth, fingers curling over her nose and he sighed silently this time. She was too old to resort to such displays of self-comfort but he didn’t discourage her. He’d give her a couple of more years before he’d be more insistent. That thought froze him. A couple of years?

He studied the little girl in his lap, mind puzzling and turning. He knew how his mind worked. He planned weeks, months, even years before he acted. He was not by nature impulsive. His heart, however, worked on an entirely different spectrum and often times led to his detriment since it almost always functioned outside of his logic. He wouldn’t abide just any elf’s presence, not even one in need, but this was a child. He was more indulgent to a child’s whims, but not normally to this extent. Mentally he groaned, realizing his mind concerning her was already made up. Could my life parallel father’s life any more tragically?

His life was complicated enough. Indel was enough of a handful. He had evisceration plans to make, he didn’t have the luxury of picking up all the lost children of the realms. Except he wasn’t picking up all of them, just this little one. Why? But it was a question he knew the answer to. She was being thrown away by her blood kin. She had no one else. Indel liked her. As a citizen of Alfheim, Azni had said it would be a simple matter to petition the Senate for the right to her since her mother was so inept.

While all persuasive reasons there was one overriding reason that had him seriously contemplating keeping her: she chose him. She gravitated towards him, not Azni, when she wanted comfort. He could see the trauma swimming in her summer-sky blue eyes. She could learn to be happy. She could learn to move on and forget but this would always haunt her. He knew from personal experience. He might one day forgive the betrayal, but he’d never forget. Never trust his father as much as he once had.

And no, it hadn’t escaped his notice that Azni was unsubtly trying to prod him in Talia’s direction.

But it wasn’t compassion that moved him, he was far too practical for that. And from a logical standing, it was far from practical to keep her. As soon as she’d crawled into his arms the first time in Azni’s house he knew he was defeated.

There was a six year difference between her and Indel so they would quickly resemble twins. She wasn’t as bright as he or Indel but she was clever. He could feel the potential in her blood, just begging for him to mold and shape. She was loving and loyal, but so cautious of trusting others. He couldn’t say if it was for any of those reasons or something that he couldn’t explain but he wanted. As much as he’d wanted Indel as a son, he wanted her as a daughter.

He was out of his mind. A thousand years alone and within five years he had one child and wanted to claim another. His solitude hadn’t necessarily been voluntary but he’d certainly not entertained thoughts before now of having children, in spite of the stories about him. He enjoyed a certain amount of privacy but at the same time he wasn’t considered ideal in terms of AEsir attractiveness. Probably even less now that he no longer had a title and was no longer a son of Odin. He’d had various lovers over the years but no one he’d trusted enough to allow it to progress further.
Jane Foster. She wasn’t his lover, yet he had more of a feeling of closeness to her than all the others that he was more intimately familiar with. Why? It came back to that one question. Because losing his mother had made it distressingly clear how short life really can be. Jane hadn’t been planned as anything beyond a passing amusement but it was becoming impossible not to see himself spending the rest of his life with her.

He’d chosen to be selfish. After Midgard he’d chosen to play an enemy of Odin, Thor, and Asgard. His lies had worked, securing him safely in the dungeons of Asgard where Thanos couldn’t reach him. He’d chosen self-preservation and the last memory he had of his mother was his rejecting her. He wouldn’t make that mistake again. Self-preservation meant nothing if he lost the love of the person he needed most, and losing Indel’s love was unthinkable. And as much as he resented Hela’s insight, losing Jane was quickly becoming the same. Now this little girl was managing to sink her little talons into the chinks into his armor so that he couldn’t escape.

Yet this was still a selfish choice, because all of them would be far safer outside of his company. This time he’d chose love…and see where it led.

Author's Notes:

Admit it, you could all see this happening. Loki is too morally gray to not pull crap like this if it got him the results he wanted faster.

Next:

Loki visits the Skrull; Hela decides to step in
SKRULLOS

Once the Skrull had been a mighty empire, 978 worlds strong. But then the world eater Galactus destroyed Tarnax IV, their throne world, and like all mighty empires before them, they fell. Since then the now established emperor had moved the seat back to Skrullos to begin again, those loyal to the revitalization of the empire following.

And then Thanos had come and promised them everything they wanted. In exchange for their realm hopping technology, he promised them a new start. A fresh planet teeming with primitive life and more than ten thousand habitable worlds in that galaxy. He’d borrowed two legions, used nanites he’d created to manipulate their shape shifting abilities, gave them to the Other, and sent them to Midgard.

The palace on Skrullos was underground, the tunnels a honeycomb of paths that stretched from one side of the planet to the other and as deep as can be. They led to chambers to train the militia. Chambers that stored food and the minerals that had been harvested from the core of the planet. The planet had been pulped of every useful resource, the heart of the planet barely beating. There were no civilians here. No denizens or innocents. Every Skrull on this planet was part of the emperor’s legions.

The drones paused in their work as a silent figure walked past them, coming from the tunnels that led to the deepest chambers. His boots made no noise, adapted to hunting in the trees. The casual black and green armor in stature was the same, the golden half-moon on the chest piece polished to gleaming perfection but the leather strap that once crossed over his chest and attached to the metal on his right shoulder had been discarded. The bracers on his wrists and arms were the same, save for the golden elven bracelet safely hidden underneath it. His tails moved soundlessly as he walked, the leather meticulously oiled so it wouldn’t creak and a fresh layer of elven metallic mesh woven into the fabric to triple the strength of its normal protection without changing the overall appearance.

Skin a light pale, hair a little past his shoulders a rich ebony, and eyes that glowed green. Through the tunnel he moved, emerging to a deep chamber, the throne room, and stopping before a figure sitting on high and glaring with boredom at the intruder. “Loki of Asgard. An unexpected surprise.”

Loki’s face gave nothing away of his thoughts or intent. He wasn’t that well known in this part of the universe, which meant that Thanos had warned this pompous fool. He might be worried of word reaching Thanos that confirmed his status amongst the living, if not for the simple fact that no one would be saying anything.

His eyes were cold and his Silvertongue primed. “I would hate to bore you by being predictable.” He had stopped walking but offered no bow to the emperor, seeing no point in even the pretense of courtesy. “As my reputation has preceded me, perhaps you could grace me with an introduction of yourself.”

“I do not converse with slaves, escaped or otherwise.”

A gesture of amusement tugged at the corner of Loki’s lip, even though he felt nothing but cold ice in his veins. It was all he could do to keep from flushing blue. “Such a harsh word: slave. But unfortunately it holds a lack of accuracy as I have no master.”
The emperor leaned forward on his throne, tone a sneer. “I see. I was not aware any AEsir gave themselves freely to Lord Thanos.”

Loki’s own tone as cold as he felt. “I am the God of Chaos, and as such am unpredictable.”

Gesturing. “Remove him.”

Loki glanced over as six guards stomped to him, wearing scaled armor and weapons drawn. An armored hand grabbed for his arm and his double wavered and vanished. Cackling amusement filled the chamber, the guards looking around without being able to discern a direction to focus.

“So disappointing, Emperor. That you would attempt to subdue me is laughable but with merely six is just insulting.”

A dagger hurled out of nothing, striking the guard through the heart and sending his body flying back. The emperor stiffened in his seat, realizing if he could keep Loki talking, he could give his guards enough time to find the trickster. “What do you want?”

“You have allied yourself with Thanos. Why?” The emperor hesitated and another dagger from an entirely different direction claimed another. The coldness was still in Loki’s voice, but there was also deadly amusement. “Four left, emperor…and then I’ll have to amuse myself with you.”

He’s toying with me. Swallowing nervously, realizing he may have underestimated Odin’s son. “Lord Thanos is most generous to my people. We will have a new world to start fresh and he asks for so little in return.”

Loki narrowed his eyes, slipping soundlessly and unseen out of the shadows. “What world?”

Eyes darting around for a hint of movement. “The realm of Midgard. It will be the perfect seat for the expansion of my empire.”

He kept it out of his voice, his tone light and playful, but inside Loki was seething. Not for Midgard itself, for he may find the citizens interesting but they were unimportant, but for a bargain broken. “But however will you control them, the populace is so…unstable?”

The emperor swallowed nervously, seeing his guards continuing to search with no success. “Lord Thanos has a Krimminger Device.”

Ah. That was a bit of technology Loki had heard of. Placed strategically in key spots around a planet, it would capture the majority of the populace. A side effect was an escalation of paranoia but it had another purpose. “And once he possesses enough minds under his command?”

Stiffening his spine. “A flip of the switch will destroy their feeble minds.”

If Jane had been on Midgard and without his or Hela’s interference, she and most of the populace would be dead before Asgard even realized there was a problem. Loki hummed to himself, mind moving as he nodded. “Interesting. And what of those that remain as there will always be those than can resist?”

“Our analysts project one human in 250 million to survive. Even if one mortal in a million survives their numbers will be no consequence. Our hatchlings are on our ships, genetically programmed to attack and kill upon birth.”
Walking almost casually, Loki’s hands behind his back as he looked this pompous fool over. “So Thanos promised you Midgard in exchange for a legion of your soldiers."

“Two legions.”

Loki cackled again, letting it bounce off of walls to keep himself hidden. “Two? My, my, he does so enjoy giving my toys away.”

The emperor froze and the guards paused in their search. “Yours?”

Loki appeared behind the emperor, holding his hunting knife under the reptilian chin and blade primed for slicing his throat. “Thanos’ exact bargain with me was if I utilized the Tesseract to open the portal for his Chitauri to conquer Midgard, then the planet and its citizens are mine. I fulfilled his terms so Thanos promises you something that already belongs to me.”

He may have been nothing more than Thanos’ puppet and both his and the Chitauri’s hospitality may have almost driven him out of his mind but he’d pulled himself together enough for the bargain. For Thanos may believe him weak, but he would never believe that Loki had suddenly decided to do his bidding after defying him for so long. A bargain that apparently Thanos felt he didn’t have to honor.

Hissing. “Kill him!”

“Ah ah ah.” Loki used the blade to nick a scale, staring at the guards, watching them freeze. “Maintain your manners or I will forget mine. Now then, here is the question. Did you give him leave over just those two legions or are all of your kind allied to him?”

The emperor’s fist clenched, vibrating with anger and frustration. “My people are his to command. All Skrull here loyally serve Lord Thanos until the bargain is fulfilled or we exist no more.”

“Pity. Then I must destroy all of you.” Loki nuzzled his temple where scale met hair, purring softly. “But I will be kind. So long as the other 977 planets of your empire do not follow in your example, they will be spared.” Loki retracted the knife and slid it into its sheathe. He walked casually around the emperor who was staring at him in surprise. Now Loki smiled and it was terrifying, his right hand slowly lifting and opening to reveal a small golden seed nestled in the palm of his hand. It glowed and throbbed weakly like the beating of a heartbeat. “Beautiful, is it not? You should feel privileged. It is unheard of for a non-seidr to see the heart of a planet.” He glanced back at the guards, eyes glowing gold as his magic manipulated the connection between those Skrull and the heart of their world and smile widening as they fell to the ground, dead. Turning back to the emperor. “A people is tied to the realm they inhabit. You butchered this planet until this is all that remains of her heart…and now you wish to do this to another realm? No. I say no, you and yours will be eradicated from all memory. For as you are all tied to her, you have weakened her so greatly I now control her. Killing her will be a kindness, and after I will turn my attention to your remaining legions on Midgard and kill them as well.”

Leaping to his feet, sword in hand, the emperor thrust forward and passed through the illusion. Tumbling down the steps, he stopped, unarmed, at Loki’s boots. “Why? For trying to seize a planet not even occupied by your own people??”

Loki’s left hand grabbed the emperor by his armored tunic, jerking him up and off his feet. There were few reasons that he would embrace the monster that lived beneath his skin again, but this was the reason that would never bring regret. Hissing through bared teeth as his glowing green eyes bled red and his pale skin flushed blue. “Because you tried to kill my father.” With his right hand he
crushed the golden seed in his hand, and more than just a planet died in that moment.

ALFHEIM

Jane had never cared for camping. She could tough it out with minimal supplies for her research but truly roughing it was far beyond her experience. Loki had taught her some basic balancing techniques and she was getting better. He’d even offered to teach her the bow and arrow but she’d declined. She was regretting that. Regarding him she was regretting a lot of things.

She was curled up against the most sheltered outer wall of the healing room, everything shut and quiet. Azni hadn’t been at home, all the lights in her house off and her gate locked. The few elves she’d met had either flat out ignored her as evening had covered the village in darkness or gave her such vicious looks she was quick to run in the opposite direction.

Her brow furrowed as she dreamed. The physical world slipped away as the normal sights and sounds of this strange world that she’d grown accustomed to changed to an even thicker darkness that was warm but not necessarily inviting. “So this is the illustrious Jane Foster.”

Jane opened her eyes, surprised to find herself on her feet on black rock and twilight skies above her. She turned towards the voice, her breath catching in her throat as a woman slinked the distance between them. Ebony hair long and flowing, a horned crown on her head and face that was half the picture of beauty and the other a skeletal horror.

The hand reached out, black claws on the digits and Jane flinched back. Hela sighed and relaxed her arm. “And that is why Odin dismissed you.”

Hela wasn’t thrilled with Loki’s plan, but she was going to allow him to make his own mistakes concerning Jane. She understood why he was doing it, even if it was a terrible way of going about it. He wanted Jane firmly on his side and rather than taking the mature approach of earning her trust he was going to trick her into depending on him instead. Unfortunately as a trickster she understood only too well. Still, when he’d asked her to watch over the mortal while he tended to matters concerning the Skrull, how could she resist such an opportunity?

Jane froze, blinking in surprise as the taller woman circled around her, dark green eyes calculating. Slowly she frowned. She knew those eyes. “Who are you?”

A smirk curled half her lip. “Who do you think I am?”

Her mind a complete blank, Jane started to shrug before pausing as the hours of Norse Mythology she’d poured over after meeting Thor kicked in. “Hela?”

Her one eyebrow slowly rose. “Few would choose to be so informal with the Goddess of the Underworld.”

Jane felt her jaw tighten. “I’m sorry but you asked.”

Hela stayed still for several seconds before flashing teeth, now able to see the feisty mortal woman that had turned Loki’s head. Literally. “Finally.” She circled around the mortal again who was staring at her with a puzzled expression. Reaching out with her flesh covered arm, she wrapped it around Jane’s shoulders to lead her. “Just between us girls, your temper is an asset. Keep it and it will serve you well amongst tricksters.”

Jane frowned, tone mystified. “I’m confused.”
Laughing huskily at Jane’s expense. “I know. The price of people like me and Loki in your life. More often than not we talk in riddles and sit back to enjoy watching you figure it out.”

Unconsciously relaxing, Jane rolled her eyes. “Great.”

“The realms are beautiful from a distance and frightening up close. If you truly wish to live among us, you have to be brave…for there is no room for cowards out here.”

Hela led Jane to a cliff that overlooked a large section of Helheim and enjoyed the mortal’s gasp. Forests of small saplings and calm rivers, which fed into small lakes. There were all manner of creatures wandering, pale visions of what they were in life, either by themselves or in small groups. Low conversations and stagnation. Jane glanced back at Hela questioningly. “Where am I?”

Her lip quirked in amusement. “This is Helheim.”

Jane looked again, looking as puzzled as she felt. “I really didn’t imagine this when I pictured Hell.”

Hela sighed patiently, well used to the confusion. “This isn’t your version of Hell. This is Helheim, where the dead go who didn’t lead a wicked life but nor were they honorable warriors who died in battle.” Jane’s frown deepened and Hela explained further. “You are thinking of Niflheim, where the dead spend eternity in punishment for their wicked, evil, dishonorable lives.”

“Oh.” She looked again, but then thought she saw something in the distance. Jane squinted and pointed at what looked like a mist covered bridge that extending into nothing. “What is that?”

“Your mythology, while grossly inaccurate and only half correct, speaks of Helheim and Niflheim. That is the way to cross between the two worlds.”

Jane’s brown eyes swept around her surroundings. She knew this. There could be several inhabited planets within a realm, or what humans called a galaxy. “Niflheim is another world.”

“Yes.”

The physicist raised both eyebrows. “In a whole other galaxy.”

“Correct.”

Gesturing vaguely. “Is that bridge like the Bi-frost of Asgard?”

Hela felt her amusement grow. Not even she could put it in human terms, the bridge there since the beginning of all things. “No, because it is a permanent connection that literally spans between the two galaxies but can be travelled within a few minutes.”

Jane felt her head shake. No. She couldn’t try to wrap her mind around that or she would quite literally go insane. Best to focus on something more practical. “Why am I here? How am I here?”

“The how cannot be put into your words and I have not the time to try, as for the why, I brought you here to prove a point.”

Mortal brow knitting as Jane asked. “What point?”

Another smile from Hela. “Ah…I am the Goddess of the Underworld, Lady Death as it were. I rule over both worlds, but not Valhalla. I have no control over those that enter there.”
“Wait, Valhalla?”

Hela smirked. “A reward for dying an honorable warrior’s death.”

Jane’s brow stayed furrowed, listening closely. “Ah.”

“I wanted to make something very clear to you: Loki was never destined for Niflheim.”

“What?” Jane couldn’t believe she had been dragged here because of Loki. Yet somehow she wasn’t surprised.

Hela didn’t reply directly to the disbelief she could hear in Jane’s voice. Instead she focused on explaining why. “If Loki had died on Svartalfheim…in fact, I will go back further. If Loki had died during the battle of New York he would still not be destined for Niflheim.”

Remembering something else from her mythology reading, Jane asked, “You’re his daughter, right, maybe a bit of nepotism there?”

Hela tilted her head slightly and shrugged a single shoulder. “I have sway over one point, I can return a soul back to their body, but I cannot keep someone in Helheim if they are meant to be punished. Which means that Loki would not have died being judged evil, wicked, or dishonorable.”

Well, that certainly put things into a strange perspective, even if it meant now Jane was even more confused than before she went to sleep. “If he had been would you have-…”

Hela snorted as she interrupted Jane. “Of course not. I would have kicked his soul back into his body, then kicked his ass, and marched him on the correct path.”

Jane almost laughed before catching herself and asking. “But-…he’s your father, right?”

Hela sighed this time, not about to start that discussion and replied slowly. “As I said, the myths are incorrect…or at least inaccurate. He is my father because I choose to call him so but he knows Niflheim is not an option.” Shrugging. “But then, it never has been, in spite of AEsir opinions on the matter.”

“Just for reference but, if Dr. Doom dies-…”

Hela rubbed her hands together in delight as she spoke. “The demons of Niflheim have some very special plans waiting for Victor.”

And suddenly Jane was dying to know about the other things in mythology about him. “…and does Loki really have a snake-…”

Holding up a hand, Hela cut Jane off. “You’re just going to have to ask him about his personal life when you wake up.”

“He kicked me out.”

Hela didn’t even lift an eyebrow as she asked, “Did you deserve it?” Jane set her jaw stubbornly and refused to answer. Hela’s expression wasn’t entirely unkind as she ignored Jane’s refusal to reply. “As a woman I can sympathize but as his daughter I will take his side.” Hela smirked suddenly. “I will say one thing more. Your temper is an asset but your stubbornness is both a blessing and a curse. Humans are small creatures, physically weak and narrow minded.” Waving her fingers to indicate the claws that had been on her fingers. “There are plenty of beings that have claws. Are made of fire or ice. Different skin. Different eyes. You took a simple gesture from me as a
move of aggression, which was not the intention. While you might see it as a simple slight to apologize for, other creatures would see your actions as a grave insult and kill you for it. We may resemble your people, but we are not and to exist in our realms you must learn to adapt.” Jane let the words of warning wash over her, truly taking them in and considering them. “If you truly wish to be more, Jane Foster of Midgard, you must learn to stop thinking like a human.”

Jane’s head jerked up in surprise but she didn’t have the time to say or do anything. A gesture from Hela and the shadows devoured Jane.

When she woke in the morning, Jane would find herself in the same place she had fallen asleep and wonder if it had all been real or a very strange dream. But only until Jane saw a small note carved in English into the wall, requesting that Jane send Loki her love.

MIDGARD

The first time Tony saw the video, it had been accidental. A random YouTube video that had gone viral. He had been absolutely certain his face was about to slide right off his skull by the time it was over. After he recovered from his initial shock he watched it a second time. Popcorn and a change of shorts later, because he may be Iron Man but even he can laugh so hard he wets himself, he sat back to watch over and over again.

Thor was easy enough to identify and Tony gobbled up the footage of him getting thrown into buildings by his ankles. There had been some initial concern but after JARVIS had assured him the thunderer had survived the fight unconscious but relatively unharmed, he’d sat back and enjoyed.

It was somewhere between the 15th and 20th time of playing the video in slow motion that he realized who the woman was who was bitch slapping the God of Thunder around. In his defense he’d never seen Gorgeous go blue. She was beautiful, but also a bit terrifying. He knew she was different and now that she was a bad ass Smurf he suspected she might be an advanced human.

“I will grant you any wish within my power to give if you have some way for me to portably show that.”

Tony paused the footage without turning around, letting his frame sink into the sofa. He knew her by voice, but the facts were slowly starting to pile up. Keeping his tone easy as he asked. “You’ve been ignoring me, why should I do you any favors?”

“I’ll send you a copy of his reaction.” Tony turned his head and watched Gorgeous slip out of her coat, relaxing against the cushions on the opposite side of the lounge from him. “It’s worth it, trust me.”

If she showed it to Thor he didn’t doubt the reaction would be priceless. Tony blinked before pushing himself to his feet, walking up to his bar and pouring himself another scotch. Now armed, he took a sip and shifted his weight to his heels. “How do you know grease lightening, why were you doing an impression of a blueberry, and what did you do with him?”

Her eyes flashed green at the blueberry comment but Tony wouldn’t be Tony if he wasn’t irritating so she decided not to send him to Niflheim for a few days to terrify some manners into him. “I’ve known him since I was a child, none of your business, and after I smacked him around a little for insulting my abilities I dragged him home.”

He’d been toying with the idea of gifting this little video to Fury, if for no other reason than to watch the director’s blood pressure rise. After all, Thor had come without talking to anybody
and hadn’t been seen since. Fury would be **pissed** for not being a priority. Looking down and muttering into his drink. “Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

Hela smirked and stood up, slipping her way over and taking the half full glass from his hands and finishing it off in one long swallow. Purring as she put the empty glass back into his hand, enjoying the surprise in his eyes. “You should know by now I don’t have a good side, Tony.”

If he knew the truth, that next to AEsir drinks most alcohol on earth was practically water, he wouldn’t be nearly so impressed. Her lip tilted further in amusement before she turned, taking in the architecture. Tony was still for several seconds, silently watching her before lightly tossing the glass onto the edge of his bar, tone demanding. “Tell me you don’t have anything to do with the mechanized circle of doom.”

Crossing her eyes before glancing at him. “My father has been known to talk in riddles and even he made more sense than you did.”

Tony shoved his fists into his slacks to keep from fidgeting. “You sent Strange, I know you did.”

“Ah. You were alluding to the machines crippling your ability to function as a unit.” Tony nodded silently. “I took no part in their being here but I am working with Xavier to remove them.”

“Why couldn’t we help?” Tony’s voice was almost sulky and he was definitely pouting as he asked.

Mentally Hela groaned. Stark was distressingly like father, in this regard as well. “Don’t pout, it’s not a cute look on you.” Although most would argue that Loki could quite effectively pull off a pout. “Charles can shield his team and it’s as simple as that.” Not quite that simple but there was no way she was inflating his ego more than it already was. “It must be a joint, simultaneous venture to deactivate all the devices at once or we won’t succeed. Besides, one of them is deep in the oceans of Midgard and not even your suit can withstand the pressure.”

*Midgard?* He didn’t have enough facts to know who she was, but that little tidbit clued him in that Gorgeous may not even be human. “And you can?”

“No…well, I suppose I could but unnecessary.”

Crossing his arms. “What’s in it for you?”

Hela slowly lifted an eyebrow. “You mean besides an end to the rabid paranoia?”

Tony nodded once sharply. “Besides that. You’ve done me and everyone a few favors but you usually get something in return.”

Hela smiled at the thought of the true prize for herself but the significance would be lost on the inventor. “All these little steps go towards a big reward. I’ll do a favor or two for nothing now to reap the benefits later…and that’s all I’ll say on the matter. Now. Do you have something so I can show him or not?”

“Maybe. What are you giving me?”

She gave him a considering look. “What do you want?”

Tony shrugged just a little, arms still crossed firmly. “A favor for later.”
Hela rarely gave open-ended favors. It was just asking for a disaster. But there might be a small amount of trust she could offer the inventor. “So long as this favor does not harm nor endanger my family, agreed.”

Grinning toothily. “This way, lovely lady, allow me to introduce you to the wonders of a Stark Phone.”

NOWHERE

Hela lounged on a flat stone, flicking her nails lazily. She’d chosen an abandoned rock in the middle of nowhere for a reason. No one to hear. No one to suspect. Most importantly no one to interfere. She wasn’t planning anything life threatening, but Thor would be more likely to react with honest horror if this little video was shared between the two of them.

There was another purpose to this meeting. She could take care of herself, so it was the only reason she trusted Thor. Considering all that had happened in the previous cycles, she didn’t necessarily trust his reaction to her little brother. Nor did she trust that he would act in Indel’s best interest unless the importance of it was spelled out for him.

Thor landed by Bi-frost a couple of minutes late but at least he did come. Mjolnir was on his belt, he approached her as if she hadn’t wiped the floor with him recently. “Niece!”

She held up a finger. “Ah-oomph!” Snarling, she squirmed until Thor put her down. She was tempted to bite him, but let the impulse pass. Smoothing down her hair, she returned to her rock and snarked at him. “I do not appreciate being smothered, uncle.”

Thor chuckled softly. “You sent for me.”

Sighing and finding a comfortable groove in the rock. “Yes. Are you familiar with the fate’s prophecy of Ragnarok?” It was as she said, she always had several reasons for her actions. This was a conversation long overdue but the pieces were moving into place. It was a conversation that needed to occur. If she wasn’t satisfied she would have to make some drastic changes.

Shrugging lightly, happy in a way that the prophecy turned out to be nothing more than a story. “The prophecy has been proven false.”

She frowned almost delicately as she asked, “Why would you say that?”

His tone softened respectfully. “My brother is in Valhalla.”

_Ah, well that explained that._ Hela pursed her lips as she probed further, “What if he wasn’t?”

“But he is so there is no reason to discuss this further.”

Hela persisted. “But what if he wasn’t?”

Equal parts angered and irritated as he asked, “Niece??”

She waved a hand at him slightly, shrugging a shoulder. “Say the prophecy was true, but it will be fulfilled through his son.”

Thor looked as perplexed as he sounded, not knowing why Hela was asking such ridiculous questions and worried where her point was heading. “Loki had no children other than you,
Hela.”

Her eyebrow quirked as she let the truth slip free. “And if I know for a fact he has a son?”

A million questions ran through Thor’s mind all at once. *Loki had wed*, he wondered. For he could not see Loki having a child out of wedlock. *Where was this child? Who was the mother? Why had Loki not presented this boy before king and court sooner? It wasn’t in his nature to leave a child of his behind.* Thor may now question everything he knew about his brother but one fact he knew to be true is that his brother would claim a child of his blood, son or daughter, and bring them before Asgard. “Where is he? He is a son of Asgard and deserving of his heritage.”

Still watching the thunderer but not reacting. “You won’t see him yet, Thor. Not for a while yet.”

Confusion clouded his features, his voice almost hurt. “Why do you deny him his family?”

Hela clenched a fist tightly before opening her hand and watching the half moon wounds in her palm close. “Because Ragnarok has happened before. Gruesome fates to past Loki’s and past children…and I have to wonder why you allowed it.”

“Me?”

Snapping at him for being so blind. She was still a little irritated that Loki had won their wager concerning Thor’s lack of forethought. *He was going to be king of Asgard, by the Norns, he should know better than to leave Asgard after an assassination attempt.* “There were other Thor’s in those other cycles. Odin’s. Why is it that our supposed family who loves us so allowed it? Which is the truth? Are we your family and the pair of you just suck at protecting that which you love…and are you merely lying to placate a pair of Jötunn runts no one will mourn?”

“…Hela…” Then something in the way she spoke pulled him up short. He was certain this wasn’t just about past cycles and he followed that sudden inspiration of knowledge. “When have I failed to protect you?”

Her laughter was disturbing, broken and tinged with madness. Then it didn’t trail off, it just stopped. “I am still banned from Asgard because your father is a political whore.” Thor bristled but controlled his tongue, listening. He remembered what happened the last time he hadn’t listened. He didn’t fear Hela, but he respected her enough to pause. “It is centuries between the times we see one another unless I send for you because I make your friends uncomfortable. I no longer require your protection, except perhaps from the pair of you.”

It was all true, but it didn’t set aside his confusion. He never could get a full answer from his father about why Hela couldn’t return to Asgard. The only thing Odin would ever say on the matter was that she had chosen a realm to rule and it was his duty as king to protect the citizens of Asgard. What his father was protecting Asgard from was the one answer he could never gain. “I have not known-…”

Ignoring his words. “WE TOLD YOU. Allow me to paint the picture, oh ignorant one. You and your friends were making plans to smite a few trolls. Loki and I came to you prior to his becoming a warrior, telling you that Odin was going to allow my death.”

Thor roared at her. “Father would never have allowed it, Hela!”

She didn’t get louder, she got quieter which was always a bad sign. “Do you deny Loki and I went to you?”
“No.”

Hela probed further, her voice still quiet. “Do you deny you laughed at us—at the thought of my demise?”

Thor closed his eyes and hung his head. He’d laughed, though not at the thought of Hela dying. It had been and still was ridiculous in his mind that his father would allow it. He’d thought it a jest or a ploy the pair of liars had concocted. Obviously his previous assumption had been a mistake. “I had not believed you, niece, but I am sorry. I did not take your test seriously.”

Hela wasn’t about to be appeased just yet. He may not have taken her words seriously but it was high time he started. Voice stone cold and without inflection. “When did we ever joke about such matters?”

“Better to be cautious than to be made a fool, niece.”

Those words lit the flame of rage all over again. When had Thor ever shown caution? He was always quick to anger. Always quick to go on defense, whether it be to protect Asgard, Odin, or his own pride. The only time he ever exercised restraint was defending tricksters. She sounded almost sweet. “Ah, so long as you are not made to look foolish you will act.”

The look on his face indicated he was about to attempt to placate her, which Hela was done allowing. “Niece—…”

“No. We’re not.” He moved to approach her and she held out a clawed hand, hissing. “Do not touch me.” He froze. There wasn’t an ounce of jest in her body language. Her hurt and fury palatable. She was certain she was right. Certain that Thor would always fail them when they needed him most. She could feel all of her plans crumbling before her and it just heightened her anger. If she couldn't rely on him to protect Indel there was no point in any of this. Ragnarok would come and it was better if she just cut her ties completely and wait on Helheim for the inevitable. “Go home, favored son, and do not cross paths with me again.”

For someone so big he was remarkably fast when needed. He skillfully ducked the clawed swipe that would have ripped open his jugular if he hadn’t moved, wrapping his muscular arms around her; firm enough to hold her but gentle enough that she wouldn’t be forced to struggle. She lashed out with an animal’s fury, digging her claws into his forearm and drawing blood. He ignored the pain and leaned his head against her own. “I am sorry, niece. I am sorry you had to grow up with such a stupid, selfish uncle who ignored you when you needed him most.”

She made a wounded sound before viciously suppressing it, whispering. “Stop it.”

He closed his eyes and smiled sadly. Until now Thor hadn't realized just how skilled she was in hiding her emotions. How wounding her exile had truly been. But as much as she fought it he could hear it now. “I cannot for it is the truth. But he has grown now and he will not ignore you again. You have but to ask and I will do all that I can.” How he wished he were holding onto another trickster just now. Because Thor knew Loki died feeling much the same.

She retracted her claws and stayed still within his embrace for several minutes. “An honor vow.”

Thor blinked, waking his mind from the peaceful moment. “Niece?”

Her voice was a little stronger, closer to its normally confident tone. “You will give me an honor vow, broken on pain of death.”
“And what is it I will vow?”

Her lip quirked bitterly. “I know Asgard has a convenient definition of innocent. You will swear to me that for a thousand years my little brother will have your protection. You will give him your attention, your guidance, and your love. Unlike Loki and I, he will not grow up questioning if the family that claims him loves him enough to protect him.” She flashed from point to point, holding sword in hand and the blade less than a finger’s breadth away from skin. “And if you fail I will kill you and no matter how many years pass, no matter how many cycles there are to come, I will never forgive you.”

He saw the steely resolve in her eyes. It would destroy her heart forever but she would do it. He nodded to her gravely. “I swear it.”

Maybe this cycle will be different. A thought she hadn't allowed before. A thought that renewed her hope. Grinning brightly, sword disappearing as she pulled out a phone and a Stark Pad from dimensional storage. “Good, now tell me what you’ve been up to…and I’ll show you what I’ve been up to.” Thor tilted his head back and laughed loudly.

He wasn’t laughing for long.

Later, when Tony saw the footage he agreed with Hela that Thor’s reaction had been worth it.

Author's Notes:

The plot thickens...mwahahaha...

Next:

This time Jane needs the rescue
MIDGARD

Hela sat loosely in the chair, watching the mortal across from her behind his desk. His expression was calm and strangely passive for such a powerful man, but there was a lot more to him than what could be easily seen. She was wearing her human disguise, which while visibly made no difference to a mortal there was something on a primal level that was different from her AEsir form. The human her was attention grabbing. The AEsir her was frightening.

“Why my people?”

A private smile touched her lips, perhaps even a hint of respect. So many things that could be said. So many reassurances that could be offered or lies told. “I suppose you would wish me to offer you the truth.”

Charles Xavier had his hands folded on his desk, giving her his attention. “It would be a welcome gesture of trust on your part, just as you trust I will not actively search your thoughts.”

That small smile on her face widened. “Ah, yes, trust. A curious word and one that I have little use of.” Waving her hand. “For example, your statement just now gave away what you are not actively searching my thoughts, but a powerful…telepath, such as yourself, gleans surface thoughts like one hears conversations in the background.”

Head tilting towards her slightly, acknowledging her statement. “This is also true, but it is not my intent to do so, I ask as a returned gesture that you not offer me intentional lies.”

Fascinating creature, Charles Xavier, and a pity that he was approaching the end of his mortality. She almost wished she’d met him sooner. So she considered her words carefully before shrugging. “Then do you prefer I cater to your sensibilities or offer you a blunt truth?”

“Most of the time I find truth is preferred.”

She smirked in amusement. “Don’t be so certain of that. You mortals will gladly accept placating falsehoods than the cold, hard facts of life.” Stretching and sighing when his expression didn’t change. “Very well. Why your people? The simple truth is I don’t need your people beyond the short term so if they die, no loss to me.”

His eyebrow raised briefly. “So there is a possibility?”

Crossing her arms. “Charles, I never alluded otherwise. We are dealing with what the rest of the nine realms calls a Krimminger Device. It should be no more difficult than pressing the correct sequence at the same time to all of them at once. However, I have no control over the creature that placed them here. He may have a contingency in place that they explode upon deactivation. If he has an override they may kill every currently effected mind upon deactivation. Until I have one in my hands, I don’t know.”

Charles was silent for a long moment. “I cannot volunteer my people without giving them knowledge of the risks.”

Hela just shrugged easily. “I was going to tell you eventually so by all means.”

His tone void of emotion. “After this task was completed, of course.”
What good would telling them the risks do except to breed fear? Grinning toothily at him.

“Of course.”

“I am, however, curious.”

Her eyes narrowed just a little. His words were said carefully. Too carefully. “Be careful, mortal, curiosity can be dangerous.”

“But knowledge can be the decided opposite.”

Hela tipped her head to laugh in delight. So adorably naïve. Knowledge turned humans into scared sheep. Or it did the opposite and turned them into monsters. Knowledge was a mortal’s worst enemy. She much preferred a human with cunning, over one that held knowledge. She regained herself quickly. “Ask.”

Charles didn’t automatically trust or mistrust someone. There was something naturally otherworldly about her that made him instinctively wary. But there was something else in her dark green eyes that invited him to trust her, at his own peril. “There were other groups you could have turned to for this. Why us?”

Amusement in her eyes now as she replied. “There were a number of factors. Even using yourself as a buffer with another group, it would come down to a question of trust. Your people trust you.”

Folding his hands into his lap. “I have never been opposed to assisting others.”

She sat up and leaned forward. “Ah, I see. And none have been opposed to your assistance?”

“I would like to think that personal feelings could be set aside for the good of humanity.” His optimism was amusing. Misplaced, but admirable. His expression grew a little more serious as he asked, “If my people are expendable, who isn’t?”

Hela suddenly wasn’t nearly as amused. “What makes you believe none of you mortals aren’t expendable?”

“You are not a woman who chooses inaccurate words.” True. Unless of course she was trying to purposefully mislead someone. Not in this particular instance. “I might even suspect that it is one of the Avengers since there are enough of their team for this task, unless one of them is invaluable to you.”

Her smile grew again. This is why she liked Xavier. A combination of knowledge and quiet cunning. His dreams of peace and unity may be a fairytale dream, but he wasn’t completely hopeless. “Very good, mortal. Care to guess which one?”

“I know which one, but you have occluded from your thoughts why.”

She and Loki were truly rare with regarding powers over the mind outside of Midgard. And if she wasn’t who she was, she would be intimidated by the power housed in this fragile mortal shell. That he had gleaned the answer from her wasn’t surprising, because she wasn’t used to hiding her thoughts from others. Yes, she definitely had plans for Stark.

Instead of acknowledging the opening he had left she asked simply, “Then shall we move on?”
Again that knowing look crossed his face, as if he knew and she suspected he did. He may not truly understand the importance to her, but he knew. So long as he kept that information to himself he would keep his tongue. The grimness that flickered in his eyes told her he knew it wasn’t a mere threat. “We shall.”

ALFHEIM

Jane was in hell. That was the only explanation. Or Niflheim, she supposed. And there was some sort of strange conspiracy to it all. There were no inns or temporary shelters and the elves had no interest in helping her. She spent a cold, miserable night huddled against the wall of some type of community center, the interior locked. Even the healers wanted nothing to do with her, G’dath giving her such a look of contempt she felt like she’d somehow personally offended the woman.

Now it was morning and other than houses there was nothing here. She wondered how she was going to feed herself. How will I even pay for it? She wasn’t a thief, but she was getting hungry enough that she was considering it. She could only imagine what the elves would do to her when, not if, she was caught. Especially considering the looks she was getting for just breathing. She was really in trouble.

“Foolish, child. Very foolish.”

Jane leapt to her feet. “Az-…”

The elf raised a halting hand. Azni had been walking slowly for her home but she sighed softly and took a piece of fruit out of her basket. “Eat slowly, then try to apologize to him. He is the only one who will help you here.”

Jane was ravenous but she followed the advice and ate slowly before stopping to frown. “Who? Loki? Wait, why should I apologize?” How could she even know? Her eyes narrowed to herself. Was somehow Loki behind all of this?

Azni shrugged lightly as if the answer was obvious. “If you are here without him, obviously he has abandoned his protection over you. The AEsir are men of honor, therefore, you have offended him.”

Jane gaped in outrage. “I offended him??”

The older woman sighed and there was pity in her eyes. “I do not know the words the two of you exchanged, but it would be wise to consider just which of the two of you needs the other more.” Jane winced a little at that because it was true, she needed Loki’s help a lot more than he needed companionship. Azni’s voice quieted to prevent her next words from being overheard by anyone other than Jane. “The young prince has a tolerance for mortals that is rarely found. You are better off by far in his company than lingering here.”

Ah, elves didn’t like humans. Great. She’d been wondering. But then she remembered the look on his face. The cold anger at her words. Slowly shaking her head. “He hates me.”

Azni nodded sadly. “Then I fear for you.”

Grasping for straws. “I-I thought healers helped people.”

Azni knew exactly what Jane was talking about. How the pair of them had convinced her not to interfere was still a mystery she was trying to figure out but she’d given both G’dath and Loki
her word and she’d follow through with it. Raising an eyebrow at her. “G’dath is Loki’s friend and mentor, are you so surprised you offending him has angered her?”

Looking back down miserably. “I suppose not.” Jane was feeling desperate now as she asked. “Can you help me?”

There was still kindness in Azni’s eyes, but there was also resolve. “Now why would I do that?” Jane’s face fell. “You and Asgard are so quick to dismiss him, until you are left with nothing but regret…perhaps we are all a little too arrogant. A little too quick to react without thinking.”

Jane felt like crying as she watched Azni slowly walk away. Actually what she felt like was a lost little girl way out of her depth…because it was true.

G’dath watched them from the entrance to the healing rooms. She hated this plan. She really did. She was being too kind in calling this a plan at all. It reminded her of Odin’s idiotic tests, which either ended successfully…or the victim ended up dead. And someday in the distant future when she died she was going to give Queen Frigga her condolences because that pouting, woeful look on Loki’s face should be banned from the nine realms.

She could see several spells wrapped around Jane as the mortal tried to politely approach the other elves. G’dath had to admit, the girl had spirit. Her own spell was in place, of course, which is why she’d initially panicked when the mortal had disappeared in the middle of the night while Loki had been away. But then her reappearance through shadows, an ability almost none but Queen Hela could utilize, had calmed her. She could also see the spells Loki had weaved around the girl. Her spells were designed to alert her in cases of mortal danger and to keep her body temperature from dropping too low. Hopefully Loki’s were more focused on bodily harm or she was going to have to shove him in Jane’s direction.

It was subtle at first, actions that a human would just accept as normal and perhaps even Loki would dismiss but she knew her people. Something was very wrong. Eyes that narrowed as they caught a mortal’s scent without Loki’s presence to overpower the instinct of ‘prey’. Grimaces that briefly displayed teeth. One of the children gave a cat-like hiss and scampered away from a startled Jane.

Several of the guards approached Jane from behind, a look from one that had the other two slowing their own steps, heads ducking in deference to the one in the middle. He reached out and gripped her hair tightly, yanking. Jane gave a pained scream, turning to swipe at whoever held her hair and crying out when the back of a hand exploded across her cheek.

Jane stumbled to her knees, cradling her rapidly swelling face.

Sucking in a breath when that didn’t instantly bring Loki, with a swear G’dath raced for the full length mirror against the wall in the healing room. His plan or not, he had to get her out of here. Not a spell she used unless she had to, she pressed her hand on the pane of glass and walked through it, the surface rippling. A second later with a yelp Loki tripped through the surface, hitting the bed next to the mirror and tumbling to the ground with a curse. He glared at his reflection from the ground before shoving himself to his feet.

What. The. Hel?? One second he was sitting at his table, trying and failing to read a book and the next the mirror had sucked him within and here he was. Dusting off his arms, he looked to the left to flash from point to point and give the healer a piece of his mind when a scream caught his attention. He froze. He knew that scream. Instinct pushed at him hard and with a soft growl he stalked the length of the room, his disguise swirling into existence, and looked outside.
Elves were running, some away from the commotion but more towards it. There were shouts, mixed with snarls, a strange combination of civil outrage and animal instinct. Hands in the air raised in fists. Other hands shaking a finger or waving a palm.

Trax was trying to push and shove his way into the crowd but those most affected by their instincts ignored him. Still the elder tried. “We are elven! T-this is not our way! It…it isn’t right!” He was ignored.

The movements, the sounds, it suddenly became a distant din. Loki was not uncivilized. He was a warrior of Asgard, had grown up in court and knew of the basic rules of the other species of the nine realms. Elves carried themselves with high dignity, but they had a strong predator-prey instinct. At the first sign of aggression his spell was supposed to alert him. He had planned to encase her in a protective bubble spell, give a few of them a glare, and leave with her. It hadn’t and her lovely face had paid the price for whatever error he had made. He’d grown too cocky. Too self-assured that he was infallible. But still, he hadn’t anticipated this. If he’d known this was going to happen he never would have subjected her to it. What was I thinking??

Guilt. It was a useless emotion he had little need for but right now he felt it in abundance for his failure. He would make it up to her. Somehow…

It all faded to a perfect moment of time, as if a spell had frozen this moment. Her head was tilted back to scream, eyes clenched. A sound he knew she would make. In a distant memory he refused to ever allow himself to reflect on, he was certain internally he had been the same. He’d never given the dark elf the satisfaction, but inside his own mind Loki was screaming.

His plans disintegrated as overwhelming primal instincts took over. He started walking, one word throbbing through his mind, pumping through his blood and overwhelming everything else. MINE.

Time reasserted itself, Jane screamed one word and struggled but the elves were too strong, an ugly bruise forming on her face. “LOKI!!”

Some in the crowd were throwing taunts at her, others were vexed at the guards. Children were quickly herded away. The guards, three of them, bared their teeth and growled, forcing the others back with intimidation. Jane might find the dynamics of it all fascinating if she wasn’t so scared. All that she cared about was escaping as they pawed her through her clothes, the one behind her whispering gruffly in her ear. “Not to worry, little mortal, we will teach you your place-…”

“Her place.” His tone was flat and cold, the sea of elves parting, heads instinctively ducking down.

Jane froze. Loki.

Loki walked forward slowly, a dangerous green glow outlining his body and no expression on his face. Oh but his voice roughened with vicious anger, his teeth unconsciously sharpened. “I seem to recall such words before. Yes, I am quite certain the Chitauri love to say such a phrase to their victims…may they burn in Hel.”

Chitauri. The army that had invaded New York. Jane had heard his voice as cold as ice, which would mean he didn’t care about them one way or another. A different tone if he dismissed them as unimportant. If he thought they were beneath him. The way that he spoke was different than all of them. The absolute loathing, hatred, in Loki’s voice gave Jane a crystal clear understanding of New York. Hela’s words washed over her and suddenly it all made sense. He’d been the Chitauri’s victim, not their leader.
She felt her eyes fill with tears, for him. She felt like such an idiot. She couldn’t even begin to understand why he would willingly shoulder the blame for this. Why he would allow everyone to believe he was an evil, power hungry lunatic…and then for some reason the story of the boy that cried wolf popped into her head. A story where eventually when there really was a wolf, no one believed him because of all of his other previous lies. Oh.

Loki was known, among other things, as the Liesmith. But more importantly, he was known for his silver tongue. He wasn’t the kind of man who wasted words when no one was going to believe him. Instead, he would do what he could to make it work to his advantage. If no one would believe the truth, give them what they would believe.

His eyes glanced around him, emerald green burned with power aching to be used. “My, my, my…and you sneer down your noses at mortals for being petty, cruel, narrow-minded creatures.” Growling with a snap of his teeth, several tripping over one another to give him space. “Then what does that make you, I wonder?” He took another measured step, struggling to keep himself contained. One wrong move is all it would take for there to be a slaughter today. **MINE.** The word continued to pulse through him with each beat of his heart, and the longer they touched her, the closer the monster crept to the surface. Finger slowly raised and pointed in Jane’s direction, the nails sharp, black claws. “If you do not remove yourselves from her person not even my darling Hela will be able to put you back together after I am finished with you.”

The guards jumped away from her as if burned, two rapidly retreating and Jane threw herself away from them, pressing up against Loki’s back, gripping the fabric tightly and whispering ‘thank you’ and ‘I’m sorry’ over and over again into his jacket. He’d warned her. He’d told her the nine realms were a cold, angry place where kindness and mercy were hard to be found. Yet again he hadn’t been lying.

She whimpered when he turned, one hand on her arm to keep her from retreating behind him. He whispered softly, his hand cool against her cheek and sweet, blessed relief flooded her face as the pain dulled along with a good bit of the bruising. It would take a few more days for the bruise to fade entirely but it was the best he could do with a spell on a mortal’s injury. She stared up at him and even as his very being projected menace, he didn’t scare her. His hand didn’t move from her cheek, his eyes losing a little of the wariness she was accustomed to seeing. **He’s wary of me??**

“You would defend a mortal against your own kind?”

Jane didn’t even think, lunging for the remaining guard with a scream. Loki felt a jolt of surprise but he moved swiftly, picking her up off her feet by her waist and swinging her back around. Even this scared she was feisty and he was impressed. He didn’t respond to the guard who should be thanking his lucky stars he wasn’t already dead. He thought about it, before deciding a quick death was too easy for this one. He shrugged out of his jacket and placed it carefully on her shoulders. Her grin trembled in gratitude as she slipped her arms through the sleeve. **This time, this time, I’m keeping the jacket.**

He leaned towards her, his lips almost brushing against her ear as he whispered. “I’m sorry.” An apology that he hadn’t been there when she’d needed him. That some failing of his own spell work had resulted in her injury, superficial or not. She would probably never know the significance of such a short sentence. The first apology he’d ever offered another, un-coerced, and that he absolutely meant.

Jane had no idea what he was apologizing for. Maybe for deceiving her on earth. Whatever the reason, she reached her hand out and squeezed his in forgiveness. She could see him now. William. But it was more than that. She thought she could see what Thor and Frigga and Azni
and G’dath saw. She could see why they loved him.

He wasn’t one or the other. He was both. He was neither. He wasn’t evil, but he wasn’t a saint. He was outside of those labels because he straddled the line of both. If he loved you, he would do anything for you, anything to protect you…and if he hated you he would bring the whole of the universe crashing down on your head. He reminded her of the cycle of a star. A beautiful, deadly sun that goes supernova, exploding with a destructive force terrible enough to rip solar systems apart before folding into a black hole with gravitational fields so powerful that nothing could escape. She took in the savagery, barely contained within his frame, and thought she’d never seen anything quite so beautiful. A force of nature that couldn’t be controlled.

And black holes had always been a favorite phenomenon of hers to study.

Loki’s expression turned cruel as his head turned, ignoring the majority backing away with cowed expressions. “You poor…simple creature. This stupid mortal who has not even lived thirty years is more brilliant than you would ever aspire to be. This petty, cruel human has more love and forgiveness in her heart than any of you deserve. This woman is a lioness. She is the best of her species and you would be so fortunate to fall to your knees and worship in her presence. She is a goddess compared to all of you.”

A dagger appeared in his hand and he didn’t even hesitate. To stay in his company on Alfheim, the only way she would be safe is if it was made clear just who would come to extract the pound of flesh owed for any harm that befell her. He now accepted that there was kindness, but it was overshadowed by ugliness. The strong preyed upon the weak. The nine realms were an echo of nature, beautiful and terrible.

Thor was and always would be a fool in that regard. Midgard was under Asgard’s protection because humans were not ready to defend themselves from the rest of the nine realms and Thor was an idiot for not discouraging them in advancing their weapon technology with the Tesseract. They were going to stretch out and be noticed, and eventually Odin would retract his protection for the good of Asgard.

Plus, it wouldn’t do at all for what he wanted for her to think she was his captive. She never had been. Hela was right, he feared her because he feared falling in love with her. The problem was, and though he wouldn’t admit it out loud, he already had. Because honestly what wasn’t there about her to love? She didn’t always think before she leapt, but he admired that about her since all he ever did was plot and plan. She was a challenge. An intellectual with an inner fire that if molded properly would burn down the heavens.

Sliding the metal across his palm to produce a line of red, holding his hand up for all to see. The words that he spoke, unbreakable mixed with an offering of blood. “I am her protector. I will be her sword as she is my shield. I vow to lay down my life for Jane Foster.”

Now that Jane was looking, she couldn’t imagine how he had fooled her. Except for a slight difference in hair color, shorter hair, and a narrower nose it was exactly the same guy. Right down to the attitude but she didn’t begrudge him it anymore. After all the ‘coffee dates’ she knew he was brilliant…and she damned herself for her body suddenly realizing that William’s hot double was right next to her. *Down girl.*

They were walking at a casual pace back towards the cottage, giving her enough time to gather her wits back together. “I’m keeping the jacket.” He huffed at her quietly before smirking while she glorified in the soft fawn colored outside with the even softer fur inside. On her it covered her hands and fell below her hips. *Yep, he will have to pry it off my dead body.* She glanced at him
quickly just in time to see his gaze avert from her. Into her brain and out her mouth it popped.
“You’re not being a jerk about it, are you?” The slanted glare said quite plainly to talk faster.
“You’re not trying to make me miserable, you have a reason why you can’t take me back.”

But a thought rattled through her mind. The reason she had wanted so desperately to go
back to earth was William. But ‘William’ was in fact right next to her. Other than to reassure Erik
and Darcy that she was still alive, there wasn’t really anything keeping her on earth. Even with the
danger and her recent scare, she found herself hoping she could stay.

Truth and lies. It was all his world was comprised of and he had grown weary of them to a
certain extent. Not the game itself, he lived for that. But he needed to gain her trust and while this
was an encouraging first step, there was still a valley separating them and he was becoming
impatient. If nothing else, their shared dreams had shown him just how to gain her attention. He
could weave lies and misdirection like no other, but he supposed in this one instance a little truth
might work to his advantage.

He hated hope. He always cursed himself a fool every time he felt it. But he hoped that
perhaps this will be the first person, other than his mother, to believe him.

Sighing. “Yes.” Huffing again, he gestured and three more versions of himself appeared,
rowned, and faded. “They are shadow sprites, visual tricks of my magic. I sent a projection of myself,
slightly altered, to interact with you.” She blinked, looking amazed while his tone turned aggravated.
“Do you think I want to live in exile? I have lived for more than a thousand years in Asgard. It is the
only home I know. I have destroyed any chance of going home and as much as I would love to be
a…delivery service for you, I am biding my time.” That part was certainly a lie. He was never giving
her up, not to Midgard nor Thor.

Her eyes narrowed a little. “From who?”

He blinked at her in surprise and she was pleased to see respect in his eyes. He slowly
tilted his head. “People that will find me if I take the dark portals to move from here to Midgard.” He
may have come here with a dark portal but he’d been counting on the timing of his announced death
to work in his favor. He had ways around that, the golden branches of Yggdrasil of course, but she
was too mortal and Indel too young for that journey even if he was willing. Which reminded him that
it was time to start training both Indel and Talia so he could travel those roads with them in tow. “If I
took you, I could never come back here and there are precious few places in the universe Indel and I
can go.”

“I understand.”

Loki didn’t look at her, his thoughts inward as he spoke and desperately suppressing a
vicious growl. “In the fortunate scenario Heimdall and the All-Father find me, Thor drags me back in
chains, I go back to my golden cage and Indel is given a swift death.”

Jane froze in horror. “They would kill him??”

*They would try,* was all he could think. “He’s a dark elf, one of the few left and they killed
Asgard’s queen.”

Shaking her head, upset. “So what?”

Immediately thinking of how Asgard would have most likely reacted had they known their
second son was in fact a Jötunn runt. “Fate is not kind to children of a hated race, particularly when
my father has the temper that he does.” Sighing in irritation at the predictability that was Odin. “If I
recall correctly, his recent edict was a kill order for any dark elf found outside of Svartalfheim. Most elves will ignore AEsiir decrees…many of the other species won’t.”

Yet again she was reminded that this wasn’t earth and the rest of the universe didn’t conform to her expectation. What would terrify most she saw as a challenge. If Thor and Loki and Sif could live comfortably in this universe then she could learn. “He’s not yours, is he?”

Frowning at her. “What does it matter whose blood he carries? Indel is my son, by my choice.” It was true when he found Indel. The knowledge that Indel was truly his son by blood changed nothing.

Ironic that Loki felt so strongly but didn’t realize or accept that this could also apply to himself. That Odin’s love could extend beyond a son from biology. Although in Loki’s defense, Odin had done a wonderful job of nurturing the reason behind that doubt.

Jane’s jaw dropped, not expecting that. “Wow. You’re…wow.”

Immediately Loki felt uncomfortable. “Don’t get any strange notions, I am still the God of Mischief. I just happened to find the little brat on Svartalfheim and…not even I can leave a newborn to just die of exposure. But I am still the trickster prince of Asgard and do not forget it.”

She looked away so he couldn’t see the understanding in her eyes. Another ‘trickster’ barrier. She would have to be deaf, dumb, and blind not to know he was absolutely in love with that little boy. She was going to have to work carefully until he started trusting her more, and since she wasn’t going anywhere she had more than enough time. “Got it.” Frowning as she asked. “Wait, newborn? It’s been less than a year since you…died.” Her fingers hooked into air quotes for the last word.


Her eyes widened. Then he really had found Indel just after she and Thor left him behind on Svartalfheim to stop Malekith. She nibbled on her lower lip lightly, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. But the question gnawed at her so she had to ask. “Who are you hiding from in the unfortunate scenario?” Loki stopped walking for a moment, paling, and closing his eyes. She ducked her head as she kept walking. “I’m sorry, never mind.”

Yes, he craved revenge like a dying man in the desert craved water, but he wasn’t an idiot. He was terrified of Thanos. There was no point in denying it, if there was any other choice he would truly prefer to hide for the rest of his immortal life. But then if he’d truly intended to do that he would have hidden outside of the nine realms. No, he wasn’t going to permit Thanos to win, but his revenge would be on his own terms.

Swallowing hard, debating with himself. He didn’t want to talk about it, ever, but he found talking to her so easy and if she was trapped here for the rest of her life with him, he felt he owed her enough to tell her why. Plus it wasn’t like she’d ever be able to tell anyone and at least to Thor he died as an equal. “What I tell you, you will never speak of.” She stopped and turned. “I will answer no questions on the matter…but since you are in my company you deserve to know what hunts me.”

Something in his eyes warned her not to make promises to him she couldn’t keep. It didn’t change her answer as she nodded slowly. “Alright. I promise.”

She shivered as he started talking, instinctively knowing he was giving her the absolute truth. “There are creatures in the universe that humans have no concept of. Beings so evil that even
the All-Father cannot destroy them, merely banish them from the nine realms. I-...suffice to say he is very eager to find me to finish what he started.” He grimaced to even say it, even if calling himself such would be too kind. “I was his for a time and I promised him the Tesseract as a means to escape. I failed and was sentenced to Asgard’s dungeons for the rest of my existence. I realized when a meager force of dark elves could infiltrate the heart of Asgard and kill-...” He pulled in a sharp breath, closing his eyes for a moment and clenching his fists. She knew he was talking about his mother’s death and instinctively wanted to offer comfort. But she held still, knowing he’d never start again if she did. “...staying in the dungeons I would simply be a golden wrapped present for Thanos. Asgard is not an option, only hiding is.” Then deadly rage filled his eyes, a silent promise that Thanos would truly regret making an enemy of him. “…for now.”

Thanos. Ice filled her veins. It wasn’t a coincidence that the creature that tried to kill her in her sleep was the same one hunting Loki. She silently catalogued the name, adding it to the facts that she had gathered from him so far and it wasn’t adding up to the simple, pretty picture that the Avengers or Thor tried to paint her. Loki’s actions were cut and dry, but not the reasons behind them. She’d noted he’d said ‘escape’. What was adding up in her mind was that Thanos controlled the Chitauri, had probably coerced...no, she was going to call it as she saw it. They had tortured Loki until he felt he had no other options. Then Asgard made it worse, in her opinion, by chucking him into the dungeons and turning their back on him. And apparently no one took the time to gather the facts. Granted, she was certain Loki telling her these things wasn’t simply because she was asking, but because he trusted her a little. Still, how hard could this have been to figure out?

Something else occurred to her and as crazy as the question sounded, since she was talking to the master of magic she decided to just go for it. Swallowing as she tentatively asked, “Have you been in my dreams?”

He froze and stared at her before shivering. “No.”

Her brow furrowed before tilting her head a little. It wasn’t that she didn’t believe him, but she was figuring out that when he did tell the truth, he rarely offered more information than what was asked of him. Guilt by omission. “Have...have I been in yours?”

This time he swallowed and turned his head to not look at her. “Yes.”

Then it was really him. She’d played childhood games with him. She’d teased him, scolded him when he was being a jerk, soothed him when his feelings were hurt. She wasn’t afraid of him...and she never could be again. She’d spent hours talking to him about books and sunsets and Asgard and constellations and...suddenly William’s hot double became really, really hot Loki and to hell with William. Was it warm here? She thanked God he was turned away or he would have questioned how flushed she suddenly was. Get a hold of yourself Foster, you’re not 16 anymore. Damn hormones. She blushed before shaking her head slowly, almost asking herself, “How is that even possible?”

He moved the pad of his thumb from right to left, each finger in the same hand tapping it lightly in passing. She’d seen him do that before a couple of times, usually when he was embarrassed. “Magic. I protected you on Svartalfheim, which is something I rarely do, and magic has a tendency to do what it wants if it’s not given a focus.”

Brow furrowing. “So...because you saved me your magic decided...I was better off invading your dreams?”

Loki shrugged just a little before sighing. “Magic doesn’t follow a logical progression like most creatures in the nine realms. To magic, protect equals important, which means doing whatever is necessary to protect what is important.”
She wondered if she should tell him Thanos tried to strangle her in her sleep. She wasn’t sure but she suspected that might be why she was in his dreams, to protect her from Thanos. Maybe when he trusted her more it would be better. She jumped a little to feel his finger rubbing the concentration line between her eyebrows. He would be lying if he denied it was just an excuse to touch her.

She glanced up at him and he smirked at her playfully. “Awful lot of thinking going on in there.”

Jane shrugged up at him. “It’s what I do. Speaking of…I can’t be a scientist here since I don’t see any human type technology. Or am I missing it?”

“Technology, no, but you can still study the stars.” Her eyebrows rose and his smirk grew. “I, perhaps, have an old telescope you could borrow. And since no human has been near Alfheim you will be the first to study these constellations.”

Smiling brilliantly, eyes excited as she asked with a bounce, “Really?”

His smirk changed subtly to a hesitant cross between it and something warmer. “I will set it up for you.”

She threw her arms around him and gave him an excited squeeze. “Thank you!” He froze in place, eyes wide and staring down at her. Her smile dimmed just a little in confusion, slowly releasing him when it was almost like he wasn’t breathing. “You okay?”

His head ducked slightly and he quickly strode past her. “Yes.”

She watched after him with a frown. Definitely a lie.

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**Author’s Notes:**

Sorry. Had to do it. I find territorial Loki yummy. Also Yay! Loki - Jane moment. Not to worry, there will be much, much more of them to come.

Next:

Jane’s potential; X-men to the rescue
ALFHEIM

“Dada!”

Loki looked up with a grin as Indel bounced outside, fixing the telescope as Jane entered through the wards (she felt like dancing that she could), though his grin fell pretty quickly when G’dath walked out of the door with purpose in her steps. The healer looked at Jane, her eyes moved over in a head to toe fashion, growling at the fading bruise on her face, before nodding and moving her focus to Loki. “Jane, watch Indel and Talia for a little while.” G’dath reached out for the nearest ear, which happened to be attached to Loki, and started walking.

Jane’s eyes grew large and Indel bit his bottom lip before glancing at Jane. “Is dada in trouble?” Talia came running up to Indel, taking his hand. Jane looked at both children and shrugged.

Loki didn’t make a sound of protest, just stooped and followed. G’dath didn’t go far, just to the path that led to the lake before letting him go. “Your lack of preparation is becoming embarrassing, Loki.”

He scowled at the healer and rubbed his ear with a finger. “What was that for?”

She gave him a look. “If you really don’t know then perhaps I should box it for you.” He backed up a step and childishly clapped both palms protectively over his ears. Rolling her eyes, she motioned to her own ears and waited until he warily lowered his arms before speaking. “Let’s revert to the basics…why do we not allow mortals on Alfheim?”

“Because you’re prejudiced.”

She raised an eyebrow but let the attitude go. “And?” He frowned a little and she sighed. “Instinct, Loki. Elven instinct.” His brow furrowed further and she growled. “How can you be this knowledgeable and this stupid at the same time??”

He wasn’t stupid. He was well aware of exactly what she was talking about. But since light elves were so sensitive, wishing to appear as the more enlightened race of the nine realms, he wasn’t about to admit to it. “I’m not stupid-…”

Voice raised louder than he’d ever heard her. “We have not permitted mortals on Alfheim in over a thousand years because young light elves revert!” He blinked at her in feigned surprise. Granted, he hadn’t been counting on that degree but he’d expected a few displays of verbal hostility. Enough to send Jane scampering back to him. Mentally he sighed and agreed with her. He was stupid. “Once, we had humans here, as mates…as pets, before Asgard extended their protection. What happened in the village were the dominant elves asserting control over her.” A pack mentality, slightly similar to an alpha wolf asserting dominance over the lesser members of the pack. “You were supposed to give her something of yours so that your scent would overpower that instinct. If you haven’t noticed they all deferred to you.”

He’d noticed, just as he’d noticed his less than civilized responses and it peaked his curiosity. “I’m not their leader.”

Her eyes narrowed at him. “It isn’t about being the elder of the village, it is much baser than that. An elder is an elected position and what civilized beings do to establish leaders. This
instinct isn’t civilized, it’s primitive and difficult to control. Trax, as efficient as he is as elder, is not a
dominant male.”

He’d noticed his friend had been absolutely useless in crowd control today. *Wait, friend?* Mentally Loki conceded that the elf is what he would tentatively label a friend. It probably wouldn’t
last once the others figured out who he really was but until then he would enjoy it.

G’dath speaking pulled him from his thoughts. “Hide as well as you like, but instinctively
you are a dominant male and no male here will challenge you.”

Which certainly hadn’t been the case on Asgard. Thor was a dominant male. His father
was a dominant male. If one used wolf pack similarities, they were alphas and he was an omega,
ignored and picked on by the majority. “Why?”

G’dath slowly in a breath. “Your power. Even to those without a drop of magical ability
you have an aura of power. It can’t be seen, it’s instinctive. But it’s more than that. You can play the
trickster and the mischief maker but when it matters you are not a man to be trifled with.”

“She blinked at him, asking innocently. “I’m not a man to be trifled with?” He rolled his
eyes at her and she smirked back. But she noted something in his eyes that paused her. “What?”

He froze, feigning innocence. “What what?” Crossing her arms stubbornly, she didn’t say
anything except to wait. He sighed after a moment. “I was merely going to point out if they think I’m
impressive I’m sure they would fall over themselves for Thor.”

“So that is what an inferiority complex looks like.* Rolling her eyes at him. “I’m familiar
with Thor, but why would I be impressed with him? I’m an elf.”

“And he is the God of Thunder.”

Pursing her lips a little. “Alright, let me put this in simpler terms. Elves are not AEsir, we
are not impressed with the same types of strength.” Loki frowned almost delicately so G’dath explained further. “The AEsir are impressed with muscular strength and physical weaponry. An open battlefield and a high kill count.” Shrugging dismissively as she asked. “Why would an elf find
that impressive? We are the intellectuals of the nine realms. I would much rather spend my days
learning new spells than training with a sword and shield.”

“Because you are a healer.”

Her eyebrow rose as she offered a rhetorical question. “You don’t think the rest of the
village is envious of your talents? You are by far the most intelligent being here, possibly on Alfheim
proper as well. Your power is like a supernova, so strong when you let it rise to the surface we can
feel it. Yes, you have the speed and fluid grace of a warrior but that is secondarily impressive to an
elf. And from what I know of your brother…no, we would not be impressed.”

Loki could feel heat rising up his neck and he mentally cursed himself. Ducking his head
just a little to get that thrice damned involuntary reaction under control. “Regarding the topic of
reverting: are dark elves similar?”

It was her turn to frown, but only for an instant. “Yes and no. We evolved from them but
from what I remember reading this reverting instinct for them wasn’t just with mortals but all
creatures.” Loki nodded slowly, arms crossing over his chest protectively. Her frown cleared,
recognizing the gesture for what it was…and possibly the reason behind the question. “But then
again, some of them were just sick fuckers and there was no explaining their actions.” His grey-green eyes snapped up to her face and she smiled a little in reassurance. “Don’t dwell on that, just focus on the beautiful gift you’ve been given.”

_She knew._ For how long he didn’t know but she knew where Indel came from. His eyes searched her own, hating the need to assure himself she wasn’t disgusted.

Tilting her head a little towards the house. “Come on, let’s go reassure your boy that you’re not in trouble.” Loki chuckled softly and followed.

But even as they walked Loki already knew what he wanted to talk about to fill in the quiet. “Jane’s potential.”

She slowed their pace so there was time to talk. “I knew you were going to ask me that one day.”

Loki didn’t even bother shrugging, his eyebrow quirking in amusement. “Well, you were the one who brought it up in the first place. If I sense her potential and it is naturally capped…how do I break it?”

She pursed her lips for a moment in thought. “There are several methods. The safest takes intense training over the course of a few hundred years.”

A wave of outrage and frustration coursed through him that so much delicious potential was dangled right in front of him and he had no way to help her achieve it. He was surprised at how much he truly wanted to see her take those first steps to become more than she was. To nurture and guide her abilities, whatever they might be. A nervous flush washed over him with the realization that he truly never wanted to let her go. “What was the point of this discussion-mortals do not have that sort of life expectancy??”

G’dath ignored him. “And then there are less safe avenues. A burst of power will break the cap, and from what I’ve seen of the result, more often than not it leads to instability and insanity.”

“NO.”

His stance was so severe, so strong and protective she smiled softly. “Which leads to one other possibility.” His eyes narrowed thoughtfully as she asked. “Your magic is connected to Indel, is it not?”

Snarling at her, feeling protective and not certain why. “To claim him as mine, so there is no question who his father is.”

G’dath ignored his rather mercurial moods. After bringing up a traumatic moment like Indel’s creation, however vaguely, she would be very surprised if Loki’s emotions settled before tomorrow. “But traditionally that is not the reason to do so. It is to give a mentor the ability to cut off a spell with a mere thought.” His eyes flashed at her and she bared her teeth at him. “I never required it of you, now did I, so settle down idiot-child.”

“Why not?”

He blinked just once, betraying his surprise that he actually asked the question out loud but she shrugged casually. “You are more than capable of controlling yourself. Besides, the side effect is that it would make you as immortal as I and I would never do so without informing you of that first.”

Loki mulled over that for a moment before asking. “So doing this would give her-this
forms a magic bond? Is it similar to a mage bond?”

After a considered pause G’dath nodded slightly. “Essentially yes.”

His eyebrows creased together as he thought of a problem. “How would I do that with the cap interfering?”

The wicked glimmer in her eyes actually made him flush and she smirked. “That is one method.”

Anger in his eyes now, his tone reflecting a similar amount of protection he felt for Indel. “She is worth more than that.”

Her smirk didn’t fade, but a knowing look crossed her face. “Which leads to a less intimate approach, but would require trust…on both sides.” Loki looked down and flinched.

MIDGARD

Hela grinned to herself as the hatch at the back of the plane slowly lowered. They were several hundred feet above the ocean, the wind from the nearly silent jet’s proportion kicking up sea salt. It was exhilarating since it had been so long since she’d been truly involved in an endeavor with the living. She missed it sometimes. Living. It’s not as if she were dead, but she was the Queen of Helheim and Niflheim, it wasn’t a duty one could just walk away from easily.

But she was here with a purpose. The day had come. Various members of the X-men had spread out to the four corners of the world, one member at each location of the Krimminger devises. Shaking off such morose emotions, touching the comm in her ear. “Are we ready, children?”

A snort from one of them, the response gruff. “I was about to ask you the same question.”

One by one, the other mutants replied.

“Yep, ready.”

“Whenever you are.”

“Ready.”

“And I usually like the cold. And yes, I’m ready.”

Hela smirked and closed her eyes, whispering softly in a language no human would ever understand, tapping into a hidden talent of hers that she didn’t share with Loki (and he was ever so jealous of that fact). “Great one more ancient than the Midgardian Seas…hear me…”

“…what the hell was that?”

Ignoring Logan, or Wolverine as his teammates called him, Hela tapped on the comm to silence it as she opened her eyes and watched. Ororo Munroe, also known as Storm, turned her head from her position at the head of the plane. To her and everyone else, Hela had just emitted a series of precise hisses and growls, far deeper than her natural voice. “What are you doing?”

Hela watched the seas distantly. “Reaching out to a very old friend.”

Storm looked around with a frown. They were hovering in the middle of the ocean with no land within a hundred miles. “Your friend lives in the ocean?”
Turning to regard the mortal who was arguably one of the most powerful mutants in the world. “He lives at the bottom of it, actually.” Ororo blinked in surprise and Hela’s voice softened. “Your people are not the only ones to fear humans…nor to learn to hate them.”

The water started to churn and bubble, first over a small section before it quickly stretched from a few feet into hundreds. The seas parted, yet they remained as the water seemed to rise up towards the plane. Storm gasped in shock as her hand moved to pull the plane back, crying out as Hela leapt out of the hatch to land on water that wasn’t water.

The scales shimmered like light reflecting through water off the bottom of the ocean before the camouflage faded to reveal a colossal creature with ebony scales resembling a snake, but with four legs and a lizard-like head. The eyes opened and blinked once, Hela bowing slightly from her position on top of the broad snout. “Greetings, ancient one.”

The forked tongue flicked, a few hisses filling the air as golden eyes eyed the plane.

Hela chuckled and responded. “Yes, they are advancing steadily.”

Those eyes turned calculating, a question hissed.

Hela frowned. “I did not call upon your aid to start war with them. There is a Krimminger device soiling your ocean. I have come to destroy it.”

Another question, a hint of malice in the air.

“I understand they have committed grave crimes against your noble race. I do not ask for them, I ask this favor for your people.” She didn’t even wait for the mocking hissing to commence. “The master of this machine is Thanos.”

The creature froze and eyed Hela gravely before nodding slightly. Hela nodded in return, turned, and leapt easily back onto the edge of the hatch as the creature dove back below the surface. Storm had already engaged the autopilot, walking the length of the plane as she asked. “Your friend won’t help?”

Hela smiled grimly as she answered. “He will. He understands there are creatures that cannot and should not be bargained with.” Most creatures of the nine realms, on two legs or four, understood that Thanos was not just a powerful being to smite enemies…he was a harbinger and worshiper of death. It highly motivated most of the reasonable races to cooperate with one another.

“Your friend is a lizard?”

Hela snorted at the very idea. “A dragon, actually. He adapted well to your seas.”

Storm made a choking sound, both of them turning as the seas once more moved and churned before the large head rose from the depths. Like pulling out a lasso, a whipcord of green magic flowed from Hela and wrapped around the machine held carefully amongst sharp teeth. A tug and it lifted into the air, slowly coming to rest on the plane’s hatch.

The trickster queen bowed again in respect to the dragon. “Thank you, my friend.”

The dragon hissed at the mortal next to Hela before disappearing again.

Hela sighed and glanced at Storm. “He likes your hair.” It wasn’t all he said but it didn’t bear repeating. She tapped on the comm again, hearing the bickering being exchanged and growled softly. “Children, you are only making your professor’s job more difficult than it already is, now shut
“Who died and made you boss?”

Lifting an eyebrow at the bristling mortal who was stepping on her last nerve. “No one yet, Logan. Why? Are you volunteering?” Maybe it was in her tone that made it clear she wasn’t bluffing. Maybe it was the growl that followed that could not have come from a human throat. Whatever the reason, every single one of them shut up. Hela knelt down, hand hovering over the machine. The infamous Krimminger Device. She had no idea who Krimminger was, but no doubt the demons were having a field day with him in Niflheim. Shimmering silver metal with a halo of sickly orange surrounding it. “Remember, this must be done at precisely the same time or this has all been for nothing.” No one spoke. No one breathed. She used her voice to tether them, anchoring them in the moment and to the psychic connection Charles Xavier had with each of them. A quick scan and a silent spell revealed no traps or triggers. She could feel them all taking position in front of their own devices. She had already explained what needed to be done but she decided to remind them. “Starting from the count of five to one, on ‘now’ press the first and third button in unison. On my mark.”

The X-men moved into positions in whichever location the devices had been placed. The bitter cold of the arctic. The burning deserts in Africa. Here in the Atlantic. Australia. Norway. China. Yet even as they did the paranoia fueled atmosphere caused actions all over the world.

A family barricaded themselves in their house.

Hela’s fingers wiggled as she leaned in closer, Storm scanning the skies just in case.

“Five.”

In St. Louis martial law was in full force, yet the forces that patrolled the streets continued to eye one another warily.

“Four.”

A riot broke out in Rio de Janeiro.

“Three.”

An explosion near Buckingham palace.

“Two.”

The streets of Moscow were deserted.

“One.”

Storm held her breath.

“Now.” With her left hand she pressed the two buttons in unison. The humming silenced. The glow ceased. Hela smiled slowly and breathed, not even realizing she was holding her own breath until now.

“…did it work?”

He may be dumber than a box of rocks but the man had balls. Hela nodded to Storm who relaxed and answered Wolverine’s question. “Yes. It worked.”
Loki studied his stew rather thoroughly, not lifting his eyes once. Jane kept glancing at him. She’d been pondering his reactions all evening and she was swiftly coming to the conclusion that, at least when it came to her, he shied away from any interactions not strictly ‘professional’. She wasn’t sure about the why but she had a feeling it didn’t have anything to do with Thor’s prior ‘claim’ on her.

Talia nibbled rather happily on her salad, grinning every time Indel snuck the vegetables in his stew onto her plate. The two children shared a look, glancing at the two adults. Indel looked back and forth between the two of them before huffing. “Dada?”

“How?” Loki didn’t even lift his head.

Indel huffed again before pouting and asking. “You like me, right?”

Loki smirked at his son as he finally lifted his gaze from his dinner. “Yes, I like you…” Raising an eyebrow at him. “…most of the time.”

Indel giggled before glancing at Jane. “Jane?”

“Yes, sweetie?”

More giggles from the boy, obviously pleased as he asked. “Do you like me?”

She smiled gently at the boy. “Of course I like you.”

Indel nodded firmly. “Good, G’dath says to tell dada you like him as much as he likes you and stop being silly.” Loki’s head jerked, staring at him with narrowed eyes. Indel slowly grinned, singing. “Da-da likes a hu-man…”

Loki jumped up. “You little…” Indel ran into his room with his bowl, the door slamming shut and giggles following in his wake. Talia giggled silently before picking up her plate and a fork, walking up to the door and tapping three times. The door opened just far enough for the elf to squeeze inside before it slammed again. Twin giggles were heard behind the closed door a second later. Loki hung his head and rubbed at the bridge of his nose with two fingers, muttering under his breath. “…this is why I swore I was never having children…”

Jane had figured out pretty quick that was his way of alleviating stress, or a headache. But he was rubbing with the hand. The hand that he’d sliced open in some kind of strange vow of protection for her. “Why?”

He sighed in slight aggravation. “Because they will inevitably turn out just like me.” She swallowed a giggle but she did grin and his eyes peeked over his fingers at her in mock ire. “You can stop laughing at me any time now.”

She chose not to comment. Just like she chose her next actions. Jane stood up slowly and moved to stand in front of him, ignoring that he stiffened. She reached up for his hand, gently tugging it down and guiding his fingers to open so she could see the nearly invisible scar. Wow, he healed quickly. She lightly touched the area, asking, “Will it fade?”

“No in your lifetime.”

She glanced up, staring into his grey-green eyes filled with caution and felt her heart give a painful thud. It was the exact same look in her dream of Asgard. Searching his eyes. “What does it
mean?” She nervously licked her lips and felt a flare of awareness as his eyes moved to track her
tongue. It was thrilling. It was exciting. She forced herself not to do something incredibly stupid and
scare him off. For such an eloquent man, full of confidence and command he seemed almost…shy.

*Am I the reason,* she wondered. Perhaps because he liked her he was shy of rejection.
*Surely not.*

His brow furrowed a little. “Precisely as it sounded. For the whole of your life I will
protect you.”

Jane shrugged a little, probing further. “So, I’m not suddenly going to live as long as you
do or something equally mysterious?”

His head tilted a little in puzzlement as he asked. “Where do you humans come up with
these ridiculous notions?”

Another shrug before she answered. “Our love for vampires and all things immortal,
probably.”

He shook his head mournfully and stared up at the ceiling. “I weep for your people’s
future.”

A roll of her eyes accompanied her retort. “Right, because you’re not pushing a thousand
years old or anything.”

He chuckled softly and her eyes were riveted by him once again. She loved his laugh.
She’d heard his mocking laugh but this one was light, warm, and inviting. “I see your point.” He
sighed before explaining. “The two most conventional ways to extend a mortal life are both in
Asgard.”

Tilting her head slightly in curiosity. “Only two?”

His smirk was full of mischief. “Well, the third option is a little beyond your people.”

Raising an eyebrow, feathers ruffling even though she knew he was winding her up on
purpose. “Meaning?”

Loki shrugged casually. “It involves a ritual between spell casters.”

Jane felt slightly indignant now. “What, and I suppose Dr. Doom doesn’t exist?”

His eyebrow quirked, knowing that name from both Barton and Hela. Neither of them had
been impressed. “Not the best argument *for* your species.”

Crossing her arms, eyes flashing. “It just proves what *mortal*scan do.”

He sighed, but it was a little condescending and she bristled again. “There are different
types of magical users and Victor is rather…pathetic on the grand scheme. He wastes his potential
and mutilates it with technology. Truly uninspired.”

Gesturing with a hand grandly as she asked. “What kind are there?”

He waved his hand and a translucent ladder appeared and hovered between them. It wasn’t
in his expression, it was in his eyes but she knew this was his element and he found pleasure in
impacting what he knew. *You should have been a teacher.*
The first rung glowed and he started speaking with suppressed enthusiasm. “The ladder represents the different types. Each step up leads to more power, but more control is required to be effective.”

Irritation effectively shelved. “So someone higher up could use a lower level but not the other way around.”

He’d tried talking about magic before, but no one on Asgard had the appreciation for his craft so he’d given up centuries ago. It was nice to have someone listen who was so eager. “Essentially. The first is a dabbler. One might even be generous in calling them a caster. Parlor tricks mixed with sleight of hand. They might have a particular discipline they naturally excel in but highly unlikely. Your TV magicians would fit this category.”

“Huh. Wait, how do you know about them?”

Loki bared his teeth in what might have been a smile but there was too much tension in his jaw. “Barton has a big mouth. When I was in New York I borrowed him so that some of my plans would actually succeed. For someone who doesn’t speak often he has a lot to say.” She wasn’t terribly familiar with all that happened in New York but after a considered moment she decided she was much more interested in hearing about magic. The second rung glowed as he continued. “Witches or wizards, depending on gender. The elementals. They have affinity for nature, usually a certain aspect: water, wind, etcetera…some are more powerful than others but mostly they’re all undisciplined fools.”

“Do they use wands?”

His eyes narrowed. “If you mention Harry Potter I will turn you into a frog. You will no doubt be a cute frog, but an amphibian nonetheless.”

Jane was goggling up the information, no longer anything but excited. “And the third?”

He smirked and answered. “Healers. A sorcerer or sorceress could fit in this category as well. An exact discipline. Anything from potions to spell work to healing rocks. Some of them can see the future…my mother had such a gift.”

A hint of sorrow. A subtle broken note in his voice. She reached over without thinking and squeezed his palm. He ducked his head slightly but nodded to her in thanks. Jane knew he was uncomfortable displaying his emotions so she pressed on. “Which G’dath is teaching you?”

He nodded ever so slightly, schooling his features and answering briskly. “Correct.”

“Healers. A sorcerer or sorceress could fit in this category as well. An exact discipline. Anything from potions to spell work to healing rocks. Some of them can see the future…my mother had such a gift.”

Jane’s mouth twisted, filled with a very old bitterness. A bitterness that she wasn’t good enough. That the kids who bullied her in school were right. That the peers that mocked her work had every right to do so. “Just a dabbler, right? Or do I not have the ‘it’?”

Blinking twice. “No.” Her face fell and his voice gentled. “A natural affinity is helpful but not always necessary if you have potential. You have both.” Turning back to the image, not seeing her face light up in excitement. “Fourth is the enchanter or enchantress. An AEsir called Amora is skilled but her control is limited to animals. Doom I might see in this category if he had any training
or intelligence. They can control people or animals, sometimes both. These are the ones who give tricksters a bad reputation because they are manipulators.”

“So are tricksters.”

Loki shrugged unrepentantly but answered truthfully. “True, but many of them use blood sacrifices to get their power boosts. I do not.” He pointed to the top rung that glowed green, his chest puffing up just a little in pride. “Finally fifth. The mage. They master themselves and their environment. Illusions. Shape shifting. Realm hopping.”

She breathed softly in realization of just where he was in the scheme of things. “So you’re a mage.”

He just bared his teeth before replying dryly. “I try my best.”

Hopping in excitement, asking softly, “So where do I fit in that, if I’m not a dabbler?”

A gesture and the ladder disappeared. He folded her hands into his, eyes closing as he sent out a tendril of his magic to seek out her own. Most creatures had at least a spark of magic in them, but his mouth slowly opened in surprise when he found her. She was amazing. Her innate potential, a reflection of her drive and intelligence, was an endless spiral of soft gold. There was a barrier between them, a curious cap of her dormant power that was both natural and familiar.

He slowly opened his eyes. A mage. She was brimming with power waiting quietly to be unlocked and he had a feeling once he taught her she’d surpass him. He could just tell her, but if G’dath was right and trust had to be both ways then he wasn’t ready to trust her completely, either. “I am…uncertain.” She blinked at him in surprise and he smirked lightly. “I need to check with G’dath but I believe you are at least a sorceress.”

She jumped in excitement. “Really??”

“As I said, I will confer first. Some things cannot be rushed and accessing magic is one of them.”

His eyes roamed over her face, her smile dazzling. But then awareness seemed to sparkle in her eyes. Giving him a slightly coy look, voice soft. “You like me?”

Loki felt a jolt go through him to realize he was still holding her hands. He all but whipped around to show her his back, growling roughly. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

His words were a little too quick, a little too strained. She tilted her head just a little and was certain the light was playing tricks on her. “Was he actually blushing? Yep, there was definite red creeping up his neck. Adorable. Absolutely adorable. The God of Mischief. The trickster. The quicksilver, silver-tongued prince. One of the most feared men in the universe…could this really be the same man, or perhaps one of many sides of the same man?”

Loki started swearing in his head, feeling his body betray him yet again. Why was it that he could flirt to his heart’s content with any manner of creature, up to and including Sif, but Jane was able to bring out the shy boy he’d been as a child? He busied himself with eating the rest of his meal as the red faded.

Polishing off her bowl, she took it to the pile of dishes and decided since he was cooking the meals, the least she could do was the dishes. Paying careful attention to each dish in turn, calling over her shoulder. “Indel, don’t you two forget to give me your dishes when you’re done so I can clean them.”
“Okay!”

Loki’s dish appeared at her side, the prince in question already at his work table with his head bent over his books. She smirked wickedly to herself but continued to clean, taking Indel’s dish and giving his hair a ruffle. Talia came up with her own plate and Jane gave her an affectionate pat as well, struggling to remember her name. “If you two get your jackets I’ll teach you a game outside.” The boy smiled winningly and ran back into his room before tearing outside a second later. He tossed a coat to Talia as he did, who ran out after him. Wiping off her hands, she came up behind Loki who she felt more than saw tense. Leaning down over his shoulder so she was speaking quietly into his ear. “I like you, too.” A quick kiss to his ear and out the door she skipped, wishing she had a camera because even as he scowled he most definitely was blushing.


Author's Notes:

Here's something meaty for you to sink you teeth into. The cat and mouse game between Loki and Jane has begun.

Next:

Tony and Bruce figure out the truth...and receive a visitor
Chapter 37

ALFHEIM

A parchment was thrust into G’dath’s face, the side facing her covered in scribbled notes. “What is wrong with this?” She frowned and looked over the runes carefully before sighing and pointing. Loki jerked the page around, brow furrowed heavily as he gripped the page tightly and shook it. “This is right!”

She took in the tangles in his normally kept hair. The smudges under his eyes that indicated at least one night without sleep, and the rumpled state of his tunic before sighing softly. She should have known this was going to happen. Loki was incapable of leaving a mystery unsolved and a failed spell was unacceptable to him.

“This is an AEsir spell.”

His frown was a little strange, equal parts exasperated and confused. “Yes.”

G’dath explained softly, “You were trying to use it on a mortal. You have to modify accordingly.” Loki felt his face burn. She had been trying to drill into him for months that exact same thing. She didn’t tease him for it would do nothing but drive him into never asking for her advice again, her tone careful. “How would you alter this protection spell?” Silently he flicked the rune with a finger, the ink rearranging on the page to a new rune. She nodded in agreement and he slumped into a chair.

The parchment fluttered to the floor as he rested his head in both of his hands. “How am I supposed to teach three mages if I can’t even master my own spells?”

Mentally G’dath rolled her eyes, sitting in the chair across from him. He was being more than a little melodramatic considering the breadth of his knowledge already. “Indel and…who are the other two? I haven’t sensed any other mages here recently.”

He peeked through his fingers with a ‘duh’ expression on his face. “Talia and Jane.”

The healer blinked several times, reevaluated what she’d sensed from both females, before quickly determining either whoever had taught him to sense powers was an idiot or this was yet another example of how insufficient a book can be for a teacher. She knew that Frigga had taught him what she could, but G’dath had found gaps in his basic knowledge that typically stemmed from a caster growing up without a dedicated master to school them from beginning to end. “Loki, how are you measuring actual ability?”

“What do you mean?”

She knew his response before she even asked it but she did it anyway. “Are you measuring the well or the flow?”

“Um…what?”

He frowned as she held out her hands. He took her hands, closing his eyes as he felt a tendril of her magic guide him along her own potential. She avoided the spiral, it but a reflection of the well, going deeper. It was like following a river to the ocean. “Here is the well. Potential. My connection to magic because of my age is deep so it feels more powerful than I am capable.” He nodded to himself. Measuring by this, he would think she was a mage. He’d known she wasn’t ever
since he’d met her, just because no mage ever settled for being just a healer. If she tried to utilize that ocean it would flood the banks and the river would be lost. For most magicians it would destroy a gift. For a mage it would be fatal. That tendril tugged him along the river that felt like it was surrounded on both sides by high banks. Moving to the midpoint before stopping. “This would be where a cap would be. Like water through a tunnel. If the tunnel is blocked what comes through is less.”

“And the width of the tunnel or channel measures ability more than the well.”

Her voice was encouraging. “Exactly.” The tendril stopped at the mouth of the river. “And here, this is the control. This is what tells you what I am capable of. A cap would lessen me further but here tells you my limit without burning out my abilities.”

Mentally backtracking before muttering as they both opened their eyes, hands falling into laps. “Glad I didn’t tell her she was a mage.”

G’dath noticed the question in his eyes. “To give you a comparison, Indel is a mage, not as powerful as you are but that is not really surprising.” Although Indel was a close second to his father. But except for Queen Hela she’d never encountered anyone whose width was as wide as the well was deep. She had no doubt that if he truly utilized his capabilities it would kill him, for no physical form could withstand that much power. Still, she pitied his enemies.

His brow furrowed slightly as he processed everything. “So the channel his magic flows through could widen.”

She shook her head. “The well may deepen. The ability to manipulate how fluidly and skillfully magic will be produced can change, but the river cannot expand.”

“Which is why a witch can never be an enchantress.”

G’dath nodded once. “Precisely.”

Loki frowned. “Then how will I know what Jane and Talia are?”

She smirked a little in amusement. “It takes practice and exposure to the different classes of magic.” At the look on his face she grinned. “Talia is an enchantress and Jane is a sorceress. They both carry deep wells to sustain their power but they will never be beyond what they are born to be.”

For some, it was all about the power. He knew of enchanters who disowned children for being born less, as if it was shameful to have a child not as powerful as themselves. Loki grinned in delight. Jane would have a much easier time here or anywhere else in the nine realms. A sorceress was coveted, any other class more powerful inspired nervousness and fear. All the healing spells he’d learned he could teach Jane. Many of the spells Amora knew he’d found for her, which he could now teach Talia. He’d kept many of his most useful books from Asgard in dimensional storage.

“You’re pleased.” Her words were not quite a question.

Loki grinned broader. “Of course I am.”

Her eyebrow quirked, her expression saddened for a moment. “Other men in your place have been disappointed.”

He snorted softly in contempt at those fools. “Considering my awe inspiring abilities, I expect everyone else to be less.” His egotistical words almost hid the relief he was trying to hide. She
wondered if it was because he found the task of teaching a woman who might someday be wife more powerful than him daunting or if he knew only too well how far apart from the rest of the nine realms the breadth of his abilities set him.

G’dath folded her hands together. “Now that you know what are you going to do?”

He considered his words carefully, but he’d made his decision long before now. “I want you to teach me how to safely break her cap.”

She hummed quietly before speaking. “With or without lengthening her life span to match your own?”

A very, very wide smile spread across his face. The picture of the cat who ate the canary, then spent the rest of the day lapping up cream. “With, of course.”

MIDGARD

Tony drank what had to be his twentieth cup of coffee of the day, sitting down on the long sofa on his observation deck. He scowled as Bruce sat down next to him, herbal tea in hand. _How the hell did this guy get by without caffeine?_ The scientist smiled just a little at the inventor. “I think you should let me in on what is going on, you know how well I take surprises.”

Tony’s eyebrow quirked as he asked. “What makes you think anything is going on?”

Grimacing a little. “You’ve been working on something for weeks if not longer, and it isn’t a new suit. And whatever it is, you’re keeping it from everyone including SHIELD.”

Sipping his coffee again. “Especially SHIELD is more like it.”

The news had reached them from Fury a few hours ago that the machines had been disabled and then destroyed by the X-men. All over the planet civil unrest was calming back down to normal levels. Bruce frowned with worry as he carefully asked, “You still don’t trust SHIELD?”

Tony heard the question that wasn’t being asked: are you still being manipulated? Cocking an eyebrow. “I don’t play well with others, remember? I never trusted them.” But he did trust Bruce. Tony sighed to himself. “This is something that doesn’t get to anyone, and I mean anyone.”

Bruce frowned lightly. “Why not the other Avengers?”

“Have you ever seen a magic show?”

Bruce slowly raised both eyebrows. “Yes.”

Tony gestured grandly. “The magician is doing his trick and the assistant is there to distract you.” Tony sighed, frustrated he didn’t see this sooner. “New York a year and whatever it was ago, we had a two-for-one, the magician is also the assistant. We got distracted by the God of Mischief and missed seeing what was really in front of us.”

Confusion written on his face. “Tony?”

The inventor gave his head in a shake. “I’m not about to blow the whistle and get anyone distracted by misdirection. Fury catches a whiff of this and he’ll go to Defcon 1. Because our assassins are company owned and Steve is a little too eager to follow orders. If I thought he could keep his mouth shut around Fury I’d consider it, but we both know he can’t.”
Bruce considered Tony for a moment. Tony’s personality aside, this was a man who had accepted him without hesitation. That would always earn him the benefit of the doubt. The inventor wasn’t stupid, quite the opposite, but he was also shrewd. Shrugging. “Works for me.”

Tony grinned, pleased. “I think I like you a bit more, Brucy.” Bruce shrugged again quietly and Tony leapt to his feet and spun around, running a hand through his hair. “Okay so I have a theory.” Spinning back. “First a question: did Janie ever mention Loki?”

After a second Bruce nodded slowly. “Yeah, she mentioned he died saving Thor.”

Tony winced. “Hmm…she didn’t mention that part. Man, he’s in trouble.” Bruce blinked in confusion but Tony shook his head while waving a hand. “Anyway, she mentioned he’d died to me, too, just not the whole saving his brother part, but that’s not the point. The point, is after she disappeared it got me wondering if maybe this wasn’t my colossal fuck up. Maybe something else happened.”

“Like what?”

Now Tony wagged a finger in the air. “Ahh…so I had JARVIS, well he did a lot of things. Stalking. Internet searching. I had to debug the system five times with the amount of spam he picked up trolling YouTube sites—anyway. I thought to myself, if someone kidnapped her or sabotaged the arch, it must be someone who talked to her. One thing first before we go to theory. I have come up with a comparison for you. As a doctor I’d like your opinion…please refrain from punching the screen. JARVIS, show time.” An enormous screen slowly dropped down from the ceiling, a nearly paper thin television. The image was one of Loki’s altered shadows at the café, sitting and casually moving over a period of two minutes before looping back to the beginning. “JARVIS, left side of the screen please.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And…image two.” It was Loki fresh out of the Tesseract, the image playing for almost a minute on a loop. It was a side by side and Bruce adjusted his glasses as he stood up. “Ignoring the obvious differences on the left side, just a subtle disguise that he picked up in Norway…” Tony watched Bruce twitch but the scientist refused to turn around. “…what can you tell me?”

Bruce blinked slowly, stunned now that he had a comparison. It was night and day and the medical side of his training kicked in. “The right side he’s underweight. Dangerously so…the bruising under his eyes is lack of sleep, or possibly dehydration. He’s injured as well, the mid abdominal region if I had to guess. I would have needed to interact with him to know for sure but he might even be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.” Bruce turned around suddenly. “When was this taken?”

Tony wasn’t smiling anymore. In fact, right now he was feeling no amusement. “Just after he arrived, a couple of days before his run for the cube.”

Bruce paused to breath before shaking his head. “He would have been in no shape to plan the attack on New York; it’s a miracle he’s even functioning.” He remembered what he’d said. That he could smell crazy on him. He just hadn’t had the reference to make the call.

“Yeah, that was my thought when I talked to him on the observation deck. Something was just bugging me that a guy that smart was being so…so. Anxiety, irritability, aggression—he’s practical a walking definition of PTSD. Something else was bugging me, too. I’m not a soldier but it makes absolutely no sense for a leader to do recon work.”
Bruce nodded slowly to himself. “No, you send someone expendable.”

Pointing with his coffee mug. “Exactly. I think, JARVIS supports it, and now so do you, that someone roughed Locks up, and I’m not ruling out torture, and sent him here.” His eyes darkened by the time he was finished speaking.

Bruce sat back down. “Why?”

Shrugging. “Not sure, unless they needed something only Locks could get them.”

“Like the cube.”

Tony crossed his arms over his chest, unconsciously shielding the glow of his reactor from view. Torture was not a comfortable subject for him after Afghanistan. “And he didn’t want to cooperate. That’s the theory, which means we could have his boss coming here with revenge on his mind.”

Bruce looked at the two images again before blinking in shock. “His eyes.”

“What about them?”

Walking up quickly to the screen. “Look at the color differences: light green on the left, very blue on the right. Didn’t Clint’s eyes change to blue when he was under the scepter’s control?”

Tony almost dropped his mug. “Son of a bitch…okay, I’m officially not mad at him anymore.”

“So why don’t you want SHIELD to know this?”

Tony’s eyes were hard, thinking of the one secret Fury kept to himself that started it all. He’d wait to bring it up and focused on the lesser offense. “JARVIS, cut the feed. Because I think they already do, and they kept it from us and I hate secrets. We beat down a guy that we could have helped. Maybe it wouldn’t have made a difference and maybe the fight would have ended exactly as it did but if I’d had that kind of knowledge maybe my two minutes with him could have stopped the invasion and saved lives.”

“You don’t know that, Tony, not even Thor could get through to him.”

Tony shrugged and perched on a glass coffee table. “Yeah, well, he wasn’t exactly feeling the brotherly love at the moment. I think we, as strangers, would have had a better shot in gaining his trust. Not to mention SHIELD is as owned as its agents by the Council and I trust them even less… nuke sending bastards…”

Bruce slouched a little. “This is more than just a theory, isn’t it?”

Sipping, deciding he wasn’t going to mention just where he dug up his information or he might have mean and green to run from. “I confirmed the PTSD from Romanoff’s psych profile evaluation of Locks…while we still had him on the Heli-carrier.”

Taking off his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. “Shit.”

Tony sighed but decided it needed to be out there. “Oh, it gets worse. The World Security Council, or whatever frilly name they want to give themselves, is the one that dismissed it, sealed the file, and ordered her not to say a word. Not even to Fury.”
Bruce’s lips thinned. “I…” He didn’t finish his thought and drank his tea instead. Tony gave him a few minutes to regain his Zen-like state of calmness. “Why again don’t you want at least the rest of the team to know?”

Tony made a scoffing sound. “Because Ren and Stimpy take orders first and ask questions second. Because Agent Red didn’t think to defy orders to tell us, even later so we’d know where we stand. Because I’ve been finding hard wired bugs on every floor. I had to overhaul JARVIS to get rid of the backdoors someone punched into his programs and someone put a remote program on my latest suit. I get the feeling someone is either getting ready to pull my plug or recon and I don’t know who it is.”

“And…all this started just from looking for Dr. Foster?”

Tony smirked, sprawling on his back on the short table. “Okay, JARVIS, pull up the picture of the café again, no zoom.” Bruce blinked in surprise. “Check this out. He’s been having coffee with her for almost two months before she disappeared so he’s not nearly as dead as Thor thinks he is. Little brother is in big trouble when big brother finds out.” Bruce closed his eyes briefly to breathe. “He’s not really there, it’s just some type of fancy illusion. His left hand passes through a chair as he leaves when she does-Bruce?” Bruce slowly opened his eyes. “He’s in love with her…and from what I could see she was well on her way.”

Bruce frowned a little, puzzled. “You think he kidnapped her?” It just didn’t seem like his style. Not with no follow up taunt. Something to rub their faces in it. What would be the point?

Polishing off his coffee, considering the bottom of his cup. “I’m actually hoping that’s the scenario, but I’m not so sure of that.” Bruce raised both eyebrows, really wanting to know why Tony was hoping for that outcome. “Because the alternative is a pissed off God of Mischief boyfriend coming here to find her.”

“As I am not human I do not subscribe to such a juvenile reference.” They both whipped around to see Loki standing there with hands clenched at his sides, dressed in the green and gold armor of the Heli-carrier. It was altered, but still recognizable. “Dr. Banner, refrain from…damn.” A single gesture, and Bruce collapsed onto the ground with a smile on his sleeping face, the green tinge on his skin fading. Loki looked up towards the ceiling, shaking his head. “I knew I should have knocked.”

Tony slowly got to his feet. “You-…”

Raising an eyebrow at the mortal, Loki let the image flicker. “Not really here, just like at the café. This is merely a visual illusion…try not to allow your feeble mortal mind to melt from the staggering amount of power on display.”

Ignoring the trickster showing off, curious as he asked. “And you can knock Bruce out with a gesture, David Blaine?”

Loki’s lips thinned at the mouthy human. He wasn’t sure who Mr. Blaine was and he had a feeling he wouldn’t like it. “There are a lot of things I am capable of now, be careful how you tread.”

Tony waved a hand before checking over Bruce to find he was indeed sleeping. “Yeah, yeah, hate you, too.” Another quick glance at Bruce before deciding it would be good to reference this later. “Awesome. Uh, mind if I record you?”

The demi-god shrugged, familiar with the term even if the way humans preserved images
left him confused. “Not at all, just keep in mind you will be unable to show it to anyone.”

Tony felt a spark of respect. He would have to check, but he didn’t think Loki was bluffing. “Whatever. JARVIS?”

“Already recording, sir.”

“First things first, JARVIS, lights.” Tony nodded a little to himself as he rubbed his hands together.

Loki glanced around quickly as the lights snapped on, focusing back on the mortal who was almost toe to toe with him and stood up on his tip toes to peer into his eyes. Loki frowned at him. “Even for a human you are acting strangely.”

Smiling winningly, stepping back. “Just checking if I’m dealing with baby blue or if you’re rockin’ green.”

Loki’s frown deepened. “My eyes have never been blue.” Except of course when he wanted them to be blue but he rarely chose to change his eye color.

Tony’s eyebrows ticked, thinking about the last time he’d truly met the trickster. “They were when you were wielding your glow stick of destiny. Anyway-...”

“What??”

Tony glanced around. Loki had managed to rattle the windows a bit and he was seething. “I take it you didn’t know-...”

Loki snapped without thinking. “Of course I knew, I didn’t think you-...”

He clammed up quick but the damage was done. So Locks didn’t want anyone else to figure out he was being controlled. Interesting. Didn’t make any sense to him but then he wasn’t Asgardian. Must be a demi-god thing about weaknesses or something stupid. Rocking on his heels. “So-o was there a point to you coming here? Trying to get Bruce to Hulk-out just for kicks?”

Loki’s eyes seemed to flash of repressed annoyance and Tony got the impression that this wasn’t all his idea. “I came to inform you since you are entirely too focused on me that yes, Jane is with me so you may stop searching for her.” He paused and his tone turned petulant. “And to inform Darcy and Erik to not worry.”

Definitely hadn’t been his idea. For once Tony decided not to say what he was thinking. “So you did kidnap her.”

Loki sighed with a roll of his eyes. “No I did not and I do not know how it happened but by some suspicious coincidence she arrived on the planet I was on and has been under my protection since then.”

“But you were chatting her up.”

Complete befuddlement crossed Loki’s face. “I was what??”

Tony smirked as he elaborated. “Feeling her out to see if you could feel her up.”

Loki’s expression morphed into something so deadly Tony actually found himself taking a step back. “Moving on.”
The inventor cleared his throat, deciding overprotective of Jane Foster’s virtue didn’t even begin to define Loki’s position. *Good for her. Janie was a good girl and needed someone to look after her.* “Is my theory correct then, were you knocked around and sent here by someone?”

Loki’s mouth thinned again. Loki didn’t like advertising that and Stark had an undisputed big mouth. Still, he was here for a reason and a little fair warning was only part of it. He moved over to the windows to peer out curiously. He refused to feel relief that from what he could see there was little to no trace of the Chitauri invasion. “Let us say you should hope never to meet them.”

“Them?”

The trickster kept his tone even. “Unfortunately yes. I will not utter their names, doing so with this particular trick of mine will undoubtedly gain their attention. Trust me. You do not want it.” *Humans just didn’t understand how powerfully the mind and magic were connected.*

“Huh, weird.” Tony shrugged before he asked, “Then why show up here?”

“I am…what does she call it…covering my bases. I plan contingencies and I prefer my plans not to need a coconspirator but this particular gambit requires it. He will come, for me or for Asgard, but he will come…and I will be ready.” He grinned evily when he said that before continuing. “If I am forced to come to Midgard I would prefer for at least two Avengers to not attack first and ask questions after the fact.” The likelihood that he would ever set foot on Midgard was slim other than to pay back a favor he owed to one of the mortals. But he wasn’t naïve to think it wasn’t a possibility.

“Hey, you started it!”

Loki crossed his arms over his chest. “Yes, and your Agent Barton would try to end it, which is why I would prefer if your friendly green menace didn’t try to crush all my bones upon my appearance since I will no doubt be concentrating on his aggression.”

Stark stared boldly back. “Tell me you’re sorry for trying to take over Earth.”

The demi-god didn’t blink, he didn’t even move for several seconds. It wasn’t often Loki was caught off guard but the arrogant little mortal had managed it. He might have to request Hela turn him into a guppy. She did owe him for that bet, after all. “…what?”

Nodding his head once. “You heard me. Tell me you’re sorry.”

Loki looked murderous, as if at any moment he was about to somehow use his little magic trick to strangle him. Belatedly, Tony realized that was an actual possibility considering what he did to Bruce without touching him. But then the demi-god shifted to the left a little, as if he’d been poked in the side. His head moved to the right to glower down as if glaring at someone almost a foot shorter than him. He blinked twice before looking away and sighing heavily. Grey-green eyes narrow, scowling, and voice low. “I apologize for lowering myself to walk amongst you feeble lesser beings and allowing the Chitauri loose on your pathetic planet.”

*Wasn’t it interesting that a certain astrophysicist was almost a foot shorter than Loki? And he’d seen moments of her temper, he could honestly see her going toe to toe with the God of Mischief. It looks like ‘whipped’ wasn’t just an adjective for humans. Well if she was holding his collar and leash, Tony didn’t have to worry about Loki ever coming back here to take over the world. Tony grinned smugly and shrugged, ignoring the name-calling. “No problem. You got a deal, Locks.”*
Loki’s scowl deepened. “Stop calling me that.”

Shrugging again. “Okay, Reindeer Games.” Loki disappeared, his eyes promising retribution.

Author's Notes:

Oh but how will he get even...cause you know he will. Stay tuned faithful readers to find out.

Next:

Odin catches a clue; Date night...kinda
Chapter 38

ALFHEIM

Three guards were typically all that was needed on Alfheim’s moon, just to maintain the outer wall from animals that ventured too close. Currently two of them were in the watchtowers, the third leaning back against the structure and watching elves running to and from their affairs. His eyes would linger on the females, watching them hungrily.

Everyone on this moon had a past. All of them had reasons why they didn’t quite fit into elf-kind society. Mostly it was the past wars that had been fought. Too much spilled blood had made living within elven glens impossible and this little moon was a compromise. There were other reasons for the rest but most would assume this was the case of a guard. It wasn’t why he was here.

“I consider myself a reasonable person…but then again I might be mistaken about that.” The guard felt his entire body stiffen as his head turned, an AEsir leaning up against the wall next to him. A shudder went through him as those grey-green eyes turned and stared into his soul. “Some reactions can be dismissed as instinctual. Others as prejudiced…and then there are people like you. Your actions to my Jane were not instinct, but your hidden nature.” Nothing except prejudice would make an elf strike a human…and nothing but a degenerate would paw at her with intent behind the action. Loki smiled viciously. “I’ve done my research on you, Amand.”

The mage’s eyes glanced to the left and Amand followed the motion, choking to see Hela standing only a few feet away with her arms crossed and disgust written on her features. Loki had moved to lean in closer, Amand jumping to feel the mage right there. But Amand couldn’t move. His feet were stuck to the ground and his body frozen. “You see, Hela knows all concerning the dead that are washed onto her shores…but she feels markedly protective of little girls.”

Hela’s voice purred with deadly intent as she slowly stalked forward, green eyes glowing. “Young girls raped and murdered.”

Amand’s mind flashed back all those centuries ago. He’d been young and with the war no one had known, a dismissed body mourned and buried. It had been the only time, but the perverse want was still there. It was why he’d left Alfheim proper. Besides, who would miss a girl from this little moon…

“I-…”

Loki’s hand wrapped around his neck, thumb brushing his jaw as he leaned in closer still until their noses almost touched. Loki shuddered in revulsion an instant later. He could hear a glimmer of those perverse thoughts and knew this one wouldn’t live much longer. He could not allow such a vile creature to continue to breathe elven air. “I do not care if it was a thousand years ago or not. I do not want a creature such as you near my children.”

Hela smiled evilly. “Fear not, father, his time in Niflheim will come soon enough.” Her green eyes flashed. Very soon.

Closing his eyes, Loki brushed first one side of Amand’s nose with his own and then the other before pulling back. His eyes opened and they flashed green. The ridges and markings that were normally only seen on his Jötunn form were just below the surface. “Sunrise. You have until sunrise to get off this planet or I will end you. And your end at my hands will be a kindness compared to the horrors that await you. I suggest, for your own sake, that you live a very, very long
“life.” The guard made a wounded sound and fled his post. The two mages grinned at one another, identical grins of death. “Are you going to give him a day?”

She snorted. “No. The second he leaves this moon he will mysteriously die.” Her expression turned innocent. “It’s the most curious thing, father. An elf that had a heart attack. Unheard of.” Now she smirked. “Someone like G’dath or Eir might figure out the body has no soul in it but otherwise it will remain a mystery.” Loki’s grin turned pleased, Hela snuggling into his side as the ghost of his markings faded. “Now what do you need my help with again, father?”

Loki felt the tension in his shoulders loosen. “The winter festival is tomorrow and I promised them something special.”

“They the elves, or them them?”

His eyes crossed a little before sighing. “Both.”

Now that made sense. Loki wasn’t driven to impressing the elves, but something special for Jane and his children changed matters entirely. “Special?” She asked to clarify what specifically he wanted.

He outlined what he had in mind and she grinned even as she nodded in agreement, thinking about certain Midgardian celebrations.

**ASGARD**

Anya tensed before she entered through the servant’s entrance, knowing someone was already within. Bristling and ready to run whoever it was off after giving them a thorough tongue lashing, she paused as she identified her king giving everything in the room a thoughtful examination.

He couldn’t explain why he had needed to visit this room, but the impulse had been too strong to resist. The year that Loki had fallen and been presumed dead, these rooms had been untouched. There had been mourning with the assumption of Loki’s death, but Frigga had been adamant that her son wasn’t dead and refused to allow his possessions to be burned in a proper funeral rite. Because he knew she received visions she was unable to speak of had he held onto the hope that Loki had survived and honored her wishes.

He didn’t pause in his examination of Loki’s space, but Anya suddenly knew Odin was aware of her. “Did he truly read all these books?”

Her eyes swept over the wall covered from floor to ceiling and end to end with a glorious bookcase stuffed full of books. Every AEsir in Asgard knew that when Loki wasn’t practicing his magic his nose was buried in a book. *How could his father not know that?* It had been a private suspicion of hers that the reason Loki’s pranks and mischief had increased in recent years was because he was bored. Nodding slowly and answering her king. “Milord, the prince has read every book in Asgard several times over.”

Odin took another look around. Books. Potions and potion ingredients. His expression turned thoughtful before it occurred to him what was missing. The little keepsakes that Frigga had given him over the centuries. The trophies from kills in faraway lands. The weapons Thor had given him. The room was used but impersonal. Jaw setting in anger as he asked. “Has someone stolen from these rooms?”
Anya looked surprised. “Of course not, sire, I insured none could.”

“Then where are the rest of Loki’s belongings?”

She almost looked around before it occurred to her what things were missing. “The prince kept them on his person at all times.”

Slowly Odin nodded. “Of course, his dimensional storage.” He may not understand how his youngest did it, but he remembered him talking about it once. His brow furrowed slightly. He always wondered why Loki even bothered. Anya was fussing over a few ingredients lining one wall and he decided to ask her. “Why would Loki carry those more personal items with him?”

“I could not honestly speak for a prince, sire.”

Odin almost sighed but caught himself, his voice a soft rumble. “I value your impressions for I believe them insightful and honest.”

Blue eyes glanced up for a moment but didn’t hesitate further. “You are a most prominent of men, sire. The most celebrated and respected king of the nine realms. So many eyes look upon you, vying for your attention. Even within Asgard so many attempt to whisper in your ear. You attend council meetings and hold court. Celebrations, contests of strength and might…so many more matters that no one is aware. Then there is the attention that you must set aside to training your eldest to one day be king. To oversee the contests that he wins and to hear of the battles he has won.” What she was saying was no secret to anyone and had been a speech she had wished she could say to the aged monarch for centuries now. “There are simply not enough hours in the day for a second son. Compared to all those other matters, Prince Loki is of no importance to you, a fact he was highly aware of.” She shifted the tense of her thoughts cautiously, growing bolder when Odin didn’t even frown in confusion. In the back of her mind it occurred to her that this father was very much aware his son was alive. “He is also aware that eventually he would push matters too far with his trickery and mischief. That someday he may not be able to return to Asgard just as his daughter cannot. He did not want to risk matters and return to an empty room, his treasures lost forever.”

He’d noticed the shifting in her tense this time and stiffened slightly. If word spread of Loki being alive, eventually Thor would learn of it. But he decided to give Anya the benefit of the doubt because she couldn’t have come to her conclusion concerning Loki recently. But her words were weighing down on him. Any discussion he and Loki had in the past ended badly. Loki’s silky words would turn accusatory and he would fall back to defense. A warrior’s instinct, perhaps, to ward off an attack but it didn’t leave much room for understanding. Asking softly, almost to himself. “He truly believes that?”

Anya folded her hands together. “Servants are privy to much since we are overlooked, sire. The council held quite the celebration amongst themselves when you decreed a lifetime sentence for the prince.”

Anger churned in Odin’s gut hotly. He should have gotten those pompous fools replaced centuries ago. They would do Thor no good as king. He would have to review potential candidates thoroughly. “And the citizens?”

“The nobles would be in agreeement with the council, since they also know of his lack of importance to Asgard’s king in comparison to his brother. The commoners mourned, just as they mourn now. He has always been our favorite.”

Visibly stiffening, anger and outrage lining his form. “I do not favor one son over another.”
Ducking her head to hide her expression. “Then forgive my impertinence, sire.”

Odin was highly aware Anya was walking the blade of a knife at this point. Well aware that while she held deep loyalty to Loki, she wouldn’t overstep her position. He wished he could make her an equal to him, so that this discussion wouldn’t have this stifled air between them. That she wouldn’t temper her thoughts because he now knew she understood Loki just as well as Frigga had. “No. Continue.”

She glanced up before doing as bid. “Prince Loki is a man of words. His skill in turning a phrase without equal. He could sway any with enough words. But the prince is self-aware. He knew that actions were an AEsir strength. So he listened not to words of love. Son. Prince. He observed actions. The time that was always set aside for his brother. The punishments that were levied for public scorn that were not bequeathed on his brother. The times when he was scorned for his nature, for the prince cannot help being a mage, but no one ever came to his defense nor offered support. And so the anger and resentment grew. The prince was guilty of mischief and pranks that went awry. Of overstepping boundaries. Of making mistakes. But are any of us blessed as perfect children?”

And Loki had let go. Because all of those cumulative differences in his treatment tied directly in his mind to being Jötunn. Actions that equated that he wasn’t important, as a son or as a warrior. Actions that made him expendable or a viable political sacrifice. Past wrongs that left him but one conclusion: that he would always be accused and found guilty for his crimes because he was evil, not because he was young and foolish.

Odin blinked, understanding in his eye. Loki stayed on Alfheim’s moon because he was waiting for Thanos to be primed for destruction. His son may desire to return to Asgard, but he wouldn’t if things remained as they were. A conversation in the future might clear the air between them but it still might not be enough. Loki would sacrifice his own desire to protect his son from AEsir scorn and worse.

Loki would return to destroy an adversary…but he wouldn’t stay. He and his son were estranged, as was Loki’s relationship with his brother. With Frigga gone and now burdened with the joys of fatherhood, he held no desire for a throne. He no longer had a reason to stay.

He was going to lose his son and his heart actually, physically ached at the thought. There had to be something he could do. If he went to Alfheim now, Loki would run and he’d never stop. *There has to be a way*-

“Peas in a pod, the pair of them.” Odin blinked, not realizing his eye had grown wet, and looked at Anya who had tactfully turned and was running a gentle finger over a picture near the bed. Loki held several copies, but always kept this one in his room. He and Hela, side by side and matching smirks on their young faces. “Father and daughter, a pair of selfish mischief makers…but they would do anything for one another.”

Anya gave Odin a slightly significant look before curtseying and hurrying out the servant’s entrance. The banishment of a daughter. Not the first wrong between he and Loki or Loki and Asgard, but one of the worst offenses. It was a wrong that would always be at the forefront of Loki’s mind until matters were made right. Moving to take the spot she had vacated, he hesitantly picked up the still image and sat down heavily on the bed.

ALFHEIM

Jane smiled gently when a small she-elf slipped in the front door who didn’t look older than a five year old. She knew the girl’s name was Talia and when she wasn’t visiting Azni, she was
here. That was about all she knew. The girl pulled up a chair next to Indel, who grinned and scooted over a little to share his sandwich with her. Loki stepped out of the bedroom but didn’t bother with his elf disguise. He ruffled Indel’s hair as he passed, filling another small plate and putting it in front of the girl. “Ah ah…manners.” The girl gently placed a napkin in her lap before looking back up and he handed her a glass. “Better…eat everything.”

Talia grinned and tucked into her own sandwich, drinking from the tall glass of milk put in front of her. Loki made soft grumbling sounds as he moved, fussing over her braids until the hair was clean and neat, making a tisking sound to see a tear in her dress before fixing it with a flick of his finger. As soon as they were done the two ran outside, a Loki clone appearing outside to watch them. “Who is that?”

Shrugging loosely at Jane, sitting and burying his face in a book. “Talia.” As if that answered everything.

Pressing a finger down on the top of his book. “And who is Talia?”

He looked up at her and reluctantly put the book to the side. He kept his own emotions concerning the little sprite out of his voice. “She’s an orphan…of sorts. She wanders from home to home.”

Jane frowned thoughtfully. “How can a child sort of be an orphan?”

Loki leaned back in the chair, elbows balanced on the arm rests and index fingers touching his lips for a moment. What she might have taken as a thoughtful pose she realized he was struggling to not say his exact opinion. “Her father is dead and her mother is…lacking. Abril appears for a few months, she vanishes again. Talia stays with Azni mostly but she’s been visiting Indel more frequently lately.”

“How’s?”

Loki looked confused for half a second before it cleared. “Elves don’t have that affliction as you humans do. Potions and spells are not habit forming and none of them utilize plants recreationally.”

Sitting down in the neighboring chair, idly thinking of how much humans could benefit from being able to use the medicines that everyone else in the universe uses. “None?”

Loki could see Jane was bursting with curiosity. Which peaked his own curiosity as to what passed for Midgardian medicine. Later he would probe a bit further into that, right now focused on the pros and cons of being a light elf. “No, the highest crime the elves have is theft. Talia’s father was put to death by the Senate…and her mother is well on her way to earning that same sentence.”

Eye brows hiking into her hairline, voice going up an octave. “For stealing??”

He shrugged loosely, not surprised at her reaction. “They consider it a symptom to an incurable corruption. A few times are overlooked. Theft from a prominent enough elf will gain attention. If an elf still steals after a final warning the problem is considered habitual and stopped.”

No doubt looking as stunned as she felt. “She won’t stop even for her daughter’s sake?”

Shrugging again. “I never met Abril. I assume she, like many before her, simply doesn’t care enough to be unselfish for Talia.”
Jane glanced out the window, the pair of them scaling higher and higher up a tree. A little girl who giggled silently and rarely spoke beyond looks and expressions that spoke for her. When she did speak it was a whisper, usually with her hand covering her mouth. “Is she always so quiet?”

“From what I have gathered-...” Loki vanished, taking over the place of his double in time to catch Talia who had just lost her grip on the branch Indel was clinging to. The least stable branch of the entire tree. The girl fell without sound, now clinging to him and body trembling.

Jane ran outside, skidding to a stop at the edge of the porch to sigh in relief. She was just in time to hear Loki order his son firmly. “Indel, come down from there right now.”

Indel scowled. “Way to go, Tali.” Loki didn’t even have to say a word except to narrow his eyes and with a squeak his son all but scampered down the tree.

Looking at Talia as he adjusted his hold. “First of all, you are not dressed appropriately to be climbing the trees like a monkey but I will have something made for you this afternoon. Second of all…” He reached down and showed the claws that had replaced Indel’s fingernails. “…he cheats so be mindful that you cannot climb everywhere that he does.”

Talia stuck her tongue out at Indel. Indel immediately copied, blue tail swinging, and held up his arms to be held. Loki raised an eyebrow and only when his son remembered to wiggle away the claws did he get picked up. Turning and announcing firmly, carrying a trapped child on each hip. “Nap time.”

Indel groaned and Talia silently pouted, but neither one bothered to try to escape since it was the one rule Loki wouldn’t negotiate on. He’d found out the hard way skipping a nap led to cranky children who were whiny and overtired hours before their bedtime. “Story!”

Loki grinned just a little. “One story.” Indel opened his mouth. “Not each, one story.” Both children pouted and he mentally groaned. Those sad little faces were going to be the death of him. Grumbling softly. “One each-and no repetitions.”

MIDGARD

The Other stared off into nothingness, cloth over his eyes and staff held firmly in his hand. He didn’t turn as the Skrull Commander came up to his right. Baring bloody teeth as he spoke, his tone not betraying anger or incredulity. “These primitives managed to destroy what no other race before them has. Impressive.” Not that it truly mattered now. Thanos had been wise to have more than one plan and he was here to implement the second in case the first failed. There was just one small matter to attend to first. Turning his head slightly. “Have a few of your soldiers masquerade as Chitauri.”

“To what end, sir?”

Sneering as his thoughts moved to the clever little witch who had organized the destruction of the Krimminger devices. He hadn’t seen her coming and it surprised him. He’d never met a mortal who could circumvent his seer abilities. Very few creatures could. “There is a very clever witch on this planet. Their task will be to lure her to me.”

Stiffening, the Skrull thought of what could be done without the Other having to be bothered with such a menial task. “If we capture her I can persuade-…”

The staff flipped in the Other’s hand, a blade appearing and screaming through the air before stopping an inch from the Commander’s throat. “I want her before me, Commander. I have
seen it. She will be a most promising gift for Lord Thanos.”

The Skrull exhaled shakily, not daring to move from fear of the Other completing the movement. “Of course, milord.”

Almost tripping in his haste, he rapidly retreated to carry out his orders. The Other returned to his sedentary position and smiled cruelly, speaking softly. “Come find me, Gorgeous. You will find you are not nearly as clever as you believe.”

ALFHEIM

Loki adjusted the jacket he was wearing, giving himself a quick glance in the mirror. He paused for just a moment longer, lifting his chin slightly before tilting his face. Maybe he should attempt a beard again. A second later he rolled his eyes at himself.

Jane had confiscated his old jacket so he’d been forced to create a new one, similar to what she wore but the pelt was almost blue-grey. She’d been eyeing it until he’d calmly stated that she would either be content with what she had or he would force her to hunt for herself from now on. He wouldn’t, of course, but she’d backed off.

Indel and Talia were jumping in place, the boy speaking for both of them. “Can we go now? Can we go now? Can we go now? Can we? Can we? Can we? Can we? Please? Pretty please? Pretty, pretty, pretty—…”

“Indel!” They both froze for a second, staring up at him with wide eyes. But then the bouncing started again, both of them pouting and silently holding up their clasped hands, begging. Loki sighed and ruffled both of their hair as he passed. “Let me see if she is ready.” He knocked lightly on her door, opening it when she softly invited him.

He observed her staring at herself in a mirror, sitting on the end of her bed and fussing with her hair. She sighed. “You should go without me. Really. I’ll just stay here and…”

Loki shut the door behind him, leaning back and watching her fidget. “Jane.”

She grimaced and looked up, mild fear in her eyes. “What if they go crazy again?”

Wincing almost imperceptibly. He wasn’t used to feeling guilty and while he hated that she could bring it out of him he wouldn’t change matters if it meant she wasn’t here. And yes, he was well aware of how quickly his mind had changed in that regard. “That won’t happen.” She frowned at him. “Alright, there is always a slight possibility. Then after I scare them into submission we will leave.” Crossing the distance, taking her hand and leaning in close to her. “Trust me, Jane. Winter begins in a few short days and lasts a long time. This is an event you don’t want to miss.” She still looked worried but he just smirked and coaxed her to her feet. “Trust me?”

After a second she nodded and wobbly smiled. He released her hand and held out both of his own, a circular band of metal filled his palms with delicate crystal flowers attached. He turned her by her shoulders, laying the band on top of her head and guided locks of her hair to loop around it. He’d carefully put protection spells in place and had G’dath check behind him to make sure he hadn’t screwed it up again.

She watched in the mirror on the wall and gasped at her reflection, feeling like a princess wearing a tiara. The crystals winked subtly of green light, the exact color of his magic, and she turned to watch Loki don his elf disguise. The jacket she had confiscated flashed into his hands and
he helped her into it. Holding out his elbow. “Milady.”

The door opened by itself as she grasped the crook of his arm. In the main room Indel and Talia were hopping in place, excitement plain on their faces. Mischief swirled into existence, wearing an AEsir leather jacket and a large grin. The front door opened next, the children running ahead and holding hands. They never went too far ahead, always returning to see why the adults were taking so long.

The journey didn’t take nearly as long as she thought it should but she paused to gasp as the main street came into view. A dance floor had been cleared in front of the community center, surrounded by twinkling lights and a modest group of musicians were setting up. There were tables along one side with different foods and several games had been set up along another. Everyone in the village had contributed something. Either in the food, the games, or setting up for the entertainment. Loki had his own contribution, but it would be added once darkness fell. Jane grinned and hopped a little on the balls of her feet.

Loki raised an eyebrow. “That was quick.”

She stuck her tongue out at him.

Loki guided her effortlessly through the steps and it didn’t take her long to catch on. She laughed as he twirled them, their eyes locked on one another. As the song slowed so did they, the two of them swaying in perfect harmony. The grin that had been on his face the entire time slowly changed. It deepened and stretched into a smile just for her. He had a million smirks and smiles but she’d never seen one so beautiful. This smile was created just for her, as unique as a snowflake and she promised herself to find ways to inspire him to smile over and over again.

The song slowed to a stop and so did they, yet neither of them looked away from each other’s eyes. And if she hadn’t been watching she might never have believed it. The only color she’d ever known was grey-green. They changed. The grey in his eyes deepened and merged to a green closer to Indel’s natural color. But unlike the times when it was just his magic flashing in his eyes, this time the color stayed. If she compared it to the other people she knew with green eyes, they were lighter than Hela’s but darker than Indel’s. A special green that was uniquely his.

It was significant. She wasn’t sure what it meant but she knew it meant something.

“Loki?”
How long have I been searching for her without knowing it? Centuries. Longer than that, perhaps. Someone who saw him. Someone he could trust. She wasn’t using him for power or prestige. Right now he had nothing. Right now he was nothing but she didn’t care. She might still leave if given the opportunity...he would simply have to give her a reason to want to stay. Beautiful and intelligent without harboring conceit. Enough temper to put him in his place and brave without being reckless. Innocent and wise. His mate. His match. She was everything he wanted and more than he could have hoped for. He smiled again, an aching emptiness that he hadn’t even been aware of since Hela’s creation filling, and kissed her knuckle. “You don’t see a monster, do you?”

Blinking rapidly, wishing she could go back in time to kick her own ass, she almost shouted before catching herself in the last instant and instead shook her head fiercely. “Of course not!”

He laughed and twirled her. “Just for that, in the spring I am going to take you to see dragons.”

Squeaking. “Really??”

“We get to see dragons?” A chirping voice asked excitedly and both adults glanced over.

Loki smirked over at Indel who was hopping on his seat. “In the spring.”

Her eyes narrowed just a little. “You’re just teasing me because you know I want to see them, aren’t you?”

He grinned again, liking this feeling. “You’ll just have to stay and find out.”

Indel jumped to his feet, running over to the couple and Talia quick to follow. “Is Jane staying for New Year’s Eve?”

Talia clapped and Loki lifted an eyebrow at the mortal in silent question. Jane looked between father and son before asking. “Why is he acting like it’s Christmas?”

Loki blinked with a frown. “What is Christmas?” There was an amused glimmer to his eyes that Jane didn’t notice. As if he were playing ignorant.


Loki grinned, pleased with that answer, and twirled her again as the next song started. The children joined hands and started dancing around them. “You will enjoy it. New Year’s Eve we exchange gifts to celebrate another year of victorious living. There is a grand feast, a time reserved for family.” His grin wobbled for less than a second but she caught it. But then it brightened once more. “I might even teach you a traditional Asgardian song for the occasion.”

Indel stopped next to the adults and pouted. “You promised, dada.”

Loki lifted an eyebrow, lightly swaying with Jane as he asked. “What did I promise?”

“You double promised you wouldn’t sing.”

Loki grinned a Cheshire grin. “I’m going to teach Jane to sing instead.”

Indel made a face and looked at Jane, complaining. “Dada sings like a strangled cat.”
Loki froze as Jane squeaked before slapping a hand over her mouth. He snarled sharply. “I do not!”

The boy pouted angrily up at Loki. “Do so.”

Jane slowly lifted one eyebrow, shoulders shaking and pressing her palm a little more firmly over her mouth. All three of them looked to Talia who shrugged since she hadn’t heard.

Mischief nodded solemnly. “Your ears will bleed.”

Loki transferred his glare to his playmate. “Liar.”

Said playmate smirked. “Naturally.”

Jane turned away to pull in a deep, calming breath before turning back and smiling gently at Indel. “Then you can sing on New Year’s Eve.”

The little boy thought about this for a second and grinned again. “Okay!” Pouting hard again. “I want a puppy for New Years!”

Loki stopped dancing to groan.

The village stayed to enjoy the festivities for the remainder of the afternoon. Evening started to set in, children yawning and the stars shining brightly. Couples and families spread out on blankets, the twinkling lights dimming so that the night sky could be seen clearly. They sat down, Talia crawling into his lap as Indel snuggled into Jane’s, who was resting contentedly against his side. Mischief snuggled into his other side with a cheeky grin, Loki throwing an arm around him as he hid a private smile.

“What are we waiting for, dada?”

Loki winked at Indel who was whipping his head around in excitement, trying to figure out what was going on. “You will find out in just a moment.”

A whine filled the air followed by a streak of fire arcing gracefully across the sky. A boom. Then crackles and an explosion of sound and color filled the sky. Ooh’s and ah’s filled the air, chased with a myriad of colors and sparkling wonder. Jane’s eyes widened. “Fireworks!”

The children giggled and pointed and clapped as the show continued, eyes wide and focused. Jane was all smiles and delight…and Loki silently drank it in. He was quite pleased with the results and mentally added a special gift for New Year’s Eve for Hela. But he looked at those surrounding him and for the first time that he could remember felt content. This is what he wanted. He was respected here. He was accepted. He was challenged, both physically and mentally here. He had the love of two children that he absolutely adored and hopefully soon he would never have to wonder about Jane ever leaving his side. He would never again stand idly by when people like Jane needed help, but this was the future he wanted. Where it was didn’t matter, although Alfheim had given him more clear, untainted, happy memories in just a few years than the thousand years on Asgard. But it wasn’t just being here. Just them. He would even return to Asgard if it meant keeping them. This family of misfits that didn’t fit by themselves…but somehow together they worked.
Author's Notes:

And we have kiddie cuteness...and perhaps just a little flirting.

Next:

Drinking and Loki don’t mix; baby steps
Chapter 39

ALFHEIM

Jane slowly flipped through the pages of a book. She missed her books and none of Loki’s were in English. She was either going to have to start learning this language…or beg G’dath for books she could read and she couldn’t decide which undertaking was more daunting. G’dath reminded her of Loki, only the elf seemed to have a low tolerance for her. Hmm…maybe she could beg Indel to read to her.

At the moment she couldn’t even begin to understand the language but the pictures were pretty. Well, some of them were. Some of them were very gruesome battle scenes and others made her blush to her toes. Strangely enough it reminded her a little of a human history book. Kind of. It was on a shelf designated as not for Indel, as Loki put it. She was starting to understand why.

“How’s it going?”

Jane snapped the book closed at Indel’s query and blushed, putting it away. “Yes, sweetie?”

Indel’s voice and frown were strange. “Dada fell out of a tree.”

Jane blinked in surprise. She didn’t think it was even possible Loki could fall out of a tree. Stamping down on the worry, she hustled to the door and followed Indel to the edge of the magical shield still in place before he pointed. Yep. Loki was flat on his back, his legs resting on a stump. Even though she’d been promised in only a couple of days there would be snow covering the ground it was a surprisingly mild day. Looking around. “Wasn’t a copy of him watching you?”

Just Indel, little Talia had been picked up by Azni earlier that morning, the older elf simply stating that she needed to take the girl to Alfheim proper for a few days. Privately Jane had been surprised Loki hadn’t objected. He tried to hide it, but she could see how attached he was to that little girl.

Indel shrugged. “Yeah, he disappeared and then dada fell.” Her life was officially strange when she could accept magical shields as security systems and a completely incorporeal replica of Loki as a babysitter without batting an eyelash.

Still, the only time either failed was if Loki was either physically or mentally having a problem. Frowning in concern. “Stay here.” Indel nodded silently as she picked her way over to Loki carefully, a recent rain leaving behind several puddles. Her eyebrows rose as she got close enough to actually hear him. He was giggling. Not chuckling. Not even laughing, but giggling like a little boy. But he wasn’t smiling--it was the weirdest thing she’d ever seen. His green eyes were fixed on the canopy of trees and every so often he would pop a bright purple berry into his mouth. “Loki?” The berries tumbled out of his hand as he tried to turn himself to see her. It was a truly uncoordinated display. Is he drunk?

He managed to turn himself just enough to see her and asked, “Yup?”

Considering how he felt about slang this more than anything else weirded her out. She startled a little before shaking her head. “…has to be the berries…” Another echo of giggles danced against her ears as she moved forward and reached for him. “Up you go, time to go home.” He held up his hand but instead of using her as balance he tugged her down. She landed across his chest with
an ‘oomph’. He giggled again and Jane rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah…real funny chuckle boy.”

She flicked her hair out of her face and he snatched it, bringing it to his own with a soft comment. “Smell nice…”

The words were simple and perhaps silly but the unmistakable purr in his tone did all sorts of delicious things to her. Things that she really wanted to act on. No, Jane. Bad. No taking advantage of sexy, drunk Loki. She shook her head and groaned softly as she asked no one in particular, “Why can’t you say stuff like that sober? So unfair.”

“Why?”

Jane snorted at the very thought of answering that honestly. “I refuse to answer that on the grounds that you will mock me.”

“Why?”

She groaned at him this time, still not asking him specifically, “Why do guys turn into two year olds when you’re drunk?”

A small furrow line appeared between his eyes as if he was considering her question seriously before he seemed to settle on an answer. “Don’t know.”

Sighing in resignation, reluctantly grinning. “I didn’t think you did.”

She tried to pull her hair out of his hand but he wouldn’t let go. He bared his teeth slightly and clutched the lock in his grasp possessively. “Mine.”

Jane tried to look stern but she just couldn’t manage it. “Loki, let go.”

He shook his head childishly. “Nuh huh.”

As much as she was enjoying this rather adorable side of him they couldn’t stay here. Narrowing her eyes, threatening on a hunch he really liked her with long hair. “Loki Odinson, release my hair right now or so help me I will chop it all off.”

Somehow he managed to yelp and giggle at the same time but he did obey, jerking backwards as much as he was able and exclaiming, “So pretty…when angry!”

She stopped to stare at him. She reminded herself to blink once but she was shocked cold with clarity, her question almost to herself, “You piss me off on purpose, don’t you?”

He shook his head from side to side and grinned. “Yep.”

She huffed a laugh and pulled herself to her feet, shaking her head. Apparently the Liesmith’s weakness was alcohol…or whatever those berries were. Walking to his feet, she took both ankles and attempted to walk around while pulling so she could lie him flat but the man, as skinny as he was, weighed a ton. Denser bones was all she could think because he shouldn’t be this heavy. Shoving his legs to the right side of the stump instead, moving to push at his shoulders. “Get up.”

“Don’t wanna.”

Rolling her eyes at him, voice firm. “Loki, get up.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. “Nope.”
Jane huffed and pushed harder. “Remind me how old you are, again.”

His answer was surprisingly quick. “1,049.”

Growling and retorting, “Well, mister eloquence, if you want to live to be 1,050 you will move your sexy ass up.” He pouted up at her before obeying. A few stumbles and lots of panting but she did finally manage to get him to his feet. Strangely once he was on his feet he had little problem with balancing. Just in time for another round of giggles. Holding her head as she turned, taking his wrist so he’d follow. “Oh my god, this cannot be my life.”

“Why not?”

Jane sighed but refused to glance back at the adorably rumpled man behind her.

“Because.”

“’kay.”

She squealed as the world suddenly decided to move for Loki, his palm clamping down on her wrist and he dragged her down with him. He fell to the left with her following and twin splashes followed right after. She cringed at the mud squishing under her knees, her face in his chest and knew his back was now covered, the water outlining his frame perfectly. She lingered just long enough to determine he smelled good and pulled back to wetly slap his chest. “I hate you so much right now.”

He giggled. “But I like you.” Then he pouted. “But you don’t like me, you like Thor.”

She shook her head and fought a grin. Indel definitely learned to pout from his father. *This adorable man attacked New York?* Then she decided to reassure him with a truth she wouldn’t have admitted to normally. *What the hell, he probably won’t remember anyway.* “I like you more than Thor.”

He smiled brightly, a little too brightly, and asked hopefully. “Really?”

“Yes.” Then an evil little grin curled her lip. Just in case he did remember this later it would be good to have a little ammunition in return. “Loki, if I ask you a question will you tell me the truth?”

He grinned. “Yep.”

“How old are AEsir when they become adults?” She asked curiously, firmly suppressing the tiny spark of guilt.

His answer was prompt. “900.”

A grin spread across her face as the guilt vanished. “So you’re like 19 on Asgard.”

“Yep.”

Patting his chest. “That’s what I thought.” Not that she would actually do anything with that information but he didn’t have to know that.

She wrestled him out of the mud and back to his feet, deciding to push him with both hands against his back to get him walking forward. Thankfully there were no further incidents but they were both in dire need of a bath. Just as they crossed the shield he asked innocently, “Jane, do you think Thor is sexy?”
Indel’s eyes were huge, his tail curled into a strange question mark, staring down at them from the tree tops as he asked, “Is dada sick?”

Answering Loki first. “He’s as sexy as his brother.” Jane huffed and pushed, speaking loud enough so Indel could hear her. “No, sweetie, your father is being very silly right now. After a bath and a nap he’ll be all better…” Then grumbling under her breath. “…or I’ll drug his ass.”

Loki’s giggles kicked up another notch, his question floating back to her. “How do you… drug an ass?”

Jane blinked once before rolling her eyes. Nothing wrong with his hearing. With no stairs to navigate she pushed him into the washroom attached to the bedroom he shared with Indel and pointed imperiously. “Get out of those clothes and take a bath.” He pouted and she shut the door on his face.

She had bathed and changed before he’d figured out how to get water into the tub. She had tea ready by the time he wandered into the main room and she kept an ear out for Indel. “Jane?”

Glancing to the right, Jane’s mind promptly had a melt down with one resounding thought: Thor looks good topless but Loki is delicious naked. Followed swiftly by: would you look at that, he’s perfectly proportioned. She was never going to be able to sleep. Ever again.

Mouth dry, voice hoarse and unable to look away. “Loki, turn around.” His head tilted a little before he did as told. Not that he stopped turning until he had done a full circuit. Nice view no matter which way he turned. But it didn’t escape her attention, the scars. There were marks on his legs and arms that looked to be in the final transition of healing. Some pale lines she guessed were from past battles, but not the ones on his back. Not the one running down his stomach. Those were deep enough to never fade but had slight color to them to reveal their newness in comparison to the others. Yet while it filled her with horror and sadness, it didn’t detract from his beauty. She wanted so badly to cross the distance and trace each line until she memorized them…

…perhaps with her tongue.

She shook her head and finally gathered the willpower to slap a hand over her eyes. “Dear god, you are going to hate yourself in the morning.” Even though she really didn’t want to, she commanded her eyes to look at the ceiling before removing her hand. Why? Because the fact that he was always covered from the neckline down gave her an early clue to some modesty issues. She stood up, keeping her eyes fixed on a shoulder which was about the only safe option and turned him around. “Clothes.”

He just giggled as he complained. “But they’re dirty.”

She sighed indulgently. “Of course. Indel, come inside, please, until your father feels better.”

“Ohkay!” She heard a thud, the boy no doubt jumping to the ground.

She pulled out clean clothes and made sure Loki put them on, for her sanity if nothing else. He yawned and she took that as a good sign, pulling him to the sofa and giving him herbal tea. The giggles were still running rampant but they were a little quieter and she took the cup from him once it was empty. He yawned again and she patted the sofa. “Stretch out. Nap time.”
Taking the comforter she’d borrowed off her bed, she tucked him in but he grabbed for her wrist before she could escape. “Stay?” There was no way she could say no when she detected a plaintive note in his tone as he asked softly.

Jane groaned again. “Why, oh why, can’t you be like this sober?”

Loki curled on his side towards her, arm moving to her waist as she sat on the sofa and ran soothing fingers through his hair. He hummed softly. “Can you…tell me your calculations again… really like to hear…”

Her eyes shot to his face, shocked at the unmistakable rough growl. Her own face flushed crimson. My mumbling is a turn on? She filed that information away for later pondering. His eyes slowly closed and within minutes he was soon fast asleep.

HELHEIM

“Mistress?”

Hela smiled crookedly at the person who spoke, moving one of the marble pieces before looking up and asking in invitation, “Do you play?”

The female Jötunn, long dead, towered over her, but there was a sereneness in her expression that was atypical for her race. Farbauti, the former consort of Laufey who had borne him three sons before her death, eyed the human game with distrust. “No.” Hela grinned and moved another piece, playing against herself. “Why do you visit Midgard so often?”

“All part of my clever little plan.”

FARBauti sat down carefully across from the Queen of Helheim. “Your plan?”

Sharing a smile with the woman who had taught her what it truly was to be Jötunn. Farbauti wasn’t her closest confidant, but Hela respected her enough to rarely lie to her. “Chess is a rather remarkable game. The rules are simple enough, multiple pieces that can only move in certain directions.”

The Jötunn’s lip curled in contempt. “A child’s game.”

Hela shook her head and corrected her. “Far from it. The rules are simple for a child to master, but that is hardly the point.”

“Then what is the point?”

The trickster queen smiled with relish and rubbed her hands. “Strategy. The best plan their intended battle before the game even begins.” Hela knocked over a piece. “You have to be able to adjust that strategy based on the moves of the other.” Another piece tipped over. “But the truly great not only plan their own moves, but are able to anticipate their opponent’s strategy. To see the battlefield before the battle even begins.”

The Jötunn nodded quietly as she listened, the question still hanging between them. “And how is this game connected to your visits to Midgard?”

A greedy, hungry look darkened Hela’s already dark green eyes. “Pawns.”

FARBauti glanced down at the game. She didn’t play, but she knew the names of the
different pieces. Asking quietly, “And who is your opponent?”

Hela ticked off each name on her fingers. “Thanos. Fate. Time, really.”

“And the reward is to win?”

Shrugging slightly and chuckling softly. “Merely a bonus if those bitches are circumvented and Thanos keeps the demons of Niflheim entertained. Everyone in the nine realms are my chess pieces and I move them into the perfect position to obtain my reward.”

Farbauti pressed carefully. Hela had her father’s temper, which was not completely dissimilar to her own. “Which is?”

Hela considered the chess board for a moment, thinking over her chosen words carefully. “If I succeed…I will finally be free.”

Farbauti just looked as confused as she sounded. “Free from what? Asgard? Jötunheim? You are the Queen of two realms. The Goddess over the Underworld.”

Desperate bitterness tugged at Hela’s lips as she answered. “I’ll be free to live.” A second later with a snarl she sent the pieces flying with the back of her hand and swept out of the room.

ALFHEIM

Loki’s hand spasmed against her waist, which roused Jane out of a comfortable doze. His eyes were squeezed shut, left arm thrown over his head to hide. Partly it was a pounding headache, she could tell by the pained tension surrounding his eyes, but not all of it. He was bright, bright red. Jane was hoping he wouldn’t remember anything. She sighed softly. Poor Loki.

“Is dada better?”

Glancing over at Indel who was still working on his coloring and had been for a couple of hours now. “He’s a little better. I think he needs…”

She trailed off on purpose and Loki’s response was barely audible. “Light green.”

“…the light green potion.”

Indel put down his crayon with a nod. “Okay.” He jumped down from his chair and ran upstairs on hands and feet.

Not allowing any amusement, keeping her voice carefully neutral as she asked softly, “Would you like me to stay, or do you need some time alone?” His throat worked, Adam’s apple bobbing lightly before she felt a light squeeze against her waist. Taking his silent cue, she leaned back into him and grinned when Indel came proudly back from the potion workroom with a light green vial. She took a careful sniff. “Peppermint and…moss?” Loki nodded and winced as he moved his arm, downing it and shuddering at the taste before hiding again. Jane was busy praising Indel and admiring his drawings. “Are you going to put those up in your room?” Indel considered them critically before selecting the one that passed inspection for the wall and set it to the side. “Did you finish your rune work?”

Pouting up at Jane. “I hate runes. I wanna hunt.”

Jane sighed softly, well used to hearing the resistance between Indel and Loki concerning
runes. “Indel, your father isn’t feeling well right now. Do your runes.”

Whining softly. “But Tali left, she doesn’t have’ta do runes.”

She made her tone a little more firm. “Indel.”

Pulling out another sheet of parchment hidden under his drawings, grumbling. “Stupid runes.”

Loki was embarrassed, but not for the reason that Jane assumed. He’d known he’d say all manner of things but telling her about his relative age had slipped his mind as a possibility. **That** more than anything embarrassed him. Scars were flaunted by most AEsir. He wasn’t prone to do so but it was more of a personal preference. Nudity had been an issue for him as a child but he’d grown out of it a long time ago. In short, he’d chosen berries that would temporarily put him in an inebriated state on purpose.

He may have exaggerated the effect on his person…a lot. But there was a method to his madness. On the one hand, he would coax Jane to say things that she might not say otherwise which was always delightful. On the other, he’d confirmed without poking about in her brain that she apparently found him sexier than Thor. Not to mention the look on her face when he was on prominent display flattered his male ego nicely. **That** was a memory he was going to share with Thor at his earliest convenience.

This sort of mischief, that from a logical viewpoint couldn’t possibly have been on purpose, was exactly the kind of trick he would get up to in Asgard. He now had the ammunition he wanted, un-coerced and the victim unsuspecting. Still, it wouldn’t be any fun to give the game away. “I will be forced to smother you in your sleep if you ever repeat what you just witnessed.”

Jane raised an eyebrow at his growled but completely empty threat. He was her protector. He’d sworn it. She wasn’t scared of him anymore and he knew it. “Brave words for a man who was parading around stark na-EEP!”

She was on her back with Loki looming over her, eyes flashing green and teeth bared. “Don’t you dare.”

Raising the other eyebrow. “Considering how much dirt I have on you now you really are brave to threaten me.” But then she rolled her eyes at him playfully. “At least you’re feeling better.”

He scowled at her before collapsing face first in the sofa next to her, left arm trapping her in place. Better, yes. Back to normal, no.

She smiled a little and pet his bicep gently. *This was actually kind of nice.*

He leaned in close and hissed in her ear. “I will have my revenge for this.”

She retracted that last thought. She turned her head enough to see his eyes, her own glinting in challenge.

Jane should have known better. She really should have. It had spiraled into a prank war, nothing but vengeance on his mind for embarrassing him. Or for embarrassing himself maybe, but the result didn’t change. Ice cubes with bugs in them…she wished she could say they were plastic. A very carefully placed water trap that almost caught him…stupid teleporting ability. Her shoelaces mysteriously tied themselves together and she almost broke her leg tripping down the stairs. The glare she’d sent his way informed him he was a dead, dead trickster if he ever did that again. She’d
borrowed some spices to dump in his tea and promptly found out he was allergic when he started swelling like a puffer fish.

G’dath had put her foot down after that one and informed them both the next prank would earn them both a boot to the ass. They worked together to switch out all her socks so she didn’t have a matching pair in her entire wardrobe. From there they recruited Indel and the three of them spread pranks over the entire town. It wasn’t until Trax and G’dath had cornered all three of them with nondescript threats of violence that it stopped.

Loki smirked next to Jane, the two of them stretched out on the porch and watching as Indel reappeared and disappeared, having just figured out how to turn invisible. Warming spells were a little limited, the spell wrapped around the porch itself but unable to go any further. “That is the most fun I have had in centuries.”

Jane glanced at Loki as she asked. “Centuries?”

He shared a grin with her and she found it dazzling. What made it even more stunning was that it was a grin just for her. A grin of trust. “Well, I do so love a good trick and it has been a while since I could indulge.”

She almost snorted at the very thought, not buying it for a second. “I highly doubt you haven’t played tricks on anybody in centuries.”

His grin grew towards impish. “This was more fun.” Then he shrugged and admitted quietly. “No one ever plays with me. It’s nice to have a partner.”

She glanced back at him. He had a teasing smirk on his face, but there was a certain look in his eyes that told her his thoughts had veered into the same direction hers had. She leaned in just a little bit but paused when she noticed he leaned back a little. Making sure she met his eyes and held them. “Whenever you’re ready.” Usually it was she that was the hesitant one about starting a relationship but as soon as she’d met him she’d known Loki didn’t do anything in the usual way.

It had been almost 150 years ago, but someone he thought had loved him had brutally torn his heart out of his chest, ripped it to shreds, and spit on the remains she’d left on the ground. He’d had quite enough of being used. He’d intentionally leaned away from Jane, as much as he didn’t want to. His eyes held that searching look again, a small furrow line appearing as he asked, “Is it just because he isn’t here?” He wouldn’t settle, nor allow her to settle for him just because she was Thor’s cast-off.

Was it because Thor wasn’t here? She considered the question carefully. In a way, but not a bad way. Thor never came back and she’d moved on with her life. And now that she had she was thankful because as much love and purpose as Thor had given her, Loki introduced a level of magic to her life that she hadn’t realized she’d been missing until she’d found it. She couldn’t and wouldn’t compare the two brothers, except to think that now that she was here she wouldn’t change a thing. Leaning her head on his shoulder, slipping her hand into his and not even having to ask who ‘he’ was. “Definitely not.”

One question had been tickling the back of his mind for a while now. “Why did Thor not stay with you?”

The question wasn’t designed to sting so she took no offense. She’d figured out a long time ago he had a natural curiosity that needed to be sated, and no qualms about asking potentially awkward questions. She’d also figured out that sometimes he did ask awkward, embarrassing, irritating questions just to needle his victim but not always. Shrugging and sighing. “Because I’m not
what Asgard needs.”

Loki frowned slightly. “Why would Asgard have anything to do with—oh.” He recognized that phrasing. His father used it all the time, especially concerning queens. And his brother was forever putting aside his own wants and dreams in an effort to keep father’s pride. Not that he blamed Thor for that. If he could have found a way to make Odin proud he would have done the same.

She nodded, not at all surprised he understood what she meant. “He didn’t tell me that, I figured it out on my own.”

His head tilted slightly as he asked, “Why do you assume Asgard would not embrace you? Intellect such as yours is needed.”

Smiling sadly. “Odin didn’t approve of me…I’m not queen material.”

Loki stared up at the sky, clearly mystified with the notion that she couldn’t be a queen. He’d meant what he said. She desperately needed instruction, but that was easy enough to provide. She could be a goddess quite easily. How could father not see that? Shaking his head to himself, tone mystified. “Queen material...”

Thinking that he didn’t know what she meant. “I’m not a warrior. I’m not stately and polished and powerful. I can’t hold a candle to your mother—...”

There was so much suppressed emotion in his voice it made her eyes sting to hear him. “My mother was a goddess without equal, a queen of the highest order for more than a 1,000 years. It is no insult that you felt intimidated by her. I was her son and she frightened me at times. And you may not be an AEsir warrior, for by that definition neither am I, but that doesn’t mean you aren’t a warrior.” He tilted his head as he regarded her, she hanging on every word. “It is a simple matter and it has nothing to do with the station that would come with a marriage. Here is the question that you need to answer: when Thor would step onto a battlefield, would you have felt it was your place to walk beside him, or to stay behind?”

Jane frowned and thought about it before a light seemed to spark in her eyes. “I always felt like he didn’t need anybody’s help.”

Nodding slowly. “And that is what my...my father saw. All those other things are trifle and can be taught but if you felt yourself not worthy to be his shield maiden, that he needed no one to stand beside him, then the two of you would never have lasted. You do not need saving, Jane. You proved that when you saved my life. Your partner should be your equal. You should want to protect him as much as he wants to protect you. He may not need you protecting him, but the man you choose shouldn’t have to ask for your support.”

Jane was quick to shake her head. “I’m not a warrior.”

He grinned as he corrected her. “I can think of no one else in the nine realms who has me at their command and I do not ally myself with weaklings.” His hand brushed a lock of her hair out of her face. “You who would defy anything and anyone for love. You loved a man more than your own world and that is admirable.” It was true, she loved Thor...with more time she could have fallen in love with him. And then she’d met his brother.... “You are brilliant and you have an inner fire.” He leaned in just a little closer. “You are a warrior, Jane, you just have to believe in yourself.”

Knowing better than to listen to the words, and knowing that Loki had long ago mastered the expressions on his face, she looked into his eyes. Those green eyes told the truth far more
eloquently than he ever could vocally. Loki wasn’t placating her or stroking her ego. He genuinely believes what he’s saying. Wow. She couldn’t see herself ever picking up a sword and throwing herself into battle. She’d never be Sif. But Loki didn’t throw himself into a fight without considering all the options either. “To me I don’t see a difference, ‘warrior’ or ‘Æsir warrior’. Obviously it means something different to you.”

He pursed his lips just slightly to consider how to answer her. After a moment he knew to make her see, she needed the context of life on Asgard. “There are many things that a child can be when they grow up, but it is the dream of every Æsir to someday be a celebrated, honorable Æsir warrior. But it’s not what everyone has a gift for. For some who do not have the natural affinity they can be taught the skills needed. There are other duties, of course, other pursuits, but being a warrior is all that really matters to Asgard.”

Sputtering in confusion. “But I’ve seen you fight, you’re amazingly fast.”

He sneered lightly at his own skills. “When we reach a certain age we’re taken to the training yard to be taught weapons. There are a variety of choices but only one acceptable way to fight. A face to face confrontation with your opponent, weapon drawn. Thor excelled at an early age, the favored son of Asgard.” Loki remembered each and every broken bone he’d sustained before realizing the Æsir way of fighting was physically beyond him. “I use illusion. Distraction. I have no issue killing my foe from behind. The Æsir crave large, impressive weapons… they hinder my speed so I prefer daggers and light weight scepters. And over all I use magic. Tricks. A considered woman’s art that no warrior, much less an Æsir warrior uses in battle.” Only emasculated men.

Again Jane watched his expressions along with his eyes, to gather a complete picture. “You didn’t want to be a warrior, did you?”

“I am— I was a prince of Asgard. There was no other choice about my future.” As if Odin would allow him to be anything else.

Snuggling into his shoulder, watching Indel switch from his magic practice to doing hand stands and cartwheels. “If you had a choice, do anything. Be anything.”

Loki ignored her questioned for the moment. “You?”

Jane was tempted to insistent since she’d asked first, but decided not to. “I’m what I want to be, I just wish…”

He heard the longing in her voice. “What do you wish?”

“That just because I’ve got the brains for a ‘nerd’ job, doesn’t mean that’s all I am. I want to map the stars and be the first to explore them.” Not even looking at his face, certain he would be scoffing at such a ludicrous dream in mocking disbelief. “I know I don’t have what it takes but I wish I could.”

His soft voice, almost guilty sounding, drew her attention. “I would have liked to have been a scholar. I have had many pursuits over the years, finding someone to apprentice would have been nice as well.”

“What about teaching?”

He shook his head after a moment of consideration. “No one really teaches magic on Asgard and I have not the patience for instructing any other subject.”

“So no magic school?”
He huffed but she detected a subtle amount of humor. “Why are you humans so fascinated with that little upstart??” Jane slowly grinned and he held out a finger before she could speak. “Ah ah. The frog threat still stands. There will be no utterances of scarred boys with wands.” She giggled and he smirked at her response, pleased he could amuse her. His brow furrowed a little, answering her question. “Every magician is unique, with their own strengths and limitations. The need for a devoted master is crucial.”

“So what happens when one family has several magical children?”

He tilted his head a little, thinking. It was a valid question because it was a problem he was going to be facing. “It’s so rare I know not.”

Jane frowned a little in thought, thinking about all the conversations they’d had about the nine realms. “Didn’t you say the Vanir were largely gifted with magic?”

Loki slowly nodded his head once. “Yes, but it is rare for the Vanir to have more than one child. I suppose if the family is wealthy enough they hire more than one master.”

When she had first encountered them, she had been absolutely enraptured by Asgard and the AEsir. At the time it hadn’t even occurred to her she was only getting exposure to one side of Asgard. She knew Loki was pessimistic by nature but it didn’t make his own perspective any less valid. It just added to the overall picture to show her that Asgard wasn’t nearly as perfect as she had first imagined it to be.

He was a different kind of warrior, but it didn’t make him less, and the AEsir were idiots for making him think he was. He flaunted cool confidence but it was bravado. A ‘trick’. Had he always been this way or had something happened? It was a story she didn’t know yet, but she had a feeling once upon a time he was a much different person than he is now. His self-doubt was almost tangible. Jane decided it would be her self-appointed task to support him and give him back the confidence he’d lost. Jane nodded to herself before glancing at him. “What weapon?” His brow furrowed and she clarified. “What weapon should I learn?”

Disappointment flashed across his face for an instant before he looked thoughtful and resigned. And yet again Thor wins. He was disappointed, but not really surprised. “I could teach you a sword, a dagger would be best for combat…but a bow and arrow might be a better fit for you as a range weapon.”

Nodding firmly and standing up. “Then teach me so I can be a shield maiden worthy of a trickster prince.” His mouth slowly dropped open, not moving from his seated position, and she grinned when she realized why he’d looked disappointed. “I told you…I don’t just like you because he’s not here.” The grin he returned was unguarded and dazzling and she felt herself flush. If that man kept it up and she was going to yank him down and kiss him whether he liked it or not.

Author's Notes:

Cooking instructions: turn up the heat just a little bit now. The sexual tension/frustration shall now begin.

Next:

A girl called Freyja; one baby step at a time
G’dath opened the door, frigid air following her, and froze. Jane pulled in a fortifying breath, closing the book in front of her, sitting at the table. “Loki took Indel for a hunt.”

Because her balance was still off and now was a critical time for kills. Because the temperature had dropped sharply and those two had a much better tolerance for the cold than she did. She’d accepted staying behind with grace. She was also currently alone, Talia and Azni’s visit to Alfheim being delayed unexpectedly from a few days to several weeks with little explanation as to why. It made for a very tense God of Mischief, who obviously didn’t like not having both children within easy reach.

The elf’s shoulders hunched a little, a look Jane couldn’t figure out crossing her face. “I’ll return later, then.”

Jane slowly crossed her arms, offended. “Wow, even elves are afraid of me.”

G’dath instantly scowled. She wasn’t afraid of the human in front of her but she was embarrassed at her own uncivilized reactions. Tone flat as she let the door slam shut behind her, the words sounding like a threat but the delivery making it quite obvious it wasn’t. “Do you know how easily I could kill you?”

Jane shrugged and rolled her eyes. “About as easily as Loki could.”

Slowly an eyebrow lifted as she asked, “Then is it not you who should be afraid of me?”

Shrugging again. “I think the likelihood of you killing me is about as high as Loki doing it.”

G’dath raised the other eyebrow as she asked, “And why is that?” Jane just silently showed G’dath her palm and wiggled her fingers. There was no mark on her skin but that wasn’t the point. Jane mattered to Loki and that was the point. The healer’s eyes narrowed. “I think we need to limit the amount of time the two of you are together.” Jane looked thoughtful for a moment before the corners of her mouth turned up just a little. Sighing at the younger woman as if deeply persecuted and asking, “What do you want?”

“Not much, I was just curious about something.” G’dath made a small gesture as if to continue but didn’t venture further into the room. Ordinarily Jane didn’t talk about the elephant in the room. If someone had a problem with her she would just avoid them or ignore them. But G’dath was important to Loki so for him she would try to get along with the elf. Jane frowned a little. “You don’t like me. Why?”

G’dath stiffened. “You will find I am this warm to most people.”

Jane made a negative sound and shook her head. “No, you’re not. Something about me makes you angry and I don’t think it’s because I’m human.”

Blue eyes glinted coldly. “You don’t want me answering that.”

Bracing herself before retorting. “I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t want to know.”
“Because you’re going to get him killed.”

Blinking quickly several times…well, that hadn’t been the answer she’d been anticipating. “Huh?”

Slumping back against the door with a groan, the elf shook her head. “The ancestors above…” G’dath closed her eyes and pursed her lips to herself, gathering her thoughts together before pushing herself away from the door. “I believe you are capable enough on your world. You understand your own culture, the rules. The way to properly assess and address others…the other realms are vastly different and more ancient than you can conceive. On Alfheim there are elves here that looking them in the eye is above your station and can warrant a sentencing before the Senate. And Loki has sworn to defend you. Every mistake you make is something he will have to bear and defend.”

G’dath huffed and crossed her arms, looking up when Jane spoke quietly. “I never said I wouldn’t try to learn.” Jane’s chin lifted a little. “And it’s unreasonable to assume that I won’t make mistakes but I’m not stupid. If you’re so worried about him then teach me because I’m not going anywhere.”

A sly grin crossed the healer’s face as she asked. “Even if a doorway opened to allow your return?”

Deciding to run with an honest answer, even though Jane was almost positive it was no. “I won’t know until that happens.”

Jane’s answer wasn’t a defensive one but a practical one. G’dath respected that answer more than anything. Narrowing her eyes thoughtfully. “How many languages do you speak?”

Jane loosely gestured to the books in Loki’s bookcases. “None of those.”

G’dath sighed softly in resignation. “So you’re strongest language is earthen English.”

Nodding. “Pretty much. I took Spanish in college, Latin and Greek but…nothing like these.”

The fact that Jane was open to learning had G’dath even considering her next course of action. Unlike any other creature, light elves were highly sensitive to Yggdrasil, to the want and will of the universe. This little mortal needed to be here and it was obvious now she was capable of bravery and sacrifice. G’dath had enjoyed teasing Loki mercilessly about his attachment to the mortal, but she hadn’t put much thought in the reality of the girl being here. She had thought at some point he would go to her or drag her to Asgard. There was an impossible amount for her to learn and she wouldn’t live long enough to learn even a hundredth of it.

Until the realization of Loki’s plans settled in her mind. Jane was mortal, for now. Jane was limited, for now. It was a condition he planned on correcting. Nodding to herself. “I would suggest working on runes with Indel, since many of the languages are based on it, not just for spell work. There are a few books on Alfheim I will retrieve for you, learning Allspeak will be vital for your survival.”

“What is Allspeak?”

Mirth quirking G’dath’s lips. “No one knows exactly where it originated but every species believes they founded it. Essentially it makes it possible for each of the species in the nine realms to understand one another without having to learn a separate language for each.”
Jane wanted so much to accept the words coming out of the elf’s mouth but she couldn’t get over her brain absolutely melting at the thought of a universal language. But the alternative was looking like an idiot and that wasn’t acceptable either. “S-so…is it the first language you learn?”

Waving a hand and sitting down next to the human, the hesitation between them destroyed. “Of course not. We all have our native tongues that we are born with. I believe AEisir learn Allspeak once they are old enough to be tutored.”

Jane’s jaw dropped. “Are you saying Indel already speaks Allspeak?”

“Allspeak takes a very long time to learn, a combination of words wrapped in ancient magic that make both the hearing and speaking of language universal.” Then G’dath paused, thinking about the way Indel spoke. “He speaks human English and high elvish.” She paused further, remembering a conversation she stumbled into between Indel and Loki. “And AEisir.”

“He’s four!”

Smirking as she looked over Jane whose own accent shifted subtly. Evidently Loki had done Jane a similar favor he’d done for his son. “If it makes you feel better, I think Loki put a language spell on him. His AEisir accent sounds correct but his high elvish is slightly muddled. Compared to your accent his English is not quite right either. I doubt Loki will start teaching him Allspeak for at least another two years or so.”

All this talk about home and language and Asgard suddenly popped into her mind. She was curious about G’dath opinion so she decided to ask, “Do you think Loki will ever go back to Asgard?”

G’dath’s snarl was instantaneous as she countered, “Would you?” After a second she exhaled slowly and shook her head slightly. “My apologies. How important is it to you to return to Midgard?”

“Uh…not much…anymore.”

Too much understanding and wisdom in G’dath’s eyes as she completed what Jane didn’t say. “Midgard is important to you because of the people there. “

“I miss Erik and Darcy and…” Was it sad that other than a few people at Stark towers, that summed up the important people in her life?

“But other than them?” G’dath asked gently.

Jane nodded in resignation. “If they were here then I wouldn’t miss earth.”

G’dath raised up three fingers. “Loki had three people that tied him to Asgard. His mother is dead and both his father and his brother turned their backs on him.”

“But they think he’s a tyrant.” Jane’s protest was weak even to her own ears.

G’dath just growled softly. “You’ve known Loki for a year, and it took even less than that for him to convince you of his innocence to much of what he stands accused for. They’ve known him for over a thousand. Did either of them even try to understand? Did they even ask?”

Jane slowly dropped her head into her hand. “I don’t know…but I doubt it. Or maybe they did but they didn’t pursue it since Loki isn’t much into oversharing.”
She didn’t doubt that. G’dath suspected Odin may know a lot more than the old king allowed to be publically known but perhaps it was just her wishful thinking. G’dath pushed herself back to her feet. “I will have those books here soon, until then start working on runes.” Jane nodded silently, obediently. G’dath glanced out the window, noting the late hour in the day already. “Loki won’t put his hand out again. He won’t beg them to take him back and he won’t try. It will be up to them to convince him…and I’m not sure either of them is capable.”

Jane nodded again, this time in agreement but she knew closure with his brother and father, for good or for ill, was what Loki desperately needed. She’d keep it in the back of her mind for now but she had a feeling she might have to act as mediator between the three of them. “For the books…thank you, G’dath.” The healer just nodded silently before leaving.

HELHEIM

Hela looked up from her Grimoire in surprise as Thor clumped into her receiving parlor and smiled as he greeted her. “Hela!”

She knew it was coming. She just sighed and let herself get picked up off her feet, wiggling when he took too long to put her back down. Idly she wondered how he’d gotten past Garm, but her sentry might simply have given up on the prospect of keeping the Thunderer out. Smoothing out her dress, she paused to frown. “What do you want, uncle?”

Thor put Mjolnir down, smiling as he asked, “Can I not simply have wish to see you?”

Hela warily raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms. “Um, how about no.”

Thor smiled even broader and took a seat, alarming in itself since the thunderer rarely sat still. The fact that he was filled with almost skin bursting excitement made it worse. “Once father holds my coronation I will announce the queen I choose to rule by my side.”

_Holy shit. Which one of those idiot courtiers managed it?_ She _knew_ she should have been keeping a closer eye on Asgard. She’d known that Odin would be crowning Thor in the next century or so but she hadn’t thought he would rush the time table. This could ruin _everything_ with Loki if Asgard and the family seemingly move on with less than a year of mourning. She started nodding her head. Odin would be thumped for, yet again, being an old fool.

Thor had just been too quiet as of late. But she couldn’t just call him an idiot and expect him to listen. She was going to have to play this carefully to figure out who it was…and scare them off. But then she noticed the silver chain necklace around his neck. Batting her eyelashes playfully. “I gather that it is not me.”

Thor’s face formed priceless horror. “NIECE!”

Hela cackled. “You are too easy to tease. Fine. If not me then who?”

His voice sweetened as his eyes held a faraway look of adoration. Hela felt queasy. “Her name is Larnvidia, she is—…”

Well there went her plan of subtlety. “I know who the bitch is. Why would you do something so asinine as marry her?”

Thor glared fiercely. “Niece. You will maintain your respect for her. Asgard needs a strong queen. And it will unite our two realms.”
Snapping at him. “I have no respect for her so it is maintained.” Ranting at him was a strong temptation but she grasped on tightly to her temper. She was going to have to find someone to babysit Thor because if he actually did make her his queen Loki would leave the nine realms that very day and never return. But like in many matters, her uncle was oblivious to what was going on around him so she was going to have to get involved. Sighing. “Thor, do not choose a bride just because it makes political sense. You will be miserable inside of a year. Five thousand years is a long time to be married to someone you can’t stand.”

“Our time together is agreeable.”

Eww. It wasn’t that he was crude or in any way eluded to where his thoughts deviated but she knew men since she was well aware of Loki’s thoughts until her ‘birth’. Pinching the bridge of her nose. “Thor—fine.” Hela shook her head. “Congratulations. I hope you enjoy your new allies.”

Thor’s frown shifted to confusion. “The Vanir have been our allies for millennia.”

Her expression sour as she went to her wardrobe to slip on courtly armor over her dress. “Marry her and find out who her new allies are.”

“What do you speak of, niece?” Thor’s question was full of confusion.

Hela studied her nails. “I heard you had difficulties in court recently.”

Thor slowly stood up, suspicion and wariness warring on his face as he asked, “Hela?”

Not looking at him, reaching for her horned crown and studying herself in the mirror. “It was a Skrull, was it not?”

He crossed his arms over his own chest, mirroring her stance. “Aye.”

She looked at him through the mirror. “And Amora told you the two guards with it were probably Skrull as well.”

He nodded once. “Aye.”

“Where did they come from?” Her question may sound casual but Thor was starting to suspect it was anything but.

Thor recalled Amora whispering her suspicions quietly before king and court, one of the few times that his father listened to her closely. “She ventured a dark passage most likely brought them, but only…only Loki was skilled in finding them.”

Hela’s smile was absolutely terrifying as she turned and asked, “Only father?” Thor blinked before looking at her with new eyes. “I have already blocked the other realms from acting as an opening for the Skrulls to utilize again. I was going to save Vanaheim for a special occasion but I suppose now is as good a time as any.”

He growled softly, asking angrily, “Why would you wait?”

Smirking evilly at her uncle. “Because I will be almost irresistibly tempted upon seeing Larnvidia to kill her.”

“Hela…”

She closed the distance, her fingers brushing lightly just under the chain and her voice
honeyed as she asked, “That is such a pretty necklace, uncle, wherever did you get it?”

Thor was thrown a little by Hela’s shift in conversation. “It was a gift.”

Baring her teeth as her disguise swirled around her form, half of her face now revealing skeletal horror. “Let me guess, it was an engagement gift. I suspect the thought of marriage didn’t even cross your miniscule mind until it was around your neck.” Hela turned away from him and asked, “Does she not look familiar, uncle?”

Thor frowned almost thoughtfully, his thoughts moving to think of Larnvidia. “She has visited Asgard before-…”

Gesturing and a door opening, it leading down a corridor. “Yes, many times. I recall her earliest visit a few years before father’s coming of age ceremony.”

“How do you know this, niece?”

Hela shrugged before walking forward, Thor retrieving Mjolnir and following at her side. “Does it matter? The picture was painted for me quite clearly. Grandmother reluctantly allowed a courtship between the two of them, unofficial before the court since father was underage.”

Thor paused and asked hesitantly, “She-…Larnvidia courted my brother?” His brow furrowed. “Why do I not recall this?”

Hela’s left hand brushed against the ebony walls and carved moldings, stopping at a terrace that showed Helheim in its misty, twilight glory. “Must have been a lot of trolls to hunt. Unless he accompanied you on an adventure, more often than not you ignored Loki.”

“I did not ignore my brother!”

Hela smirked to herself, enjoying his defensive tone. “Save your words for someone who doesn’t know you were a spoiled, self-centered, reckless child in those days. Anyway, father proposed moving their courtship to formality on his ceremony night and presenting his intention before Odin. She responded that Loki’s true use to her began and ended behind closed doors under bed sheets…because her true intent was to woo the first son who would one day wear the crown.”

A rush of emotions tried to overwhelm Thor but it seemed to choke him. Frowning, his hand moved towards his throat before pausing at a feeling of not quite pain originated from his neck. Not hesitating further, as soon as he ripped the necklace from his skin his eyes cleared and he looked around in confusion.

Why had I wanted to marry Larnvidia? Voice hoarse as guilt, sadness, and grief rolled through his mind and heart. “Niece…”

Without thinking Hela’s hand found the back of his neck, the echo of a distant past when Thor and Loki would do so to one another in moments of brotherly bonding. They paused that way for several heartbeats, until his emotions had calmed before she spoke, “The habits of a millennia will not change in a few short years. You are different, certainly better than you were…but you still have room to grow. Just remember that in spite of everything he loves you. He will always love you.” She didn’t bother correcting her tense, knowing Thor wouldn’t notice. Turning and opening the far door to the paths outside of the palace. “I want you to meet someone.”

Thor followed, a little more subdued. “You wished to not announce our ties.”

Hela nodded to herself, this path set aside for the children who chose to come here. “She knows who I am. One of the few who do. There are many dead who wash onto these shores, but children are innocent. They have the freedom to choose where they wish to go. She had no one
amongst the dead, so she came to me. She was smothered by her Vanir dam hours after her birth, and has chosen a child’s form to embody for her eternity.” They passed by a set of trees, entering a clearing where ghostly children hid and giggled amongst nature. Thor glanced at Hela, hearing the coldness in her voice…and the anger. “She was not even granted the dignity of a name, and asked that I name her to honor the father she never met.”

A little one paused in the game, a girl in the shape of a child of nine. A beautiful little pixie of a body, sparkling green eyes several shades lighter than Hela’s and smooth skin that seemed an almost pale blue. But it was the hair that startled him, jet black and bone straight. Just at a glance the girl felt familiar. “Thor Odinson of Asgard, this is Freyja.”

The child pushed her hair back, grace in the gesture and voice as warm as sunlight. “Freyja Lokisdóttir.”

Loki’s daughter. And it clicked in his mind. The light blue skin of a Jötunn mixed with Vanir. Thor knelt without thinking so that he could see this child easily, his heart in turmoil. He was not surprised the girl had green eyes, but he was surprised at how straight her hair was. The nose looked familiar, but it wasn’t Loki’s nose. He knew the next question was important. He was certain he didn’t want to ask it but he did anyway, “And who is your mother?”

The little face was devoid of any feeling on the matter, snuggling against Hela contentedly. “I have no mother. My dam is Larnvidia, a queen of Vanaheim.”

For the first time in living memory, lightening crashed and thunder rolled on Helheim.

ALFHEIM

It had been a successful hunt and dinner was enjoyable but her mind was stricken with self-doubt. It had been weeks since she and Loki had a conversation about them as a couple. Since then there was a carefully constructed but invisible wall between them. A physical boundary that he didn’t cross and was actually very careful to maintain. Conversation still occurred frequently between them and there was plenty of laughter but now there was this unspoken tension.

“Pass the salt, please.”

Loki moved the container within reach, she reaching for it with a smile of thanks. Just as her fingers would have brushed his, he was quick to move the digits and return to his meal. Her smile slipped as she salted her potatoes, her frustration translating into a few aggressive strokes. She cut into them carefully, bringing the small wedge to her mouth and slowly biting down. She glanced up and froze when she noticed Loki. His green eyes had darkened, body tense and riveted as he watched her.

She suddenly got the impression that he wanted to leap the distance between them. She was torn between not moving…and finding out what he would do if she did.

Indel pouted and rested his chin on the table. “When’s Tali coming back?” When no answer was immediately offered he frowned and looked back and forth between the two of them, both frozen and staring at the other. Face scrunching up. “Da-ada!”

Loki blinked twice before glancing at his son and asking, “Yes?” Jane felt herself released from that magnetic gaze and put down her fork. She couldn’t go on like this.

Indel pouted harder. “You were ignoring me!”
“No I wasn’t.”

His green eyes narrowed. “What’s the answer?”

The corner of Loki’s lip twitched, ruffling Indel’s white hair. “Alright, what is your question?”

“Where’s Tali?” Indel’s face fell a second later, worry in his eyes. “She’s coming back. Right?”

Loki picked Indel up instantly. “Of course she is. Her visit to Alfheim is longer than expected but Azni assured me she will return soon.” Indel grinned happily. No doubt. No suspicion that Loki was lying. Complete trust. Of course it didn’t hurt that Indel could hear lies but Loki found satisfaction that his son never doubted his word.

Once Indel was entertaining himself with a bath, Jane knew it was time to ask. She didn’t want to know, but she had to know. She caught his eye and tilted her head in invitation as she walked for the door. Loki accommodated her since they both knew if he didn’t want to move she couldn’t have made him with a crowbar. She sat down at the end of the porch and he stiffly sat next to her, frowning at her as he tried to puzzle her actions.

Sighing softly. “This is me, being incredibly forward since you are determined not to bring it up.” His eyebrow rose. “Are…?” Turning to face away from him, starting to lose her nerve. “Are you having second thoughts about…me?” His brow only furrowed further in confusion and she rushed headlong into the thick of her worry. “I sometimes think you’re dying to kiss me, but then you don’t…a-and other times I-…” Her face heated up with embarrassment.

“No.” His voice was quiet and thoughtful. “No I haven’t changed my mind.”

She glanced at him to see his face was set in serious contemplation. “Every step I take you counter.”

Mentally he winced. It was true, he did, but it wasn’t for any reason she suspected. He spoke slowly, as if the words were being reluctantly pulled from him. “There are three general classes in Asgard. Commoners. Nobles. Royalty. Each class has their own standard for courting and I find myself…uncertain how to proceed.” His thumb traced patterns along the back of her hand. “A prisoner cannot marry for obvious reasons and once free, no matter their previous station they are disgraced and given a commoner’s standing. There are steps that can be taken to earn back one’s honor, but they will never be more. No expectations for courtship, a simple marriage as it is on Midgard.”

Jane matched his thoughtful expression. “And each rise in class has stricter expectations.”

Loki nodded. “If I were to simply marry and…at some point in the future decide to return to Asgard and by some absurd twist of fate be welcomed a noble once more, my wife would be reduced in status to a handmaiden or concubine—…” There were exceptions around that rule. As a queen in her own realm, Larnvidia had been an exception but he refused to let his thoughts drift to her. Jane was who he wanted. He knew he was being absurd. As if he would ever go back. But that damn dream of himself restored as a prince of Asgard was paralyzing him from progressing. He looked into her eyes, his burning with passion. “I will accept nothing less than an equal for my bride. But right now I am in a state of limbo and the path unclear.”

She knew he was a planner but looks like he plans months and years in advance. At the same time she was thankful he had the foresight to think about such things. She flushed for an
entirely different reason, feeling a thrill that was both deep and profound that he saw them together like that in his mind. It made her bold. Reaching up to gently trace his cheekbone with her thumb.

“Let’s say that we approach this from the expectation that you are a prince.” She didn’t care what Asgard had to say about it. It’s how she saw him. “Obviously I may touch you like this or you would have ducked my advances.”

Leaning into her palm, smirking slightly. “Very astute.”

“Where is the line drawn?”

He swallowed heavily, a smirk that was equal parts naughty and naughtier tugging at his lips. “We cannot be lovers without formal leave by the king.” And knowing his father as he did, that leave wouldn’t be granted until after a marriage.

Grin tugging at the corner of her own mouth as she asked cheekily, “Can I kiss you or do we require chaperones?”

He slanted a glare at her. “Do not mock my customs.”

Raising a challenging eyebrow at him. “So sensitive for a guy who loves to mock mine.”

Loki actually slouched, just a little and looked heavily burdened. “Yes, you may kiss me.” Then he smirked and Jane giggled. They both leaned in towards one another, his fingers sliding gently along both sides of her face. Her breath quickened as those clever fingers ran through her hair and maybe it was the way his hands shook just the slightest bit or the way his eyes were just a little too wide but instinctively she knew he was nervous, maybe even afraid.

She scooted closer, hand moving to his thick hair and scraping gently along his scalp. He hissed softly and his control seemed to snap, lips colliding with her own. He pulled her close, his chest pressed to hers. One arm snaked around her waist, tugging her closer while the other held the back of her head.

Too hard. Too wild.

Lips pressed and sealed tightly against her own. Stinging nips against her bottom lip and a tongue that completely dominated their conversation.

Harder. Wilder. Colder.

His skin turned icy beneath her fingers, his kiss so demanding it was hard to breathe. His actions were almost desperate and a soft keen of distress welled up in his chest. He flung himself away from her before he could hurt her, back pressed against the outer wall as he seemed to panic within his own skin before shutting down completely.

Jane blinked slowly, pacing her breathing to calm her hammering heart. Wow. She was so unbelievably turned on right now. That would be the quickest way to break all the customs he was trying to preserve. But then his reactions registered in her mind, cooling the heat in her blood. Lustful desire shifted to a desire to reassure him. She wondered just how long it had been since he could trust someone enough—and deleted the thought. She would just have to set the pace and she was alright with that.

She stood up and he curled back from her. “Shh…trust me…just trust me…” She followed. He seemed to retreat even further, even though he was right there. His body screamed vulnerable even if his face was unreadable. Smiling gently, encouragingly, kneeling and carefully cupping his jaw, whispering softly as she touched her lips to his. “…just feel…” She pressed light
kisses against his lips, just gentle pressure and then releasing. Simple. Easy. He moved towards her with each touch.

Needing. Yearning.

Pulling back, she caught his searching green eyes. “Now your turn.” When he became too rushed, too panicked she gentled him until he was eager without distress. If she ever, ever found his diary…assuming magic wielding Norse demi-gods had those…and found out who hurt him she would kill them slowly. Very slowly. He was treating her like she was a treasure that at any moment would be taken from him.

His fingers gently tangled in her hair, kissing her sweetly. She could quite happily spend the day just sampling his lips. He broke the kiss, panting, and leaning his forehead into hers and eyes closed. “I know how to free your magic…” Jane blinked to focus her pleasantly fuzzy brain but remained quiet as his breath quickened, tongue licking his lower lip and obviously nervous. “Learning magic takes centuries and—-I could give you that-I could give you a lifetime, my lifetime—-” His hands reached out to cup her face, green eyes open and wild and fierce. “But I won’t let you go. I will never let you go. I will kill anyone who tries to take you from me. Tell me no.”

The last he said as a command.

His possessive, manic words should terrify her. They don’t. Her heart bursts into flames as her fingers sink painfully into his thick locks and yank him back to her, kissing him as if permanently marking his lips as her own. He gasps into her mouth before making a growling sound that didn’t even sound remotely human.

He wasn’t human. He wasn’t even close. The body of a man, but a truly otherworldly being who’d had too much taken from him. She didn’t doubt the passion nor the conviction of his words. The previous men in her life who’d stayed just long enough to take what they’d needed before leaving, he wasn’t like them. Everyone had always just taken, but not him. Not Loki. He was selfish but she’d known that as soon as she’d met him. This was a man who would keep her because she was something he wanted and needed.

She was perfectly fine with that. Idly she wondered if he realized she was just as disinclined to ever let him go. Pulling back and brushing her thumb against his temple when he whimpered softly. “Hey.” His eyes blinked open and she smiled. “I’m telling you yes. You think I don’t know what I’m getting myself into?” Erik, Darcy, anybody on earth would scream at her to run away. Jane Foster ran away from nothing.

Loki watched her closely, her eyes almost glowing like embers as he drank her in. She didn’t say it but he could see it in her gaze, feel it in the way her hands were wrapped in his hair. She’d suffered loss and heartbreak. She’d been taken from and she was refusing to allow it to happen again. He was wanted. And he had no doubt once he opened the lock to her magic, even if he wanted to he’d never be able to slip away. He couldn’t wait to find out what a glorious creature she would become.

They could both hear Indel fumbling around inside and knew the boy would eventually come wandering out. Feeling particularly brave in that moment, she taught him a new trick with her lips to his that left him gasping for air, a wicked smirk crossing her face as she went inside. Loki just sat there and blinked slowly. *Evil, evil woman.*
Author's Notes:

Well, Jane's at least a little bit happier but I can think of someone else who's in a hell of a lot of trouble. Mwahaha.

Next:

Jane learns about a few myths; Trouble is brewing for the Avengers
Chapter 41

ALFHEIM

The knock at the door turned heads, the door opening and Talia running inside with a large grin. She bypassed Indel to wrap her arms around Loki’s leg. He gave Azni a subtle glance who nodded slightly, but significantly. He grinned in greeting as he picked the girl up, her arms wrapping around his neck and hugging strongly. Indel immediately turned and raised his own arms. Indulgent, Indel was soon occupying his other hip.

Jane smiled in greeting, missing the subtle exchange between the two of them. “Would you like some tea, Azni?”

Azni smiled pleasantly. “I am afraid I cannot stay long. The storm that is coming soon will put at least a foot of snow on the ground. I need to be home before then or G’dath will never let me hear the end of it.” Loki smothered a chuckle but Jane giggled. There was a wicked twinkle in Azni’s eyes. “However, she did ask that I give this to you and requests that his reaction is memorized for later questioning.”

As soon as Jane saw the book her eyes brightened in delight. Azni ignored the question in Loki’s eyes and bid them goodnight. Loki’s expression immediately soured as Jane slowly pulled out the thick volume of Norse Mythology she’d begged G’dath for. Jane found a seat, Indel wiggling until Loki set him down. Indel pointed excitedly, sharing the couch with her. “What’s that?”

The boy loved books almost as much as his father. Dusting off the outer cover primly. “This is a collection of legends from Midgard. I thought we might figure out which ones are real and which ones aren’t.”

The look in her eyes was wicked as she said this, staring at Loki who sat in a chair with a huff and crossed his arms. Talia curled up in his lap, her head pressed into his shoulder, thumb in her mouth and fingers curled over her nose. He silently mouthed his three favorite words to Jane when he was stuck in a situation he didn’t like, even though he didn’t actually mean them. ‘I hate you’.

She stuck her tongue out at him and he looked away to hide his grin, she catching him off guard for that one. She flipped the pages over to a section that said rather appropriately labeled ‘Loki’ and Indel pointed excitedly. “Dada, that’s your name.”

Grumbling softly under his breath. “So it is.” Snarling loudly, making both of them jump. “I want it declared for the record that most of that is complete and utter tripe.”

She grandly turned a page. “Notated and dismissed.”

Indel frowned at his father. “What’s tripe?”

Jane snuggled the boy against her. “I’ll tell you when you’re older.” Smirking as she glanced back at Loki. “One word: Sleipnar.”

Loki made a disgusted/choking sound. He hadn’t read the exact copy in her hands but he’d found references in Alfheim’s library to some of those myths. “My father’s horse, a gift from the court of Vanaheim. And no, I do not have a wolf or a snake as children. I can shift form as easily as any mage but I have never had interests with any four legged member of the animal kingdom. I have one son, him…and I am not nearly as cavalier in my personal affairs as the stories suggest.”
Her eyebrow quirked slightly. “But there are hints to interests in both sides of the coin.”

He rolled his eyes at her before shrugging. He wasn’t ashamed of that aspect of his preferences. It would scandalize Asgard if he openly admitted it but he’d never had any issues as to the gender of his partner. “My mother told me once that love is love, no matter the outer package.”

Jane smiled and nodded, agreeing with him and flipped a page. “Can you appear as a man or as a woman?”

Loki shrugged easily. “Of course, but that is no consequence. I believe what you truly wish to know is if I have a preference to a gender…and it depends. I have gone now for centuries as a male, the gender I was born with, but when I was younger it would change daily based on my mood.”

Pointing out some pictures to Indel, Talia obliviously asleep, as she asked quietly, “Did it matter to Asgard?”

His eyes darkened at that little reminder. “Yes. Because of my magical preference, some believed I should never change to male…and some believed that because I could comfortably live as a female, there was something corrupted in me.” Surprisingly Odin hadn’t seemed to care one way or the other. Even on his girl days his father still referred to him as ‘he’ but the fact remained that Odin hadn’t acted ashamed or rebuked him on those days. Not so surprising Thor and his mother never cared what he chose to look like.

Jane shook her head. “Wow, get a penis, get a sword. Idiots.” The tension in Loki’s shoulders relaxed at the irritation and anger in her voice. It was gratifying to hear and he silently catalogued her reaction for later pondering. She smiled to see a lessoning of his tension. “I notice you didn’t mention Hela in that list.”

He huffed. “She is not my child, she is a part of me.”

Jane’s eyebrows hiked up. She knew the answer but she was curious as to his response as she asked, “She’s real?”

Indel turned with a frown. “Who?”

“Come here, Indel.” The elfling carefully climbed into Loki’s lap, finding a spot not occupied by Talia. “Now, just as there are planets, there are people who live on each of them, yes?” Indel nodded. Loki twirled his fingers and a diagram of planets hung suspended in the air. Jane’s eyes widened in amazement and she scooted closer to watch. “There are nine realms that are the most important in total, each of them with a very important planet. There are other planets in each realm of course, but these nine are vital. They keep what we call the World Tree together. To lose them leads to our end.” Yet another reason why he’d let go of the Bi-frost. He hadn’t been in his right mind when he’d tried to destroy Jötunheim and he’d been terrified of facing his father with that much disappointment waiting for him. “At the very top of the tree is Asgard, then Alfheim and Midgard…and down here we have Svartalfheim and at the bottom is the underworld, and Helheim. There is a very special Queen on this planet, and when we die we either go to see her, or we go to Valhalla above Asgard.”

The little boy frowned again as he asked, “Who’s the Queen?”

“Her name is Hela. Once when I was quite young I tried a spell I shouldn’t have. It almost killed me, but it did not. Instead when I woke a girl lay next to me, a girl with my smile. My father explained that I had divided my magic in half, but somehow it didn’t make either of us any weaker.
When we were old enough, Hela wanted to leave so I went with her and helped her conquer Helheim, so she’d have a home of her own.”

An oversimplification of a very difficult time in his life. The court was terrified of Hela, feeling how otherworldly and powerful she was and talk had spread of banishing her powers or even killing her. Unlike him, she had no true claim as a child of Odin and therefore didn’t have his father’s protection. Nor could Loki by technicality claim her as his child since he wasn’t old enough for it to be acknowledged. He’d just turned old enough to go into his first battle and he’d chosen Helheim’s demons as his proving ground. He didn’t ask his father for permission, nor did he tell anyone his plan until he returned without her, and by then it was too late for anyone of Asgard to do anything about it. That was truly when the court started fearing him. He was almost positive there were times, particularly after he returned from Midgard, when his own father had feared him.

Indel’s brow furrowed in thought. “But you made her?”

Loki hedged a bit. “Of a sort.”

Grinning suddenly. “So she’s my big sister.”

He groaned but saw no point in denying it. “Do not ever tell her that.”

“But she calls you dada, right dada?” Indel asked this with an excited bounce.

Loki smirked slightly and nodded. “She calls me father. I have not seen her in a long time, but I assume she still does.” Obviously untrue but he wasn’t prone to sharing all of his secrets. Not yet. He noticed his son frown at him, brow drawing together but not speaking. His son usually called him out on a lie. He supposed that since half of what he said was true was throwing his boy off the trail a little.

Jane’s lip twitched as she turned another page, asking quietly, “Did you really cut off Sif’s hair?”

He rolled his green eyes. “No. I have enjoyed tormenting her over the centuries but I would never do something so stupid.”

“But you turned it black?”

His expression turning blank, not interested in sharing that bit of history with anyone yet. “Yes.”

Jane blinked twice but decided not to press him on that one, turning a page before frowning suddenly while pointing out a dwarf to Indel who was quick to rejoin her on the couch. “Did the whole…” She pantomimed stitches going through her lips and Loki lost what little color he had. It didn’t happen quite the way the story depicted it since he hadn’t cut off Sif’s hair and he didn’t go to the dwarves to get replacement hair.

A diplomatic visit, his father taking him so that he could observe courtly behavior. He hadn’t been all that old, perhaps 14 in human terms. It hadn’t even been an intentional insult, just a poorly chosen phrase and there was sudden outrage. Several of the adults had been screaming but he’d remained silent, waiting for Odin to calm everything down. He didn’t. It was brought before a moderator and it was decided he would have his mouth sewn shut so that his uncivil tongue would stay in his head.

He was dragged away to a section of the dungeons that delved out punishments to prisoners. He wasn’t locked up, simply punished before being returned to his father. Over and over
his mind focused on only one fact as he was being held down and screaming in pain, that Odin hadn’t said a word. It was the last time in his life he’d ever waited for someone to speak up for him. Even now he fully acknowledged that he’d been young so he might remember events differently but it was what ingrained in his mind.

It was the day that forged his silver tongue because he may face punishment, but he would have his full say regardless. He didn’t say a word now except to press his lips together because Indel would never hear that story. He might tell Jane in the future but not now. Her jaw dropped before shuddering in horror. “Okay, Asgard officially sucks.”

His eyebrows rose, mind back in the present as he asked, “Pardon?”

Indel turned and asked Jane, “Why does Asgard suck?”

Loki frowned at his son. “Indel.”

Indel immediately looked defensive. “What? She said it, I’m just repeatin’ it.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose with a sigh. “Jane, refrain from teaching my offspring slang.”

Jane giggled a little and turned a few more pages before stopping with a wide grin on her face. “Two words: wedding dress?”

Loki suddenly remembered an afternoon with Thor in a wedding dress, full beard of course and miserable face covered by a veil, trying to get his hammer back. Loki threw his head back to laugh.

MIDGARD

Natasha Romanoff kept her face free of all emotion, green eyes silently observing and analyzing. The room that she was in was unremarkable, as was the building housing it. She wasn’t even certain where she was, having been flown here in secret but she suspected it might be somewhere in France. There were four screens, the silhouettes of three of them with men, one with a woman. That was all she knew. She suspected origins in two of them but the accents were distorted.

Her eyes moved from screen to screen as they talked, mostly to themselves as if she wasn’t here. It was just as well, in her opinion. It was never good when the World Security Council dragged a field agent before them. Fury was the face and voice of SHIELD but they were the ones who truly held the power. She suspected why she was here but she was never one to simply act. She was much too careful to act impulsively or prematurely.

“Agent Romanoff, you were given specific instructions concerning your observations of the alien hostile, Loki.”

Not moving, not allowing her body to betray a hint of her thoughts or feelings. The council didn’t care what she thought and would only see emotion as a weakness. “Yes, sir.”

The male voice was dripping with disbelief. “Yet somehow such information just wandered into Anthony Stark’s hands.”

“How would such a security breech occur?”

It always came back to Stark, who was a brilliant man and a reckless idiot. She had the
highest security clearance amongst the Avengers and she didn’t appreciate the subtle accusation that she had given him access. She mulled over the merits of pistol whipping the inventor as she replied. “Stark is belligerent, undisciplined, and intelligent…I would be more surprised if he failed to find secured information.”

“Are you saying this American is a security risk?”

An information leak was serious, but more so the fact that it could be accomplished than what was taken. And any organization that would casually order a nuclear strike at the risk of millions would not be above killing someone as prominent as Stark. Choosing her words carefully, tone even and face blank. “Any civilian is a security risk.”

“She is repeating our own thoughts of this Avenger Initiative.”

“Agent Romanoff…have you informed Agent Barton of your findings?”

A slight amount of outrage crept into her voice. “Of course not, sir.” Not that Clint would listen to anything that might put Loki in the victim role.

“And your report?”

The report itself had been a detailed analysis of Loki during his Chitauri invasion. She’d seen enough blood and violence to know what to look for. She sent her report to the council and created a hardcopy version for Fury before receiving different orders from them. Reaffirming her hold on her composure. “Shredded and burned as instructed, sir.”

“And are you comfortable with keeping this conversation from him?”

She was a spy who had left a bloody trail in her wake for years and they were concerned about her keeping a secret from Clint? This didn’t bode well. Yes, she was close to Clint but she had never allowed her attachment to anyone to interfere with her duty. That they thought she would was both insulting and worrying. “Of course, sir.”

“Very well. Dismissed.”

Natasha nodded her head before turning to exit to the side corridor. The door sealed shut behind her, the conversation continuing…starting with the woman. “Gentlemen, I believe we are past the point of discussion. We need appropriate resources in the field and the Avengers are a liability, not an asset.”

It had been a discussion between them for some time. One of the men almost sighed. “If we really are shutting down these Avengers, now is more prudent than later.”

“Her attachment to Agent Barton could be an issue.” Her voice had a touch of disdain to it.

“Collateral damage? Accidents do happen. A resource such as Agent Romanoff knows this.”

“No, we can’t risk an agent of her skill set with a vendetta against us.”

“Shame, really, she truly was a fine operative.”

Her head tilted slightly towards the screen, giving the order. “See that it’s done.”

The four screens went blank.
There was a feeling in the air that left her skin buzzing. Natasha always prided herself in her finely honed instincts, they responsible for saving her on a number of occasions. The checkpoint guard not at his station was her first clue. Seeing the metal security bars already in place over the windows was the only other clue she needed. Spinning neatly in the air at the sound, she avoided the two bullets aimed to tear through her torso and landed in a crouch.

Natasha didn’t see people, she saw movement and it all became a dance. Spin and kick. Flip and snap. Lift and strangle. She flowed through the seven agents, two with broken necks, one shattered sternum, and four with internal bleeding. Yanking open an air vent, she flew through the narrow passageway gracefully and slipped out the last grating to an unoccupied office.

Table. Chair. Two windows both barred and locked down. Certain she was going to have to blast her way out and calculating her low odds of success, she paused to see a shimmering open window between the two barred ones. After a split second of forethought, she dove head first through the opening, performed a neat flip in midair, and landed on her feet. Turning with a frown, she watched the window seal and disappear in a flash of green.

*Green magic. Interesting.*

Natasha looked around thoughtfully but when a dog barked she slipped into the shadows and disappeared. From the roof Loki glared at Hela who was carefully studying her nails. “Explain to me again why this had to have my expert attention, daughter.”

Hela blinked back innocently as she asked, “I can’t interfere, remember?”

She used that excuse before over the centuries and quite frankly it was wearing thin on him. There may be some lines she couldn’t cross but he was quite convinced she could do as she pleased without consequence since technically she was living. Absolutely no expression crossed his face as he retorted. “Bullshit. If you like the damn woman so much, you save her.”

She tisked softly to herself. “Stark is amazing. One meeting with the man and you’re already talking like him.”

Loki pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation. “Hela…”

Hela cut him off with a decisive gesture from one hand. “I wanted her surviving to be by your hand. It will make her more agreeable to listening.”

Hela was too powerful to ever really need his help for anything. The fact that she thought he would actually believe her was insulting. It only made it worse that their magic manifested in a similar fashion. She could just as easily have saved the spider and pretended it was him involved. His green eyes slowly narrowed. “My getting involved with these Avengers isn’t part of my plan.”

Her darker green eyes copied him. “Nope, it’s mine.”

“She, don’t you dare-…”

She huffed at him. “Your way is impractical. The only way the Other will be primed for destruction is to flush him out of hiding. That requires the scepter and someone has to wave it around as bait. SHIELD won’t. That leaves these defenders you say you hate but you secretly like.”

His voice growled but his tone veered towards pouty. “I don’t like them.”

*Loki is such a child.* Hela rolled her eyes. “Please. If you lived on Midgard you’d be best friends with Stark and pranking the Hel out of Fury.”
Crossing his arms over his chest, what Hela knew to be a defensive move for him. “If I
lived on Midgard I would kill Stark and subjugate the planet.”

She snorted and asked, “Before or after you traded archery tips with Barton?”

“He blinked twice as a satisfied grin spread across her face. “Wait, b-I wouldn’t
even speak with Barton, let alone…” Her grin didn’t change and he scowled at her. “I hate you so
much this century.”

Hela giggled and leaned in to kiss his cheek, his surprise that she didn’t pass through him
never failing to amuse her. “I love you, too, father.”

He huffed and faded.

Amora appeared a second later, crossing her arms over her ample chest and sounding
indignant. “I did my part. I was key to her survival, now will you lift this curse??”

As if Amora warning her of Natasha’s eminent death had been such a difficult task. Hela
had been the one to contact Loki and he had been the one to save Natasha. If she weren’t so busy
she would have kept track of the assassin herself. Hela turned and raised an eyebrow. “So you can
ruin everything with petty revenge, no. I think not.”

Amora gaped. “You promised!” Lies aside, they had all be raised with the concept of
honor firmly ingrained. Neither Hela nor Loki gave their word lightly because they would follow
through.

Hela let the other eyebrow rise. “I never gave a time table. The curse will be lifted, though,
but not until the appropriate time.”

Stomping her foot childishly. “It’s not fair.”

The trickster queen raised the other eyebrow. “Reap what you sow, Enchantress. Why
should I be generous when your every effort is to your benefit alone?” Then Hela shrugged loosely.
“Besides, the curse does nothing more than prevent you betraying his being alive.”


Hela felt her jaw tighten involuntarily. “I know he does, and he will for a time longer.”
Despite how it may seem she didn’t enjoy Thor’s grief. She was a trickster and teasing came
naturally to her, and though she was and always would be practical, deep down she did have a
perhaps naïve hope for a happy future.

“Why?”

Looking away to study the skyline. “Because he took father for granted. Everyone did.
The God of Mischief, reduced and dismissed as Thor’s faithful tag-a-long. They saw his worth when
he was needed. When a trick or sly word could save a life, but otherwise he was dismissed. I am
going to make it impossible for that to ever happen again.”

“How?”

An amused smirk curled Hela’s lip. “Father thinks this is his clever little plan but it’s not.
It’s mine. The part of Asgard that truly matters mourns him. Thor regrets losing him and Odin is
learning of his failures as a father. If the pieces come together as they should Loki will be welcomed
home and Thanos will learn the price for bringing suffering to my house.” Her look turned sly. “I
might even reward you if you play your part.”

Tone demanding. “What reward could the queen of Helheim offer me?”

Hela had and always would have plans within plans. She already knew what her intended result was for both Loki and the Avengers, it wouldn’t be too difficult to incorporate Amora into those plans…and it would serve Sif right in her opinion. “It is what I can reward you as Thor’s niece.”

Amora blinked twice. “I’m listening.”

Smirking. She would need to think carefully how to move the little chess piece before her. And Thor was still waiting for her on Helheim. It was time to visit Vanaheim. “Come find me in New York.”

Hela disappeared without looking back, leaving the enchantress behind. Amora snarled as she turned, only to scream and bonelessly collapse. Her limbs twitched, a soft whimper escaping before her eyes rolled back. A dark silhouette moved out of the shadows, partially obscuring her unconscious face.

Author's Notes:

Hmm...I wonder who attacked Amora... You may place your bets now. No cheating!

Next:

The Source Spell; Hela and Larnvidia chat
ALFHEIM

“I am slimy cat.”

Loki slapped a hand over his face as he burst out laughing. He was too caught off guard for one of his normal sarcastic chuckles. This one was loud and full-bodied. Indel frowned in confusion, looking from one adult to the next. “How did you get slimy?”

Jane yelped as she asked, “What?” She had been the one trying to speak in All-speak. Trying being the emphasized word of that sentence.

Continuing to talk, confusion genuine as he probed further, “And you’re not a cat now, are you going to turn into one?”

Loki doubled over and started wheezing while Jane sighed. “I take it I wasn’t even close to saying ‘I feel fine today’.”

Talia solemnly shook her head, grinning. Both she and Indel were sitting on the floor, sharing a book.

G’dath’s dry tone from the doorway interrupted Indel’s response, “I never thought of laughter as a weapon but it seems to be his greatest weakness.”

Both ladies eyed Loki thoughtfully who was reduced to silently laughing, arms wrapped around his middle and slowly sliding out of his chair. Jane sighed again. “I’m trying to learn All-speak.”

The healer nodded with a pleased expression, putting a small stack of books on the table for Jane’s later perusal. “Ah, an ambitious endeavor. Remind him it normally takes an AEsr 300 years to master if he becomes too difficult.”

Grumbling under her breath. “I’ll keep that in mind.” Jane jumped up and carefully lifted the family grimoire. “Oh, since he’s out of commission I’ll ask…there was a spell here that puzzled him.” She carefully navigated the pages. “Aha! This one.”

G’dath glanced at it before her expression turned grim. “Source spell.”

The tone broke through Loki’s mirth and he picked himself up. “What…is a source spell?”

Giving him a quick glance, well aware all eyes were on her. “It has been reduced to a legend it was so long ago but it did happen.” She moved to sit down at the work table and got comfortable, the other adults mirroring her as the children went back to their book. “A war on Alfheim soil involving a species no one remembers the name of. Alfheim was defeated, our numbers steadily dwindling. Their goal wasn’t just to conquer us, they meant to eradicate us to make Alfheim truly theirs.”

Loki was frowning thoughtfully. He’d read every book in Asgard and had made an impressive dent in Alfheim’s library. “I’ve never heard of this.”

G’dath looked down at her hands folded together on the work table. “We never wanted to give anyone any ideas about repeating the past.”
Loki nodded. “Pragmatic.”

The healer nodded in agreement, thinking of the story passed down to her through her family since one of the five had been one of her ancestors. “Desperation leads to inspiration. Five elves. Two of them kings, the other three powerful mages. They created this spell. If they were wrong it could kill them. Or all life on the planet. Or the planet itself. It was a chance they were willing to take.”

Jane frowned at the book. “What does it do?”

G’dath slowly shook her head, brow furrowed. “I wish it were so easy to verbalize. It forms a connection to the heart of the planet, channeled through the four to be focused by the fifth.”

Jane glanced at Loki. “The heart of the planet?”

Loki’s voice lowered respectfully. “Every planet is connected to its people. And vice versa.”

Shaking her head in confusion. “How?”

G’dath picked up the conversation. “It is beyond your science but the magic that breathes life into all of us rests at the core of every planet. It is a reflection of its inhabitants and very protective of them.”

Vaguely remembering something she’d read once. “Are-…you mean like earth’s mother?”

The elf tilted her head a little in consideration. “In a way.”

Book abandoned, Loki looked down as Talia crawled into his lap. He tickled her side, the child giggling as she turned and reached for his hair, loosely braiding strands of his ebony locks. Indel was cradled in Jane’s arms, his curious fingers smoothing over the AEsir locket always around her neck.

Loki glanced at Jane. “Think of it this way. The planet is comprised of precious gems, crystals, and has hosted billions of lives over thousands of years. Gems and crystals in particular are known to absorb energy, particularly magical energy. Your kind has a dormant ability, but some of you have overcome that limitation. Each new life, each new magician leaves behind an impression and the effect is cumulative. You leave an echo of yourselves until the result is a consciousness that can be interacted with.”

“…because magic eventually develops a mind of its own.”

G’dath straightened in her seat as she asked Jane curiously, “Who told you that?”

“Azni.”

“Ah.” The healer rolled her eyes, well used to the elder elf knowing a lot about a lot of things. “Alfheim’s mother is a reflection of her people, fierce and strong, but proud.”

Muttering under his breath. “…to say the least…”

Jane tilted her head curiously, not hearing Loki. “What did the spell do?”

G’dath seemed almost grim now. “Much more than anticipated. It forms a storm as a reflection of the caster. With five mages involved it effected all the elements. The ground shook with
earthquakes from coast to coast. The seas rose up as if made of watery hands to grab and consume. Gale force winds were created to scoop them up and hailstones the size of houses. The destruction was un-imaginable, yet there was no elf-kind casualties. But there was another effect. When Alfheim gives, she give everything. There was an excess of power that had to go somewhere.

Loki blinked with realization. “A channeled focus…that created this moon?”

“Well is still a part of Alfheim, but suspended in its own time.”

Loki looked around with new eyes. “A pocket universe, with its own set of rules, but accessible to the nine realms, even as their time curves around it.”

Jane’s expression was of complete delight. “Oh my God! So you’re saying this moon is its own universe, its own time, but it runs in parallel to my universe, just at an accelerated rate and the only tie to this world is the under-forest.”

“Essentially, yes. Or at least, that is the current theory.”

Loki smiled slightly as he watched Jane and G’dath get into a heated debate, watching as quantum physics and magic collided. He didn’t participate because the dots had just connected in his mind. Jane was too brilliant to get her calculations wrong, or to allow anyone else to make a mistake. She hadn’t made one, yet she was here because someone had interfered. There was a less than 1.28% probability of her survival if the destination had been random. Which meant that someone had sent her to him.

There were only three people in the realms capable of magical manipulation from that kind of distance with that much precision. He hadn’t done it. He didn’t believe Hela had either. Which left just one. What he didn’t understand was why.

Why was he still permitted to hide here? How long had he known he was here? Did he not want him to return to Asgard or was he going to allow Loki to announce himself alive when he was ready? He didn’t know, and the unknown made him nervous. Not nervous enough to flee, but nervous enough that he would be looking over his shoulder every so often. One thing above all else was absolutely clear. For whatever the reason, Odin approved of Jane Foster at his side.

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**ASGARD**

The Past

*Two figures stood next to one another on a balcony overlooking Asgard. Both of them were dressed well, obviously of the noble class. She was a few inches shorter than her companion, beautiful, with long chestnut hair and green eyes. She smiled at nothing, seemingly serene, but there was a strange greediness in her gaze. Her companion seemed to be oblivious, all of his attention focused on toying nervously with the ring in his pocket.*

*“Larnvidia…” She turned, the smile still on her face but there was an almost hidden coldness to it. Loki stiffened his spine a little more severely, gathering his courage. “My coming of age ceremony is but a few weeks from now.”*

*She nodded slowly, gracefully, the perfect poise of a young queen. She wasn’t born noble, but she’d quickly risen in popularity until it had been a given for her election to the role on Vanahheim. “Yes, I do believe your entire realm will be present to celebrate the second prince’s first steps into recognized adulthood.”*
Loki mentally scowled, not believing that for a minute. The AEsir hated him and delighted in his failures. Even though she visited him often she wasn’t from Asgard, so it was understandable she wouldn’t be aware. “I was hoping you would be able to attend.”

Her hands were crossed before her demurely. “My duties always come first, my prince, but affairs can be moved for such an important occasion.”

Struggling to keep the nervousness out of his voice. “I was also hoping to present us before my father that night.”

Her brow furrowed just slightly in confusion. “Present us before Odin…for what?”

The palms of his hands started to sweat and he started to fumble for the ring before catching something in her expression he hadn’t before. Her body was going through all of the motions correctly, but there was something contradictory in her expression. Staring at her face intently, ring now forgotten. “To ask his permission for the intent to marry you.”

She almost managed to hide it from him, but it was a look he was very familiar with. It was a look many of the courtiers had perfected over the centuries. Veiled contempt.

Not since he’d started attending court as a young prince had he left himself emotionally vulnerable. His thoughts spun round and round but his heart was strangely quiet. He’d been a fool. A complete and utter fool to believe that anyone would fall in love with him. He was the AEsir that couldn’t fight, except to use a woman’s weapons. Women and men alike came to his bed because of his family. Because of his title. Not because he was wanted. He was too strange, too skinny; ugly… and that would never change.

His expression blanked, a strange feral coldness filling his veins as she started to speak. Her tone turned mocking. “You believe that I would actually marry you, the second prince, when the prize will be held by your brother?”

Loki almost took a step back, even though he truly felt like running away. But he was a prince of Asgard and that wasn’t an option. Slowly crossing his arms over his chest and hiding behind the trickster. “You used me to be here, to be noticed by Thor.”

Her lip curled slightly as if she found him an amusing child. No, it was worse than that. Now that she was officially his enemy he allowed any random thought from her treacherous mind to wash over him. He was prey to her. A mere step on her way to the rise in power she desired. He was nothing to her.

“Our time together was an agreeable diversion, the conversation interesting and your only gift beneath satin sheets, but there is only one prize that I want…and only one man who can give it to me.”

As if he weren’t a man. He felt hollowed out and his eyes flashed green. “Do you truly believe that Thor has any interest in you?”

Malicious amusement now on her face. “Did you have interest before I convinced you? I seduced you, the forked tongued prince. Your rather dim-witted brother should be of no consequence.”

Heartbreak and protective rage collided. His brother was an oblivious idiot who would be easy prey for Larnvidia if the queen could so easily fool him. He wanted to kill Thor for being the son and the prince that everyone wanted. He wanted to kill her for destroying the illusion he’d held
for much too long that he would ever find anyone who put him first.

But it wasn’t Thor’s fault. His brother didn’t purposefully overshadow him, it was simply the card he was dealt. He may hate his brother for it, but he also loved him. Voice cold. “Allow me to escort you to the Bi-frost.”

She turned her back to him. “Actually, I thought to seek your brother out tonight, now that our time together has ended so abruptly. I am certain I can persuade him to console me.” His arm snaked out, hand wrapping painfully around her bicep as he yanked her back around and stepped closer. She hissed in pained surprise and tugged. “You would dare to touch me without invitation you disgusting leech? You are nothing before Asgard’s eyes!”

Unknown to him, his grey-green eyes flashed red, his voice holding a deadly purr. “I wouldn’t recommend spending any more time in Asgard if you value your continued existence.”

Larnvidia paled slightly, eyes flitting from his eyes to his face. “I-…”

He bared his teeth, normally smooth in appearance, for the first time they were shark-like. “And as I will be sharing this moment with my daughter, I would highly encourage you to tread lightly through life.”

Larnvidia felt her breath freeze in her throat. His daughter, Queen Hela of Helheim. She hadn’t said another word, following Loki back to the Bi-frost site. After her departure he gave the ring back to Frigga and refused to speak on the matter, taking the golden roads to Helheim.

VANAHEIM

Hela moved slowly, black dress pooling to the floor. The wind rustled the material, displaying the emerald lining up the slit. The silver, armored bodice cinched at her waist, the fabric along her arms falling to her wrists. No one in the Vanir court could see a weapon, but then the goddess of the underworld didn’t need one.

Queen Larnvidia nodded from her throne, caution in her body language. “Queen Hela.”

Hela paused and drew in a slow breath, closing her eyes and tilting her head back as if in ecstasy. Depending on her mood, sometimes fear was such a delicious scent. “Queen Larnvidia…” Hela circled around the dark passage that linked Vanaheim to Asgard. It was distinctly marked and guarded since dark passages worked both ways. Smirking. “My, my…you are a foolish one.”

Hissing, leaning forward. “What??”

Turning, green eyes amused. “Foolish. Either that or your guards are incompetent.” Shrugging easily and glancing at them. “Either is possible but I am more inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt.”

Larnvidia sputtered from her seat. “This is outrageous, Queen Hela!”

Amusement dropped from her face. “You’re right, the attempted assassination of an ally is outrageous.” Silence descended over the court, eyes flitting back and forth between the two queens. Hela grinned nastily. “Where is your false indignation now?” A vial appeared in her hand and she threw it at the passage. An explosion of green mist outlined the ugly tear between realms before dissipating. The guards jerked, weapons in their hands as they looked from the passage to the Queen of Helheim and back again several times. Brushing her palms together. “One problem solved…” Turning her gaze to the nervous queen. “One left.”
Larnvidia lifted her chin in false authority. No one had dominion over Hela anymore. “As delightful as your visits are, Queen Hela, perhaps it is time you left.”

Smiling and showing too many teeth, growling. “Pleasantries aside, then.” She moved too fast to be followed, the Vanir queen slamming into a pillar and Hela snarling with impressively sharp teeth. “I warned you never to gain my notice my fine little royal bitch or you might not live to regret it.” The warning itself had been brief and to the point, Hela visiting Vanahem after Freyja had found her. Larnvidia would say nothing of Loki’s true origins and in return Hela would let her live.

In all honesty Hela couldn’t say why she had waited so long, save perhaps for the pleasure of psychological torment. That and Larnvidia’s mysterious disappearance might have prompted Loki to ask questions before it was time for them to be answered.

A male voice almost shrieked as he stepped away from the rest of the courtiers. “You cannot threaten a Vanaheim queen!”

Turning her head slightly to look at the outraged uncle who had been acting as the guide behind Larnvidia’s rise in power since her parents had died. “I am the Queen of the dead, you twat, I can do whatever in Hel I want.” Turning back to her captive who struggled futilely. Larnvidia had just a little bit of magical power for making persuasive items like the necklace she gifted Thor, but she was no match for Hela’s power. “Did you truly think that just because I am barred from Asgard that I care not what happens to my grandfather?” Everyone in the room froze. “Odin has many things coming to him, and I will not allow your petty desires for a throne in the golden realm to spare him from a single one of my plans.”

Larnvidia’s uncle took a hesitant step closer. “What do you accuse us of, Queen Hela?”

Looking at him with slight amusement. “I accuse that the creatures who attempted to slay King Odin utilized the dark passage before you to slip into Asgard secretly.”

His voice almost even, except for a fearful tremor. “Your grievance seems too personal for actions not her own.”

A small smile now painted on Hela’s face. “Perhaps, except she is the queen of the region. The responsibility of assassins slipping past her watch is her burden. Besides, I have been watching for an excuse to rip her throat out for over a century.”

His eyes widened. “You—…”

Hela made a scoffing sound, cutting him off. “Cannot? Wouldn’t dare? Please, I have killed greater people with less cause.”

Larnvidia squirmed, her hands wrapped around and tugging at Hela’s restraining wrist. “I have never even insulted you, let alone harmed you!”

Hela growled. “No, you harmed my father, more than even he knows.” Another silence descended that had shifted from wary interest to fear. Even to those that were not aware of their relationship, it was widely accepted on Vanahem that Loki the Liesmith held sway over Lady Death. “It is bad enough you broke his heart with words designed to gut a lesser man…it is even worse what you did behind closed doors.”

“I did nothing.”

A smile graced Hela’s face that held no amusement. It was a smile of the Queen of the dead. A smile that revealed too much wisdom and horrors witnessed in too short of a life. “I am
Queen of Helheim. All the dead who do not die in battle but who are not to be punished for a wicked life wash onto my shores. What do you think happens to the children you murder?"

There were gasps from the court and Larnvidia paled. There were nine realms and no race within those realms had blue skin…save one. That had been how she’d known Loki was a frost giant. When the child they’d conceived had been born with light blue skin she’d known the truth. A child with the second son was of no use to her and she had quickly disposed of it. Still, the knowledge of his revealed parentage was a truth she was going to delight throwing in his face, perhaps use to her advantage, until a visit from Hela had stilled her tongue.

The uncle sputtered indignantly. “Larnvidia has never married so she was never with child!”

Smiling evilly. “I see, so she is a virgin?”

Boots thumped across the stone, Thor pausing at the threshold before continuing forward. His normally happy, easy expression was set in battle ready stone. “I will dispute that falsehood for she was touched and spoiled before she entered my bed.”

Hela crooned softly. “You killed a child of the royal Asgardian bloodline without consent.”

Larnvidia hissed. “I am Queen, I require no consent.”

Thor scowled as he retorted. “My brother was a prince of Asgard, actions such as yours are valid grounds for war.”

Hela continued Thor’s thought. “Which means you required his or his family’s consent if you wished to maintain peace.”

“He…”

She squeezed her throat to cut off Larnvidia’s words. “No lies. He would have raised the child if he’d known.”

Desperately trying to pry Hela’s fingers from her neck as she shouted. “Odin cast him out as a prince and a son!”

Thor scowled. “I did neither. Loki will always be recognized by me as my brother and my family, just as Hela will always be my niece.”

Larnvidia hissed through clenched teeth. “The child was a monster, beget by a monster. It was half JÖTUNN!” Eyes widened in shock. Gasps filled the room.

Thor’s roar was instantaneous. “My brother was not a monster!”

“I share my father’s blood…what does that make me?” Hela turned to fully face Larnvidia as an ugly silence filled the throne room.

The Vanir Queen tried desperately to argue. “He—he was an enemy to most of the nine realms…”

Thunder rolled, a dark storm racing across the skies. Lightening seemed to flash in Thor’s eyes as he took a step, his words snarled with protective fury. “He was my brother, I care not where he was birthed. He died nobly, therefore his enemies are mine. He was raised Asgardian, the second
son of Asgard, and I will challenge any who dare to speak against him.” He looked around the room, remembering what Hela had asked of him. “I demand compensation for the murder of a member of my family, as prince and future king of Asgard.”

Larnvidia’s uncle stepped towards the AEsir prince, licking his lips greedily. “Perhaps a union between Asgard and Vanaheim is appropriate.” Larnvidia struggled not to show how agreeable she was to that arrangement.

Thor held up a hand, looking disgusted. “I will not sully my home nor my bed further with her presence.”

Hela grinned maliciously as she turned. “As I require compensation as well perhaps you will allow me to punish her.”

Something in her eyes told everyone what she had in mind would be unpleasant to the extreme. Thor nodded easily to his niece, knowing that whatever punishment she had in mind will well satisfy his need for justice. “Aye.”

Hela didn’t look back at Larnvidia, her cold voice touched with sadistic glee. She said the words mind to mind, so that none but Larnvidia would hear them. “I am going to have such fun with you, my little bitch-queen. I won’t kill you…but you will wish I would before I am done with you. Whether for power or politics I care not your reason, for no reason will ever satisfy me. You show no regret in stealing the life from my darling little sister, so I will force regret upon you. You will pay penance for every year stolen from her and the demons will feast in delight upon your screams…welcome to Niflheim.”

Hela turned to clap in delight, Larnvidia screaming as she fell down a black pit that opened at her feet. The blackness faded from the floor, leaving behind the stone floor whole and unblemished. All the other occupants in the court suddenly found their feet fascinating, afraid to make a sound. Larnvidia’s uncle broke out in a cold sweat as her expression turned evil, she and Thor standing side by side. “Now that she’s out of the way, we three need to talk about discretion…and of course of your new Skrull allies. How unfortunate it would be if Asgard and Helheim were forced to go to war with Vanaheim.” She didn’t turn her head in Thor’s direction. “Do you not agree, uncle?”

Thor had his arms crossed over his chest, staring down hard at the shorter man. “Aye.”

Larnvidia’s uncle swallowed.

Author's Notes:

Told you, she's terrible. Not to worry, I'm a firm believer it people getting what they deserve.

Nothing graphic cause, quite frankly, sometimes what we imagine is so much better than what I can write out ;)

Next:

Pepper is persistent; Jane learns a little more of the past; Anya and Hela make plans
Chapter 43

ALFHEIM

Usually in terms of relaxation this was the best time of day. Both Indel and Talia were down for their nap and would remain that way for at least another half of an hour. This would be the perfect time for the pair of them to get in a make-out session. Then just as the little ones were waking up he would disappear for a few minutes, although he refused to tell her where he popped off to, but she didn’t foresee that happening today. Jane slowly lifted an eyebrow as she watched Loki rap his head against his work table over and over again.

His hands moved to his hair as he leaned back in his chair and growled at the ceiling. “Why won’t she shut up??”

The second eyebrow shot into her hairline as she asked, “Who?” Because she certainly wasn’t hearing anything. Her boyfriend was eccentric and at times he joked in creative ways but he was much too agitated to be teasing. Not that she would actually call him her boyfriend to his face.

He shoved himself impatiently to his feet. “I mentioned once how some m-humans have potential, like yourself.” He’d almost said mortal, but he knew it only pissed Jane off when he said it. Speaking slowly, vaguely remembering that. “…yes…”

Gesturing at nothing. “She’s been saying my name, over and over again, for hours and it’s bleeding over so that I can’t ignore her anymore. For this much feedback she’s been at this for days.”

Thought was that powerful? That…was an interesting thought, a possibility that actually sounded a little scary. And obsessive. Frowning as she asked, “Should I be jealous?”

He smirked. “Maybe.”

Picking up an empty skillet and waving it in a gesture that was clearly not a threat. “Don’t force me to smite you with cooking ware.”

He grinned toothily and she grinned in return. “I can weave a spell once I locate her to block her from annoying me further.” He sighed softly, staring forlornly at the couch where they could be otherwise entertaining themselves. Jane had no idea what she did to him. Her kisses, her touch, it left him scorched and aching. He was forced to take a dip in the lake far too often to maintain his control when he would much prefer to spend hours educating her on just what pleasure was. “Give me a moment while I scare her into submission.”

MIDGARD

Virginia ‘Pepper’ Potts was not a stupid woman. You couldn’t be and keep up with Tony Stark. Was she as brilliant as he is, no. But then no one was so it wasn’t an insult. Still, that he thought he could keep her in the dark about Jane’s mysterious disappearance forever was insulting. And at the moment she wasn’t insulted, she was livid. She had an arrangement with JARVIS about secrets, who bowed quickly to her whims…much like his inventor. She went through the files that Tony had pulled together and it all came down to one word in her opinion. One name.

Loki.
Her talks with Jane hadn’t been just a one-time occurrence. Neither had her friend’s
dreams and even though Jane had refrained from bringing them up, Pepper hadn’t. Weeks and more
of talking with Jane had given her an uneasy feeling that maybe, just maybe, they weren’t dreams.
After all, Jane hadn’t even had a couple of days of interactions with the trickster. One particular talk
refused to leave her thoughts.

Pepper took a sip of her tea. “Alright, tell me something I don’t know.”

Jane blinked in confusion at her friend from the relative safety of the couch. “What?”

Grinning, not about to be sidetracked. “You heard me. Your dream Loki, tell me
something I don’t know.”

Blushing and refusing to let the thought of the possessive descriptor to settle into her
disturbed mind. “Um…come on, Pepper.”

Shaking her head, sitting primly less than three feet away and focused. “Forget it. You
spend more time with him than me lately, tell me something.”

The project had all of Jane’s focus and she looked up at Pepper guiltily before sighing in
defeat. She thought carefully before shrugging. “He can read my mind.” Pepper slowly raised that
eyebrow and Jane shook her head slightly, remembering that Star Trek movie Darcy had dragged
her to. “I’m not talking Spock-like or anything but he’ll sort of glean a random thought once in a
while.”

She’d seen the video feed of Tony talking to thin air. Nothing was recorded on the other
side and there was no audio but the inventor wasn’t that crazy. Wherever Loki was, if he could crawl
into Jane’s dreams and apparently have conversations at will with the eccentric inventor, she might
be able to drive him crazy enough to confront her. Crossing her arms, Pepper leaned back in her
chair, and started thinking the word, over and over. She was stubborn enough. She would do it every
day. Tony would call her crazy. Not to her face, of course, but he would behind her back. She didn’t
care, he’d been grumbling worse about her for years.


She hoped she gave the trickster a headache. She hoped she drove him absolutely nuts.
Honestly she didn’t care if he popped back here just to threaten her life, as long as she was satisfied
with his answer concerning Jane she really didn’t care. Morning, noon, and night. Whenever she
wasn’t in a meeting or sleeping, she kept up her chant.

It was late afternoon and Pepper sighed softly, filing the final contract. Keeping this up
was more difficult than she liked to admit and she was pretty sure she was giving herself a headache
but some naproxen would take care of that.

“By the Norns SHUT UP!!”

She almost choked on her water at her unexpected visitor but managed to just give him a
cool look over her glass. She had no intention of obeying but with a raised eyebrow she asked
curiously, “Will you go away if I do?”

Loki stood in front of her with a comically exasperated expression on his face, fists
clenched at his sides. Pepper was not one for dwelling on such things but the expression was almost…cute on him. “Dear lady at this moment I will grant you any wish in the heavens if you will leave me in peace.”

Putting down her glass, pushing herself to her feet and stalking the distance. “If you answer my questions.” She had a feeling if she rewound the tape later he wouldn’t be seen in front of her. But just because his physical presence wasn’t in front of her didn’t mean she wasn’t going to be careful.

He narrowed his eyes with a glare, his tone snappish. “Or I could kill you to silence you.”

She narrowed her own eyes, refusing to allow herself to feel fear, and noticed his flare with respect. Much like Tony apparently, who respected a woman unafraid to boss him around. But it gave her a normal basis to work from. “Then you already would have done so, Mr. Odinson.”

He grimaced but restrained himself from flinching. “Do not call me that.”

She filed away his reaction, keeping her tone professional and even as she asked, “Then you prefer Loki?”

He sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. “Yes.”

Pepper nodded slowly before jumping to the most important question. “Where’s Jane?”

His eyes narrowed again in consideration before growling softly in irritation. He’d mastered his own expressions by studying others. Miss Pepper Potts was an open book to him and her concern was genuine. “Of course you made friends with her.”

Eyebrow lifting. “That’s not an answer.”

He countered her movement, lifting his own eyebrow and asking, “If I give you an answer will you keep my presence to yourself?”

Her eyes narrowed again. “If you don’t I’ll tell everyone until…I think his name is Heimdall, notices.”

Loki paling didn’t give her the satisfaction she thought it might and she found herself regretting saying it. Pepper couldn’t stop herself from visibly flinching when she heard his voice. No one so proud and commanding should sound so small. “She appeared where I am, yes.” Strangely he seemed to rally himself instantly and she was relieved…and surprised she was relieved. “And I won’t tell you where no matter what you threaten.”

She could almost picture him sticking out his tongue just then. She had a feeling if he knew her better he might have. This was the man that had attacked New York? The most important she asked first, “Is she alright?”

He smirked and reached out his hand, Pepper’s eyes widening as Jane appeared by holding his hand. The physicist immediately grinned and waved, trying to talk, then turning to frown at Loki when no sound came out. “I’m still working on that.” Lifting an eyebrow at Jane. “My communicating between realms is impressive enough.”

Jane stuck her tongue out at him and he smirked again. Pepper felt a swell of satisfaction and felt like dancing. I knew it. The frequency of Jane’s dreams and the way her eyes unconsciously softened with warmth when she spoke of them left Pepper with the silent impression that her friend was in love. And the way that they were so vivid and detailed left a suspicion that they weren’t just
dreams. And they were so cute together. They were still in the beginning stage...she couldn’t wait until she could get some real ‘girl time’ with Jane. “Then you can answer for her.”

Loki turned back to glaring at Pepper. “I am not going to act as interpreter for your ‘girl time’ session.” Pepper almost visibly startled before realizing he’d picked up that phrase from her own thoughts. It was unnerving but she refused to be intimidated. She just stared at him for several seconds before glancing at Jane, silently waiting. Jane’s lips moved and Loki turned to snarl down at her. “I am not doing this!”

Pepper’s voice was dry. “I wasn’t expecting the God of Mischief to be so insecure with his masculinity.” Loki turned a vicious glare in Pepper’s direction, expecting her to wilt and impressed when she didn’t.

His voice purred of dark threats. “How would you enjoy being a canary for a month?” Jane elbowed him and he glanced down at her, amused. “You are correct, of course. She would hardly notice the difference.”

Pepper blinked twice before looking back at Jane. “Are you alright?”

Jane mouthed a few words before looking up at Loki expectantly. Loki’s eyebrow quirked. “I find it amusing that you actually think I will bow to your every whim.”

The physicist glanced back at Pepper with a very specific look in her eyes, who buried a grin. But Pepper picked up a conversation smoothly. “Not to worry, Jane. I know you’re miserable but I’m sure I can inspire Tony and Bruce to rescue you.” Jane said something, flipping her hair to the side as if she were a teenage girl and Pepper nodded. “I agree, green is definitely his color.”

Loki’s head jerked, staring from one to the other. He tried to jerk his hand out of Jane’s grip but the physicist refused to let go. “Oh! I almost forgot to tell you about the latest fashion trends. I gained extensive knowledge...”

Loki waved his free hand. “Alright, alright, ALRIGHT!” Jane’s lips quirked, looking back up at Loki with doe eyes and a slightly quivering lower lip. He sighed and succumbed to her pout, fake or otherwise. “She wants to know if Erik and Darcy were worried about her.”

Pepper smiled at her friend, feeling feminine pride that Jane apparently had Loki wrapped around her finger. “I will reassure them personally. There were some concerns about where you were but we’ve kept almost everyone in the dark. We weren’t sure where you were but I think Tony has known you were safe for a while now.”

Loki smirked, glancing back at Jane and listening to her. “Was the damage wrought by the Midgardian Bi-frost...are you truly calling it that?” Jane scowled up at him. “Was there extensive damage when it accidentally activated?”

Pepper showed the label on the folder, dubbed ‘alien dudes’. “Tony seems to think no.”

Loki frowned and cut into the conversation with a question of his own, “What aliens?”

Retrieving a folder from her desk, pulling out a physical image of the three and showing him. “They used guns that didn’t fire bullets.”

His head tilted a little, eyes narrowing just slightly as he asked, “Could they not simply be humans in disguise?”

Pepper shook her head. “The aliens Tony has been unable to identify caused the damage, not the arch.”

Loki frowned and cut into the conversation with a question of his own, “What aliens?”

Retrieving a folder from her desk, pulling out a physical image of the three and showing him. “They used guns that didn’t fire bullets.”

His head tilted a little, eyes narrowing just slightly as he asked, “Could they not simply be humans in disguise?”

Pepper shook the label on the folder, dubbed ‘alien dudes’. “Tony seems to think no.”
Loki hid his reaction, but he had a feeling they had been Skrull, which reminded him that something needed to be done about them. He didn’t like loose ends. Crossing her arms sternly, asking him seriously, “When are you bringing her back?”

His hand unconsciously tightened a little on Jane’s hand, whose eyes shot to his face. “As of now I make no promises.”

Pepper noticed Jane didn’t seem surprised or disturbed by that. It must have been for a good reason. “You had better do everything in your power and then some to keep her safe, Loki.”

He almost smiled at her and she blinked in surprise. “Now that I can promise.” Tilting his head slightly towards her. “Farewell.”

He disappeared and she sighed. Then froze and tried again. Nothing came out. Turning red, she would have screamed his name if she could have, and no matter how much of a headache she gave herself screaming his name in her head he didn’t reappear. She didn’t regain her voice for two days and even after she did, she still couldn’t say his name.

ALFHEIM

“Thank you.” Loki turned his head and raised an eyebrow at Jane, suppressing a grin that she had yet to release his hand. “For letting me see Pepper. Thank you.”

He inclined his head towards her as his AEsir armor shifted into the tunic and jacket that he usually wore here. “You’re welcome.”

She grinned, amusement in her tone as she asked, “What did you do to her?”

Looking innocent. “Me? I have no idea what you mean.” Jane just gave him a look. His grin a few seconds later held absolutely no remorse. “She’ll regain her voice in a few days, but not the ability to say my name.”

Which explained why he’d paled so severely. She didn’t know for sure but the spell sounded impressive. Jane shrugged loosely, asking softly, “Would it be so bad for the AEsir to know you’re alive?” His lips thinned and she gave him a thoughtful look. “You don’t really want to go back to Asgard, do you?”

He glanced away and considered her questions before sighing softly. “It was where I grew up, my mother’s people. But she isn’t there anymore, and Asgard has little use for a second prince who doesn’t fight like an AEsir warrior.”

She easily read between the lines. “You were disrespected.”

His tone turned snappish, ringing with frustration. “I was ridiculed and tormented until I started making examples out of anyone who dared. But I couldn’t win in an honorable way, I couldn’t meet my tormentor in a combat ring, because magic isn’t allowed in an honor fight. So I hurt them. Some severely. I made them regret every word uttered. But it didn’t gain me any honor, only contempt.”

Jane shook her head, befuddled. “Talk about a rigged game. What about your father? Doesn’t he use magic?”

Loki caught himself before he snorted. Yes, his father used magic and he was the most powerful AEsir capable of doing so. “He is very powerful, but he is just as capable with sword and
sheild as he is with seidr.” Tone dripping with self-mockery. “My father is a true AEsir warrior who is probably thankful to no longer have a trickster son to be shamed by.”

She didn’t hesitate anymore, wrapping her arms around him as she stepped to him. Jane leaned the side of her face into his chest, hoping to chase away painful memories. It shouldn’t be like this and silently she promised herself that if she ever had the opportunity she would voice that opinion. Needing to distract him, having figured out long ago that Loki and negative emotions didn’t mix well, “So this is your home now.”

His arms came around her in return, his chin resting lightly on her head. As he contemplated his thoughts shifted and his tone eased of frustration. “You have to admit, I could do a lot worse.”

From the sound of things, he had done a lot worse for a long time. She felt him stiffen as she burrowed a hand under his tunic, resting it against the small of his back. She felt his tension melt away as she started chastely rubbing the soft skin there with her thumb. “Are you going to stay here or build a house on Alfheim?”

Loki considered that for a moment as he leaned into her touch. As often as he planned each day, he honestly hadn’t given that part of his future a lot of thought. “Here for now. After Thanos’ defeat I wouldn’t be opposed to settling down here.” There were other matters to consider. He hadn’t forgotten. There wouldn’t even be a moon for much longer but he wasn’t opposed to settling on Alfheim. Quite the contrary. He sighed. “Though Asgard may take exception. I may be a citizen of Alfheim but I am their escaped prisoner. Short of faking my death again, I may have no choice in where I live.”

Murmuring into his chest. “We’ll think of something. You shouldn’t have to live where you feel unwelcome.”

Rubbing her back. “You’d be welcome on Asgard.” He bit back a grin. She may not even be aware of it, but he now knew just from her questions she wanted to stay. “Women who utilize magic are respected. Talia would integrate well as well.”

Frowning lightly as she asked, “But not Indel?”

Sighing softly with regret. He wasn’t disappointed in his boy. He doubted he ever could be. “He takes after me. He might one day be a warrior if he chooses, for beyond defending himself I shall not force it upon him, but I doubt he will be an AEsir warrior.”

Jane huffed, voice rising as she asked, “Then why would I want to live where you two would be miserable? That’s unacceptable to me. If Asgard can’t get over themselves, as Darcy would say, they can suck it.”

Loki choked on a laugh. “Suck it?”

Shrugging, grinning with pleasure that she could get a laugh out of him. “Yep. I’m not exactly sure what ‘it’ is, but they can.”

His expression turned serious, probing further, “And if my father decides I have not yet paid for my crimes?”

Jane scowled and countered, not thinking of the specifics so much as a plausible plan. “Then you’ll fake your death and I’ll play the part of the grieving girlfriend and we’ll meet you on Alfheim.” Such a silly word, in his opinion. But so long as she didn’t label him ‘boyfriend’ he
Continuing with his thought, surprised to find talking to her about his plans pleasurable. Never before had he done so, with anyone. He enjoyed hearing her responses and was shocked that he did. "They may not let you leave with Indel. He is my first born son and Odin regards tradition highly. Traditionally the immediate family would raise any male citizen in the event of death. Alfheim has claim over Talia and Asgard won’t fight for her. Most probably they will fight for Indel.”

"Then we should modify those plans for the two of you to ‘die’." He kissed the back of her free hand. Jane threaded her fingers through his, frowning thoughtfully. "Would the fact that he is a dark elf be a problem for them?"

Loki grimaced. “Possibly. They would have more issue with Talia being adopted than that I would think.”

Jane wasn’t sure if he was even aware of the small slip he’d just made, that Talia was adopted but apparently Indel wasn’t. But then again he probably knew and was offering her small amounts of trust as he was comfortable. She just silently filed it away for later. “Do children not get adopted on Asgard?”

“Some do.”

There was a tone in his voice, dark and fragile. A sense of foreboding washed over her and she carefully moved her hand away from his back. “I feel like I walked into something.”

He hesitated, both verbally and physically. Jane found herself holding her breath, almost afraid she’d pushed him too hard too soon. It hadn’t taken her long to figure out Loki had issues. Not just with trust, but even his issues had issues. She gave of herself freely, even though by now he knew a lot more about her than she knew about him. But then this wasn’t a contest so she wasn’t about to complain or try to force him to give more of himself until he was ready. “I discovered recently that…I was adopted.”

That certainly explained why he looked so different compared to his family. His hair, his eyes, even the features of his face were sharper and more aristocratic than theirs. He’d verified he was relatively young for an AEsir, but not so young that he couldn’t have been told the truth centuries ago. “Recently?”

His reply was slow, the words reluctant. “A few years ago.”

Pulling back enough to look up at his face. “I take it you were surprised.” There was no mistaking the expression that passed over his face this time. A rage so deep and raw it was frightening. She couldn’t stop herself from asking even if she tried, “What happened?”

Meeting her eyes evenly. “New Mexico happened.”

Jane’s eyes widened. Thor’s banishment…and Loki sending the Destroyer.

There was that feeling again, just on the edge of her fingertips. It was almost a feeling of contradiction. As if the person before learning this truth would never have tried to kill Thor and after had become someone else. But there was something else in his eyes. Something wild and wounded before he hid it. There was something he wasn’t saying. It was like she was staring at a physical wound that was still bleeding and infected.

Now he looked away, head turned to the side and almost physically withdrawing. She
knew he wouldn’t be able to say anything further and pushing would damage the trust building between them. She leaned up and kissed him gently on the jaw before snuggling back into his chest and hugging him again. Slowly he relaxed against her, holding her, when she didn’t ask anything else of him.

She wouldn’t press, not yet. She wasn’t sure what it was that he wasn’t saying, but she had a feeling whatever it was had truly been what started New Mexico.

ASGARD

Anya was rather focused in her task, this particular mirror in Prince Loki’s rooms always collecting an inordinate amount of dust. It was a beautiful day as always in Asgard, the servants finishing up the last of their chores before they would slip down to the village for a few hours of casual relaxation. She glanced up at her own reflection, freezing as a woman with her face who looked back slowly smiled. Anya’s eyes widened, touching her own face as her reflection winked.

Hold on tight.

Squealing, hands that reached out to her with the shape and form of glass tugged her through the mirror. Like stepping through a doorway, the journey was instantaneous. She landed on what would have been hard marble, her fall cushioned by a dozen conjured pillows. Looking up slowly, eyes widening as she exclaimed, “Milady Hela??”

Hela smirked, sprawling backwards into a lounge that appeared behind her. “I remember you.”

Anya hastily scrambled to her feet. Curtseying in respect, expression sad. “And I you, milady.” But then she truly noticed her surroundings, her eyes flitting this way and that to take it all in. She knew if wasn’t Asgard and because Hela was here she suspected this was Helheim. Hela just watched her indulgently, knowing that as a servant Anya had never set foot outside of Asgard.

Only speaking once Anya’s initial curiosity had been satisfied and deciding that she was going to give the AEsir a tour of Helheim. “I gather you faithfully toil away, cleaning Loki’s rooms.”

Anya held herself a little taller, pride in her voice. “It is my duty and I perform the task faithfully.” Hela lolled her head to one side and crossed her eyes. Anya giggled, her posture relaxing. “Apologies.”

Hela’s lip quirked. “I’ve always liked you, Anya, don’t disappoint me now.”

With curiosity in her voice she met Hela’s gaze evenly. It had been centuries since she and Hela had last spoken and the Queen of Helheim didn’t kidnap AEsir just for the pleasure of doing so. Her tone held a hint of formality. “I gather you have a task for me.”

Hela sighed in irritation. Things would be so easy if her uncle was clever. They had parted ways after subduing the Vanir with fear. From his agitated state, Thor had probably gone back to Asgard to hunt trolls with his friends. “I need you to sit on Thor.” Anya’s eyes widened exponentially and Hela growled. “It is a mortal turn of phrase that doesn’t mean what you think it does. Babysit. Watch over, not sex.”

Anya blushed and looked relieved. “Oh.”

Hela narrowed her eyes a little. Was there a hint of longing there? Interesting. She wasn’t going to address it now and it could be nothing, but it was something to think about for later.
“Larnvidia managed to sink her claws into him, I want to ensure that cannot happen again.”

Distaste flashed in Anya’s eyes though she hid it from her face. None of the servants cared for the Vanir Queen, the woman impossible and two-faced. “Is she to return to Asgard soon?”

Malice curled Hela’s lips. “No. She will be playing with my demons until I am satisfied and even when I return her…” Chuckling darkly as she thought of the Vanir queen’s current fate. “…she will never set foot in Asgard again.”

There were many reaction that Hela was expecting from fear to outrage. Anya looked relieved and it surprised Hela. The AEIsir asked softly, “Until when?”

Hela’s lips thinned a little. The commoners would know nothing until an official announcement but there was so much needed to prepare the palace properly that the servants always knew weeks in advance of an event like that occurring. “Has Odin announced Thor’s coronation yet?”

Anya looked shocked. “No, milady.”

She nodded in satisfaction. If the opportunity presented itself she’d confirm that with Odin but it left her with a glimmer of hope that he wasn’t a complete idiot. “I want you to watch Thor, to ensure of no other attempts to coax a marriage vow out of him until Loki comes to Asgard.”

Squealing excitedly, smiling. “The prince is returning?”

Hela couldn’t help smiling. There was a reason Loki and she liked Anya as much as they did and it had everything to do with the type of woman she was. A fascinating combination of perception along with a complete lack of guile. Her one weakness was she had no ambition nor aspiration to be more than she was. “If all goes according to my design, before a year has passed. And do be sure to warn me if Odin does do something stupid like announce Thor’s coronation.”

Nodding her head quickly. “Of course. If I may be so bold?” Hela nodded slightly and Anya continued. “Do you not trust the prince in matters of love?”

The trickster queen looked away from the servant for a moment. “I trust my uncle to know his own heart. But he has yet to convince me he knows how to protect Asgard from that heart.” Anya looked slightly confused. “It is no secret he holds a deep affection for Sif. She is a respected warrior but she wouldn’t make a very good queen as she is. She doesn’t balance him with much needed restraint as she should. But beyond that, there were courtiers and other realms who held a great interest in Thor since it was obvious to all he was who Odin would one day crown. Loki knew his unspoken duty to Asgard and acted as the buffer, subtly and not so subtly warning off those that would use Thor and Asgard for their own selfish ambition.”

Anya slowly nodded in understanding. “You wish for me to be that buffer until Prince Loki can return to take my place.”

“Exactly.”

Frowning now as she asked, “How do you expect me to fend off courtiers?”

Hela’s smile was sly as she stood and held out the crook of her arm for the other woman to take before leading her on a tour. There were spells of course, but Anya was no witch. But there were other ways that were completely innocent and if planned well…looked like an accident. “You know subtlety, Anya. There are subtle ways to make a woman miserable enough that even a prince isn’t worth the discomfort of courting him…and if not I will provide you a few ideas.”
Notes:

I can't help picturing him as a wary alley cat when she was holding and 'petting' him. :D

Next:

A discussion of dreams; The Other and Gorgeous chat
Chapter 44

ALFHEIM

“I have another question.”

G’dath’s lip quirked, setting aside a completed healing stone she was inspecting for Loki. Today was a normal hunting day, Talia staying with Jane to paint. Slowly but surely, the healer was starting to like Jane. It was so refreshing to discover how curious the mortal was. “Hopefully I can answer.”

Jane thought carefully before speaking. Part of her thought she should be asking Loki, but this was his mentor in all things magic. She had a suspicion he would just avoid her question if she asked. “Loki’s eyes.” The healer turned, watching the mortal put away a few books. Jane was frowning at the remaining tomes in her hand. “The celebration before winter started. When we were dancing, his eyes changed right in front of me.”

The elf tilted her head slightly with a frown. His eyes flashing green wasn’t an uncommon occurrence but G’dath thought Jane understood the cause. “They do that from time to time.”

With the last book put away, Jane turned around. “But they never changed back. Even now they’re still green.”

G’dath blinked twice before realizing the petite human before her was correct. His eyes were a much richer green and had been for some time now. Frowning almost delicately as she asked, “Have you asked Loki?”

Jane slowly shook her head, explaining. “I wasn’t sure if he would know and since you’re his mentor I wanted to get your opinion.”

Considering her words carefully before responding. “Perhaps what you saw was them changing back.” Talia appeared and held up a small bottle of paint. Jane carefully unscrewed the top before handing it back. The little girl ran back to her drawing, even as G’dath’s voice pulled Jane’s focus. “I have a theory, and perhaps I am wrong but I suspect I’m not.” Jane made a small gesture for the elf to continue. “Almost a thousand years ago I met a very young Loki on Asgard.”

Jane grinned in delight, completely sidetracked as she asked, “Was he cute?”

The other woman’s face filled with nostalgia. “Adorable. A smidgen taller than Indel and dressed in formal princely attire.” Jane smiled brightly, easily able to imagine such a sight. “His eyes were a similar color to Indel’s. Mages are very curious creatures. They are so filled with magic it reflects in their eyes. And magic is ruled by emotion over intellect. Even those with lesser magical strength like you and I will sometimes show a little power in our gaze.” Jane swallowed quickly. Loki had mentioned once he knew how to unlock her magic but the topic hadn’t been brought up again. She had a feeling he was waiting for the right time to offer and her feelings on the possibility were a strange combination of excited and nervous. “I was told that the day Hela was accidentally created was the last time she remembered seeing his eyes that color.”

“She?” Jane didn’t say it, guessing it must be an AEsir friend of G’dath’s and deciding not to press the issue. Asking slowly, “Because a spell didn’t work?”

G’dath opened her mouth to respond but a male voice replied. “Because I knew it was time to give up.” Both ladies turned to see Loki standing against the closed front door, his hunting
supplies set aside on the work table for cleaning. Neither of them had heard him come inside. Indel was sleeping in his arms, worn out, and Talia had already wrapped herself around his leg in greeting. Jane blushed, her face hot for talking about him when he wasn’t here. His expression was solemn and his eyes weary, but he didn’t seem offended to be the topic of conversation.

Jane restrained herself from closing the distance, asking softly, “What were you giving up?”

His lip tilted crookedly, too close to a grimace for her liking. “I spent hundreds of years fighting for my father’s attention. Trying to find some way to make him proud, to distinguish myself from Thor. I thought, in my naiveté, that making myself more powerful would gain his notice. When I woke, realizing I failed, I knew in my heart I’d never succeed. I still tried, but I accepted what took my head centuries to realize.”

Jane now closed the distance between them, Indel rousing himself just enough to yawn and stretch out for Jane, who took him easily. He yawned into her neck, snoring softly seconds later. She thought about putting the boy to bed, but she wanted—no needed Loki to answer this one question before anything else, “Why have they changed back?”

Were anyone else to ask such a question he would never answer it. He knew his vulnerability was his heart. He hid behind logic and slyness and witty quips but just as his mother once held his heart, now Jane did. She could do more damage to him with a few well-chosen words than Thanos ever could, but he wanted to trust her. No. This was the woman he loved. This was a woman who hopefully would love him. He had no one else. He needed to trust her. “This will, perhaps, sound incredibly sentimental, but I’ve found someone new I want to make proud…and newfound hope I can succeed.”

Jane didn’t even attempt to suppress the sappy smile aching to spread. A soft need to feel his lips against her own soared through her and she didn’t even try to resist. She just stood up on her toes, free hand tugging on his jacket until he bent towards her and shared a sweet kiss.

Indel yawned and mumbled quietly. “…icky…”

G’dath slapped a hand over her mouth to muffle her giggles. The two of them parted, Jane nibbling on her bottom lip. On Asgard, Loki would rather be caught dead than in such a compromising position. But this was his home and company or not if he wanted to kiss his Jane he was damn well going to do it. Talia looked up, still wrapped firmly around Loki’s leg and grinned. Jane and Loki both sighed, he resting his forehead lightly against hers.

“Dada!”

Loki whipped around, seeing Indel at perhaps 10 by human standards, dressed like a young prince, being tickled by a version of himself.

Loki froze. No. Not this lie, not again!

“I will save you, brother!”

A small version of himself, down to the brilliant green eyes he’d held as a child. The little boy seemed to easily tip over the trickster and the two children immediately attacked their father. A lovely blond elf crossed the garden, dressed in light silver robes. Her sky-blue eyes sparkled, a smirk almost out of place on her face. Talia…
Loki felt like throwing things in rage but he didn’t, silently slipping out of his bed without disturbing Talia or Indel and storming outside. He was used to dreaming and the ones he’d shared with Jane he’d come to look forward to. Those had ended as soon as she’d been hurled to his side. Tonight his dream was a similar repeat of before. The dream of being in Asgard, a prince with Jane as his wife. The only true difference had been Talia added to the exchanges but everything else down to his father’s silent presence had been the same as far as he could tell.

He couldn’t go back to the way he was, searching so desperately to find a place for himself in Asgard. Some place where he was accepted, not just by Asgard but by his father. If he allowed that dream to flourish once more it would poison everything he’d built here. He could admit only to himself he was afraid of becoming that Loki again. The cold, silver-tongued trickster prince of Asgard had no room in his life for children.

He wasn’t dressed for the weather but he barely felt the cold. He never really had and he was the biggest idiot for not realizing sooner what he was. His magic spiked and he picked up a rock, it instantly lighting on fire before hurling it in the direction of the lake.

A day. A year. He stood staring at the lake for a time, long enough for the sun to just begin to dawn before G’dath’s voice washed over him. “I think I could feel your agitation on Alfheim proper.”

He didn’t even feel the temptation to smile, not turning. “Not the word for it, G’dath.”

Her steps made no sound as she approached. “True, but it’s impolite to point out when a warrior is afraid.”

Now Loki allowed a bitter smile. Of course she would sense that. He asked softly, his voice carrying to her, “How familiar are you with Yggdrasil dreams?”

She moved to stand next to him, adopting a more serious expression. “In what regard?”

“Do they always come true?” He wished they did, but he doubted it. Even if Odin demanded his return he doubted he’d comply. He was becoming comfortable with the idea of this being his home. “Why are some dreams fanciful futures and others feel like a warning?”

“Mhmm.” G’dath thought back to all the time her father had spent pouring over the books, theorizing with other scholars. “Those dreams were more my father’s specialty than mine.”

The soft tone of respect in her voice indicated that her father was dead. “Does no one know anymore?”

She nodded after another considering moment. “I will tell you what I remember. The purpose depends on the origin. Some originates from Yggdrasil, and they are of what can be. Not a literal history but a possibility.”

“So it might not come true.”

G’dath tilted her head slightly as she thought. “The dream speaks of the destination, not the journey. But it gives validation to the end of the current journey. A commoner will dream of being a princess, but the dream won’t necessarily be the exact future. It’s encouragement for those that need it, because in the future she becomes a princess but is now missing a limb that she lost in war.” He pursed his lips to ask but she held up her hand. “Don’t speak of it. Words have power and these dreams can be fragile.” He swallowed the questions aching to escape. “Other dreams are from the
sister fates, a prophecy of what will be for all those bent to fate’s will. But those are waking dreams and different, for those directly affected do not receive them.”

Brow slowly furrowing, feeling his anger and frustration calming as he asked, “Isn’t everyone fate’s slave?”

“Surprisingly no. We are all under their sway because we know them to be real. We empower them but there are many mortals who do not believe and are therefore free.”

So there was an advantage to being mortal after all. He sighed and looked back to the lake. “If there are changes can the dream still happen?”

“A good dream?”

Shaking his head slowly. “An impossible dream. I can’t ever have it, but it’s the second dream. Similar but different.”

G’dath knew enough about Yggdrasil dreams that rarely was anyone ever gifted with two. That Loki had experienced something so extraordinary left her with no doubt. Unless someone outside of fate’s control altered Loki’s course, this would be a reflection of his future. Unfortunately, that was someone like Thanos. But that was also someone like Jane. “If the second dream is similar, then it’s validation you are on the right path, as impossible as it seems. Those outside of fate can alter a dream. I would suggest doing nothing that would prevent this from becoming a reality.”

Clenching a fist. “I’m a criminal and an outcast, it is impossible for me—…” He cut himself off before he said too much and later regretted it. It wasn’t easy to do for he always lost control over his tongue when he was angry. But somehow he managed it. Voice ringing with frustrated disbelief. “How?”

“Is this something you want?” Her words were quiet and thoughtful.

Shoving himself away from her. “What does it matter—…”

He jerked to a stop, G’dath in front of him. She’d moved even faster than Hela, and his daughter’s speed was damn impressive. Her tone short and succinct. “Is. It?”

His mouth opened to respond with something witty and hasty, but then he closed it again without a word. It mattered. He wished with everything in him that it didn’t because he never got what he wanted, but it did. “…yes.”

She gave him a thoughtful glance. “You don’t sound very certain.”

Eyes narrowing in suspicion, asking softly, “Why do you want to know? To mock me?” Crossing his arms over his chest defensively. “Yes. More than anything.” To return home. To be a prince and a son of Odin. Instinctively he glanced at one of his pale hands, knowing with but a thought it would be blue. “I wish I’d never learned the truth. I would give almost anything to be in my rooms right now, lost in Thor’s shadow and blissfully unaware of what happened to occur. There are only three reasons that I am glad I am where I am and they are here. I will give this up for them but these dreams are a tainted poison and I wish the torment to end.”

Her expression softened in understanding. “The dreams are not to mock or torment you.” She shrugged lightly when he continued to stare at her doubtfully. “If the dream changed but is still something you want, obviously you are doing something right.”

His arms moved to hang loosely at his sides, expression moving to his other default. His
lower lip stuck out just enough that, unconscious or not, it couldn’t be labeled as anything other than a pout. “I hate playing a game unaware of the rules.”

The corner of her lip twitched as she asked with almost hidden amusement, “But if you’re winning the game, why complain?”

His mind turned over ten thousand years worth of AEsir law crammed into his brain. “Criminals are dishonorable curs not worthy of walking on Asgardian soil. No dishonored has ever been welcomed to return.”

G’dash ignored the not so subtle hint that this was linked to his dream. Instead she focused on the impossible stubbornness of AEsir. She tended to agree with him, but it was the last thing he needed to hear. “You are Loki. For you, the rules are meant to be broken.” Loki started to shake his head. “Did your father not break his own edicts when he found you?” Surprisingly it wasn’t as hard as he thought it might be, to imagine Odin brushing aside his own edicts to sneak an infant Jötunn into his palace and into his family purely because he wanted to. He’d never seen Odin do anything without a purpose, but it was an appealing thought. Loki’s lip reluctantly twitched and he subsided. “Just live your life, Loki. Think of the dream as a distant reward and focus on what you have now.”

Loki’s right arm rubbed his left. “Have you ever had them?”

G’dash considered the lake for a moment before slowly nodding. The fact that she seemed reluctant to share caught his attention. “Yes. It has been a long time but I did receive one once.” She refused to look at him, keeping her tone even. There were some aspects of her past she didn’t like to dwell on, and this was one of them. “It was just after my mate passed and I considered joining him.” Loki visibly startled. It wasn’t unheard of for light elves to die as a pair, he was just shocked that G’dash had even considered it. “I was shown a future that confused me enough to intrigue me…and so I decided to wait.”

Curious, asking softly, “What was so intriguing?”

Giving him a small elf smile. That quiet, humored look she’d carried when he’d first met her. “You were in it.”

MIDGARD

The Other stood turned to the direction of the setting sun, an expanse of nothing around him. There were clumps of plants amidst stretches of dirt, the heat of the New Mexico day abating as dusk approached. Well out of the range of the mortal machines, the direction he faced led to the underground facility that housed the scepter. Somewhere in that maze of corridors and mortal obstacles lay the mind gem. His plans for an expeditious death for the mortals had failed. It was time to alter those plans to retrieve what Lord Thanos wanted.

“You are a difficult one to find.”

He did not turn as a mortal woman flashed into existence just over his shoulder. Several Skrull disengaged their camouflage, appearing in a half moon around him. Instead of startling he only asked as if speaking to himself, “And how did you find me, I wonder? How did you even know of me is a more prudent question?”

Hela’s lip quirked as her dark green eyes assessed the creatures around her. “Your minions talk too much.”
The Other nodded slowly in agreement. “Indeed. And what is it you wish…the sparing of your pathetic planet?”

Crossing her arms loosely. “An exchange.”

Now the Other turned, staff in hand. “An exchange of what?”

Hela felt her fingers twitch to simply dispense of the games and cut off his head. But that would be too neat and merciful. She had nearly a year’s worth of pain to make up for; the debt he owed her father too great. “I will give you the gem you seek and you will leave this planet, never for you or yours to return.” Not that she expected him to take her up on that offer. She had plans for that gem and it was staying right where it was until the time was right. The Other’s head turned a little towards the soldiers masquerading as Chitauri, a gesture anyone not aware of a trap would mistake for annoyance. She smirked, pleased he was irritated, “I told you. Your minions have big mouths.”

“Which minions do you speak of?”

She shrugged loosely, grinning at the two she’d followed here. “It really wasn’t that difficult to put together. Those…”

Hela trailed off purposefully, knowing a mortal wouldn’t know their species and the Other supplied it easily. “Chitauri.”

“Exactly, they were assisting that lunatic that tried to destroy New York. Luke or whatever his name was.”

Baring his bloody teeth in contempt. “Loki.”

Shrugging carelessly as if she could care less. “Right. So I followed them, heard them mention a gem and remembered the glowing blue rock attached to…Loki’s stick. Seemed easy enough to figure out.”

Another slight jerk of his head caught her attention. If she could see his eyes she would imagine them narrowing their focus on her. “You have the gem.”

She’d left the mind gem and the reality gem was tucked away where no one could see it. Making a scoffing noise. “Of course not. SHIELD has it. I know where in the compound it is. I can retrieve it is the point I was going to make.”

The Other pointed his staff threateningly. “Or I can glean its location from your mind and take it at my leisure.”

Hela touched his staff with the tip of her finger and smiled wildly when it melted. “You should be careful around advanced humans. Full of surprises.”

Instead of annoyance or anger in his voice, there was smugness. “Indeed. Just as you should be careful around those smarter than yourself, little witch.”

The Other tossed something to her that she caught. Perhaps not the brightest choice, but it had been a reflex. Opening her palm revealed a very familiar pendent that Amora was never without. Hela looked back up grimly as the Other smiled with bloody teeth bared.

“You killed her?” She doubted it, since Amora hadn’t been destined for Valhalla and she would have noticed the Enchantress entering Helheim.
“My lord will eventually.”

*Shit.* Thanos had ways around the curse keeping her from saying Loki’s name. And the Titan had an unhealthy fascination with Loki. He would get the answers from her in a most brutally painful fashion. Amora didn’t know much, but enough to damage her plans.

Hela was so focused on what could and would go wrong, she was distracted for a fraction of a second…exactly what the Other had been waiting for. She screamed as electric current shocked through her body. She collapsed to the ground, her limbs twitching in aftershocks. She tried to speak but all that left her lips were a few soft slurs.

“Curious. Such a powerful little mortal, felled by something so simple. Take her to Lord Thanos.” The Other turned dismissively, knowing his orders would be obeyed, and stepped onto the platform of a small transport that lowered down from the clouds. The small vessel hovered for a moment before racing across the skies and disappearing from sight. One ship remained behind, a Skrull vessel that would take her to Thanos no doubt.

A hand grabbed her wrist, dragging her limp body inside the transport and leaving her lying in a boneless heap in the center of the ship. One of them sat at the helm, the others taking silent positions around her as the ship powered up. Hela drifted through gray distance for a few minutes, feeling the ship punch a hole through space and jumping from point to point. Unlike her more graceful slips from point to point, she could imagine the universe screaming in pain.

She started to chuckle softly, eyes closed. The one in charge of the group turned to look down at her in disdain. “Considering how painfully short your life is about to be reduced to I fail to understand your amusement.”

A small smile curled her lip. *Such simple creatures.* Before she was Hela she shared the past with Loki, you didn’t grow up in a household with the God of Thunder and not get struck by lightning at least once. Compared to that unpleasant sensation, a Taser was like static buildup.

A black boot stopped next to her face, the Chitauri disguise abandoned in favor of his natural Skrull form. “You won’t be amused for long, *mortal.* You are about to lick the boots of the being that created torture.”

She never realized just how much she loathed that word until now and it wasn’t even an insult against her. She’d said it before, most AEsir had. Hela supposed it was the way he said it that left her angry. She moved in a blur. Her hand around his throat, she lifted him off his feet as she pressed him against the hull while gesturing with her free hand. The other Skrull growled and twisted but couldn’t lift their feet from the floor. The pilot flew on, unaware of what was going on around him.

Her small smile grew as she purred. “You are correct. Soon you will be dead and my enjoyment of toying with you will end.” He made a choking sound. “Shh…perhaps I should have mentioned that I’m not mortal.” She smiled cruelly, her nails growing to sharp points, as did her teeth. “Allow me the pleasure of introducing myself. The nine realms know me as Queen Hela of Helheim and Niflheim, Goddess of the Underworld.” Her smile grew, her skin flushing blue. “Or a few centuries ago I was known as Hela Lokisdóttir of Asgard.” A jerked gesture, and she tossed his body to the ground, his neck broken. She turned slowly and snarled, lethal intent in every line of her body as her blackened armor wrapped around her, twin swords at her hips. “Welcome to Hel.”

**NOWHERE**
Hela stood on a lone cliff, the moon as lifeless as the rest of the planets in this solar system. She was the guardian of the dead but she wasn’t about to destroy entire civilizations just to get rid of one Skrull craft. In spite of popular opinion she did have, if not a love for life, at least a hidden affection for it. She looked without seeing at first. The universe was so vast, so much more than just nine realms. It made one feel small, even someone like herself. She shivered as her eyes swept over the endless sky. Were she to have truly been helpless would she have even be missed? Loki would tear the heavens apart to find her but otherwise…

Where would she go when she died? She felt goose bumps prickle along her arms. For an instant, she wasn’t a warrior. She wasn’t a queen. She was a young Asgardian, former or otherwise, who wanted to go home.

Sighing softly, shoving such silly desires to the side, she ducked her head and studied her hands. Mumbling under her breath, a green glow filled her hand, shaping into a distorted ball. What she was creating wasn’t necessarily awe-inspiringly powerful, it was merely unstable. The energy crackled malignantly and with her arm extended, it flew away from her to the sun in the far distance.

At first nothing happened as the energy disappeared. Then the golden sun started to crackle, the color changing and deepening from gold to orange to red. If sound could travel in space, there would be a mighty rumble more violent than an earthquake and more powerful than an erupting volcano. Light and energy exploded outward, destroying the two closest planets before it all collapsed in on itself. She felt the power rush over her, a magical shield protecting her. The collapse repeated infinitely before a great emptiness started to expand. The little Skrull ship that had been hovering just out of reach started to be pulled in by the steadily increasing gravitational pull.

It wouldn’t do for Thanos to find them and a ‘natural’ accident always worked well in covering up evidence. Once the ship had disappeared down the black hole she sent a second pulse of exotic anti-matter and within seconds it collapsed on itself. Now with that out of the way, it was time to see if she could track down Amora.

Author's Notes:

Angsty Loki is still my favorite to write... but angsty Hela is a close second. I think they both need lots of hugs!

Next:

Abril comes for Talia; Tony chats with the God of Mischief; Lord Utterow is a degenerate
Chapter 45

ALFHEIM

“…you will give me my daughter, right now.”

Loki turned the corner of the trail, Indel riding on his back, to see an elf he didn’t recognize on one side of the shield to his home and Jane on the other. Jane had asked him several times why he felt he needed to shield his home. This was why. Jane’s brown eyes were narrowed in defiant irritation. Talia stood against her and wrapped in her arms. “For the last time, we wait for Lokhi.”

“Who are you?” Loki didn’t even bother to wait and announce himself before asking, his green eyes studying his prey intently.

The she-elf jerked to the left to stare at him while Jane just looked visibly relieved. She recovered quickly and lifted her head haughtily. “I am Abril and I have come to retrieve my daughter.”

His green eyes narrowing before gesturing lightly and walking through the shield. Abril followed and reached down for her daughter. Loki was there in an instant, scooping Talia into his arms. The blond haired, blue eyed elf paused to eye him but Loki ignored her, his command formed into a request. “Jane, will you please take them inside for a moment while Abril and I have a little chat?”

Talia looked from Loki to her mother to Jane before holding out her arms for Jane to hold her, resting her on her hip. Indel dropped lightly to the ground and took Jane’s hand, asking hopefully, “Can we have apples, dada?”

Loki grinned but his eyes held no amusement. “Of course.” He waited until all three of them were inside before turning back to Abril.

She didn’t keep him waiting, her eyes narrowed as she demanded, “Who do you think you are?”

Lifting one eyebrow at the elf, producing a wrapped scroll of parchment but careful not to hand it over. It was one of the most valuable documents he kept on his person at all times. “I think I am Loki, citizen of Alfheim and recognized by the Senate as Talia’s father.” Abril stiffened. “Do not even pretend to act surprised. You knew that someone would claim the girl eventually. Admit it. You were hoping it would be so.”

Voice trembling as she retorted. “I was hoping she would have an elf-kind household… not…”

Crossing his arms lightly over his chest. She was nothing to him and he didn’t give a damn what she thought of him. “Then you should have made arrangements to secure someone you would approve. Too late, I’m afraid, for I will not give her up. She is my daughter. She is Indel’s sister. The end.”

Hissing as she almost shrieked, “With a mortal??”

Loki smiled coldly. “There is a mortal saying that I find most appropriate. Thieves that live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.” Abril’s lip trembled before she controlled it. “Now, I can be
and have been known to be unreasonable. This is not one of those cases. So long as I am aware of your visits you may do so.” His brow furrowed a little, eyeing the necklace around her neck that was far too aristo in comparison to her modest dress. Fingers lightly brushing against the polished stones. “Does this belong to you?”

Her chin lifted slightly in defiance. “It does now and I choose to wear it…just as I may choose to give it to my daughter.”

Voice cold, eyes hard as he demanded clarification, “And that means you paid for it or stole it?” Abril didn’t say anything and she didn’t have to. He detected the slight flinch. A flick of the wrist and the necklace disappeared. “You are not possessing anything stolen around Talia.”

“She is my-…”

His voice now sharp enough to cut glass. “No. She is my responsibility, my daughter, and you are not turning her into a thief.”

She looked almost indignant. “And I suppose you never stole anything.”

“I did once.” He couldn’t remember what it was, just something he’d wanted that had belonged to a friend of Thor’s. He’d been very young, only a few years older than Talia. “In a rare moment of good parenting my father had found out and tanned my hide for it.” Not quite the word for it as it had been the worst spanking of his life. He had no idea why he had told her that but he had and now she was looking at him thoughtfully. “I never stole from anyone again after that.” Technically true in his opinion since he had borrowed the throne from Thor without asking but he would have given it back. Eventually. “So you may visit, and I encourage it, but you are not giving her stolen items as gifts and you are not leaving this village with her. Am I clear?”

“Many in your position wouldn’t accept a thief in their presence.”

Speaking of living in a glass house. “You haven’t been foolish enough to steal from me and since I am hardly an example of sainthood I can afford to be generous. But make no mistake, my own flaws aside, I will not allow you to ruin her future as you have done to your own.”

She looked indecisive for several moments but finally Abril bowed her head respectfully. Loki gave her a pausing look before opening the door to find three ears pressed to the wood. They all looked up at him guiltily and he sent them a mock glare before focusing on Talia who instantly took his hand.

Abril smiled hesitantly at Talia. “Would you like to walk to the lake?”

Talia looked to Loki first to make sure she could. When his lip quirked in a smile at her, she nodded and reluctantly released Loki’s hand to follow. Mischief appeared just as they crossed the threshold. The two shared a look before the boy made himself invisible and followed the two elves.

Jane came up to Loki’s left as a flame leapt to existence in his palm and he carelessly tossed it into the fireplace to help warm up the room. Looking curiously up at him as she asked, having guiltily bowed to the temptation to hear what was going on. “Was that true?”

“Which part, eavesdropper?” He smirked slyly as he retorted.

She pouted a little. “Hey, we didn’t hear everything.” His lip quirked with a slightly coy smile and she couldn’t help stealing a kiss. “Just when you started talking about good parenting.”

Loki winced down at her just thinking about it. “I still have the bruises to prove it.”
Smiling wickedly at him. “Prove it.” He rolled his eyes.

Loki studied the mortal silently as he fidgeted with the metal suit on the table in front of him. The suit was definitely looking a little charred around the edges. Idly he wondered if the other Avengers were worse off. But he was also curious. Why did they do what they did? He understood Thor. For glory. For fun and adventure. But he didn’t think that’s why these humans put on their armor and fought their foes.

Blinking and realizing Stark had stopped moving, his gaze lifted to see the inventor watching him. Tilting his head slightly but forcing his voice to be bland as he asked, “Why fight since you are not part of a warrior culture?” He noticed Stark take just a moment to check his eyes before answering. Will the human do that every time we encounter one another?

After that assessing moment Tony shrugged. “Everyone has a different reason. Oh, and JARVIS, thanks for the warning.”

“Apologies, sir, Mr. Odinson does not appear on any sensors.”

Loki glanced up with a silent frown, idly curious where the voice came from. Tony sighed even if internally he was cackling. Loki’s reaction to the disembodied voice wasn’t as startled as Thor’s but it was always enjoyable to catch one of these supposed gods by surprise. “Great. Anyway, why do I put on a suit and kick major butt? Cause I’m awesome. Fame. Fortune. Shwarma-ever tried it? Probably not. Your brother liked it…I think. He kinda will eat anything. Oh, and well, I’m a genius with some neat toys so why not?”

Loki’s head tilted just slightly. He was not one for babbling and he found Stark about as focused as Indel after consuming a sugary substance. “Interesting…” Stark turned and raised an eyebrow. “…even with a distance between where I am and where you are I can still spot a lie.” He gave Tony a toothy smile, who scowled at him. “Very well, I will leave your answer as is for now, but please refrain from insulting my intelligence in the future.”

Retrieving a cup of coffee and taking a sip, sitting on the bench as he shrugged. “Didn’t think the Liesmith would appreciate the truth.”

“You would truly be surprised by what I appreciate, Stark.”

Tony pursed his lips thoughtfully, mind trying to puzzle him out. Loki, power-crazy-let-us-banter-before-I-shove-you-out-the-window had been predictable. Insane, but predictable. This guy was the polar opposite. Still an asshole; but a smart, perceptive, unpredictable, calculating asshole. “I’m guessing you wouldn’t buy me saying because it’s the right thing to do?”

“Not really, no.”

Shrugging again and jumping off the bench, throwing a few tools into a pile. “Yeah, well, we haven’t been dating for very long. I don’t open up until at least the third date.”

Loki considered him, quip ready. “Hmm…and have you had many third…dates, was it?”

Smirking over his shoulder, eyebrows wiggling. “Babe, I haven’t even had many second dates.”

The look Loki returned was smoldering with sensuality. “I think you will find I am worth
Tony considered him again. He was impressed. Most people, particularly heterosexual men, couldn’t play the flirting game with him but Loki was just full of surprises. At least, he assumed the demi-god was hetero but he wouldn’t be surprised if he was bi-sexual. Not that he was tempted. Pepper would kill him. Jane would probably kill Loki. And since he knew for a fact the two women got along it wouldn’t end well for either of them. Still, he could appreciate sensual skill when he saw it. Dark eyes narrowing for just a moment. “How are you at computers?”

Within an hour Tony was blown away. Apparently Loki hadn’t been joking that science was merely a baby step to magic. He breezed through computer programs, using minimal amounts of magic to fly through programming simulations. He stopped suddenly and the inventor glanced at him with a raised eyebrow.

The demi-god’s eyes were sparkling with life but he was panting softly. Since he remembered what happened the last time he’d overextended himself he knew when to quit. “No more today.” Turning to nod slightly towards the mortal. “Until next time.”

Tony was stretched out on a sofa, asking curiously, “Will there be a next time?” He knew he couldn’t keep the demi-god out and he found he honestly didn’t want to. Nor was he tempted to tell anyone Loki had come calling. Fury would have him locked away for psych evaluation in a heartbeat if he found out they spent the time chatting instead of fighting.

Smirking evilly. “Perhaps.”

Sitting up suddenly, tone demanding. “Tell me you’d never try to take over the world again.”

_Such an adorably naïve mortal._ Loki could understand why they were so easily fooled by his previous ruse. They’d had to rely on Thor for a dissection of his character and his brother, as per usual, fell short in critical thinking. “Ruling was never a goal of mine…but I won’t forsake a needed role for me to fulfill.”

Tony almost did a classic double take. “Yeah…lay that one out for me.”

Loki spread out his hands casually, mentally calculating how much time he had before he had to leave. “My goal was simple, to open the portal so that as many Chitauri as possible were massacred by your pitiful forces. You needed a villain to fight.” He shrugged loosely and smirked. “It sounded like fun, so of course I obliged. If I ever do return and my guidance is required, who am I to refuse?”

Tony didn’t even blink, dark eyes searching his own. “You have got to be kidding.”

Shrugging again. “I might be. I’m called a trickster for a reason.”

The inventor snorted and climbed to his feet. Stark stretched for a moment, then ventured over to one of his thrusters. “You wouldn’t have happened to make any slime monsters explode recently, would you?”

Loki’s evil smirk grew. “Maybe.” His expression turned concerned as he asked, “You didn’t let it touch your skin, did you?”

Tony froze and paled, thinking of the hours he’d spent cleaning the slime out of his thrusters by hand because the stuff wouldn’t come out otherwise. “Why?”
He swallowed a cackle and muttered softly, just loud enough it could be heard. “I suppose it would depend on whether you have gained weight recently.” Loki’s eyes flickered down towards the mortal’s stomach for the barest of seconds before speaking normally. “Oh...um, no reason.”

Yelping and pawing at his shirt over his stomach, as if that would solve anything. “I can’t be pregnant!”

Loki didn’t say anything except for a brief look of guilt to run across his face before he vanished, leaving a hyperventilating Avenger screaming for JARVIS to get Bruce.

Jane was treated to the sight of the God of Chaos lying on the floor, laughing so hard he was crying.

ALFHEIM

“You have got to stop doing this.”

Loki rolled his eyes at G’dath chiding him before he sighed and drank the potion with a grimace. He’d forgotten to take into account that Mischief had been watching over Abril’s visit with Talia. A minor miscalculation he wouldn’t make again but he’d gotten weak enough and Jane concerned enough that she’d escorted him to the healer. She and Indel were currently with Azni while Talia and Abril walked through the village and with a sweet kiss that made his heart pound Jane had promised to wait for him there.

_Such a deliciously evil woman._ He shivered with the thought of her. It was killing him not to take the next step and he didn’t always have the best patience when denying himself something he wanted. Brat, as Jane would say. Still, she was worth it so for her he would deny himself until their fate was solidified.

G’dath sighed and pulled out a messenger bag, slipping half a dozen more vials inside. “I’m serious, Loki, start stocking restorative.”

Raising an eyebrow as he asked curiously, “Or what?” He was desperately curious to discover what she was going to threaten him with.

Glaring back at him. “Or I’m going to knock you on your ass.” He gave her a considering look, wondering if she was even capable. Her eyes narrowed. “Try me.” She couldn’t read his mind, she knew just by his expression what he was thinking. Her sharp inhale of breath, her head turned towards the door, caught his attention. “Damn.”

Lord Utterow. A notorious light elf, both as a powerful enchanter, as well as an elf carrying a significant amount of political pull. He had everything it would seem except one thing. The elf had no soul. Cold and calculating, intelligent and cunning; the elf lacked empathy for anyone and everyone and delighted in crushing hopes and dreams. When Utterow came to a village like this, he was here for a specific purpose and that was it.

As an enchanter, Utterow would easily see through his elf disguise. Loki debated staying as he was but this was the sort of elf who frequented the courts of other realms, like Asgard. An elf who would use the knowledge of his living status to his advantage. Loki did not want it common knowledge that he was alive. He had less than half a second but he’d dealt with trickier situations. He turned as a rather cocky elf, with long golden hair and brown eyes, stepped into the healing room.
G’dath stood, placing herself slightly in front of Loki. “Lord Utterow. This is a surprise.”

The enchanter smiled blandly at her before glancing at Loki who smiled shyly and projected demur. “And who is this enchanting young elf?”

G’dath almost gave herself whiplash as she jerked around. There was no glamour in place this time. The AEsir male Loki had been replaced by a she-elf with similar features. He chose the least challenging gender, but he didn’t think of himself as female today since this hadn’t been an inspired choice. This was a disguise, nothing more. Loki’s green eyes sparkled with mischief. He was a changeling, after all, did G’dath forget already? Loki bowed his head slightly and offered the enchanter a generic elven name. “Llana.”

Utterow walked the distance, a wolfish smile on his face as he leaned in. “What a beautiful name.” He reached out to brush a lank of hair behind Loki’s pointed ear, the intimate gesture between elves normally reserved for close families and lovers.

G’dath’s eyes widened before snarling. “Lord Utterow.”

Utterow ignored her easily, asking Loki boldly, “Where are you from, my dear?”

Smiling pleasantly, picturing Utterow’s defiled corpse rotting away in Niflheim. “The northern providence, above the Enosk River.” It was a reality he could make happen with one request, which helped to keep his temper under control. He let Utterow’s thoughts wash over him and he fought to keep the revulsion off his face.

“A wonderful land and quite beautiful…I can see why you would call it home.” Loki smiled just a little wider silently, carefully hiding how sharp the edges of his teeth were, as was the very real possibility of his eminent attack.

“Lord Utterow?”

The enchanter turned to the new voice, his smile turning cruel to see a she-elf being restrained, her daughter clinging to her. “It has been quite some time, Abril.” Abril said nothing, knowing exactly who he was, and he grabbed her golden hair harshly. “You will answer to the Senate for daring to steal from me.” She didn’t bother trying to defend herself, knowing Utterow didn’t care about what was taken. It was only about the execution to him. Chuckling softly, huskily. “Perhaps they will gift to me your offspring in payment.”

Mischief lay in wait, knives in hand and wrapped in invisibility. His first instinct had been to kill the elves and escort Talia back to the cottage, but he’d let the impulse drift when the elves paid Talia no mind. Their target was Abril and Loki didn’t owe her anything. But the girl’s quiet distress was tearing at his control. He noticed Loki stand, the disguise fading completely.

Abril knew she would face death. She had fully intended to be brought before the Senate with dignity but as distasteful as his threat sounded it wasn't unimaginable. He might simply want Talia because she was in his magical caste but Abril suspected not. She suspected something much worse. She would rather anything. ANYTHING. Bursting into tears. "Please, no!"

‘Anything, my dear?’

Abril stilled, instinctively her eyes moving to Loki who wasn't wearing his disguise anymore and unnoticed by the rest. He was dressed in his AEsir armor, raising a single eyebrow at her. They were both caught in a moment in time, the people around them unmoving.

She recognized him, not because they had met before, but because she’d combed through
enough aristocratic dwellings over the years to see images of the other royals of the realms. She’d never dreamed someone like the fallen prince of Asgard would wish to protect her child, and suddenly it became enough. Even in a home with a mortal. Even with a dark elf as a sibling. He would see Talia grew up protected, her gift of magic cherished. Concentrating, knowing he would hear her thought to him. ‘Please take care of her.’

No pleading for her own life…and in truth he wasn’t surprised. It was rare that one member of a mated light elf pair survived when the other died. He understood. She had been drifting, waiting to join her mate once more but instinctively she’d survived this long because her child was too young to survive without her. Loki smiled the slightest amount and nodded. Abril’s tears cleared, gaining strength from his gaze.

Time reasserted itself with Talia’s cry. "Papa!!"

Utterow sneered at Abril, not noticing there were no longer tears in her eyes and reached down for Talia, stunned to find the girl gone. He jerked and looked around but she was nowhere to be seen…and neither was Loki.

VANAHEIM

In spite of popular opinion she wasn’t omniscient. Far from it. Amora may have been on the same planet as Thanos but they had moved her. It was the where that currently eluded her. She needed a distraction, and Fandral was ever so useful in providing one.

Hela laid back on the setae in a small inn on Vanaheim, watching Fandral enter from the small kitchen with a bowl of grapes. It was a thoroughly domestic activity but the two of them had grown unusually comfortable together. Fandral was beside himself. He’d never entertained just one woman for so long but he was strangely content. She was a puzzle. A beautiful, brilliant enigma who didn’t lack in imagination and he couldn’t see her ever boring him.

Hela was a bit more practical. She was waiting for the penny to drop. She knew he hadn’t told his little friends about her, and as much as he might think things could remain as they are forever she wasn’t a fool. Dirty little secrets never lasted and so long as their tryst remained unspoken that’s all it really was. Still, she wasn’t about to deny herself the pleasure of his enthusiasm while it lasted.

The knock at the door made Fandral jump and Hela’s lips twitch into a bitter smirk. No one would come for her here so it had to be one of Fandral’s compatriots. Sometimes she hated always being right. Sif barged in a second later. “Fandral, Thor-…” Her dark eyes widened and she made a choking sound as she froze. Blinking and recovering quickly. “Queen Hela.”

Hela nodded slightly in return, deciding to be polite and just watch the show instead of antagonize. “Lady Sif.”

An uncomfortable silence started to stretch as Sif’s eyes moved from Hela to Fandral and back again. Hela knew all sorts of conclusions were being drawn and the warrioress wasn’t wrong. Fandral cleared his throat, his question a hint, “Might I have a few moments of privacy, Lady Sif?”

The warrioress nodded slowly, stunned. “C-certainly. Thor will not be departing for Jötunheim for several days hence so there is time.”

Fandral’s eyes widened in shock. “Jötun-…whatever for?”

Spine stiffening in respect to mention her king. “The All-father wishes to open peace talks
with the Frost Giant’s new king.”

He snarled, instantly thinking of those beasts during their last confrontation on Jötunheim. That adventure had been a disaster and Loki’s quick thinking had been the only reason he’d lived. “Why would the All-father discuss anything with those frozen monsters?”

Sif shrugged loosely. “I know not. Thor wishes us to stand as his and his father’s guard.”

Fandral nodded solemnly, taking the honor of the request seriously. “Allow me to dress and I will join you presently.” Sif nodded in return and stepped back outside, the door closing after her. Fandral turned with a soft smile of regret, Hela already standing with her back to him. “I apologize, dear lady, that-…”

“Jötunn are frozen monsters to you?”

Oblivious to her chilly tone as he shrugged and asked as if the answer were an obvious conclusion, “Whatever else could they be?”

Her arms crossed, still facing away from him and answering him. “Living, breathing beings who deserve as much respect as any other creature in the nine realms.”

The blond Æsir paused, not believing what he was hearing. “Surely you jest, milady.”

“I kid you not.” When her voice deepened he detected what he hadn’t before: the barely contained rage. “I am the guardian of Helheim and Niflheim, Æsir, do you doubt that I may visit those of Valhalla at my choosing?”

He would be an idiot to state otherwise. Brash and self-absorbed though he may be, he had never been described as an idiot. “I would expect that of any in the nine realms, you would be able to do so.”

“Do you truly believe there are no Jötunn in Valhalla?” She snorted when he didn’t protest to the contrary. “Of course you do. For who would ever expect that a Frost Giant could lead an honorable life? I assure you there are those there…not many, I will grant you that much. Which means they are a people just like any other.”

Fandral had been putting on his armor, but he paused in the involved act. “Hela, why do you care for them? They are nothing more than unseemly, repugnant blue beasts. They are Asgard’s enemy…your enemy.”

Her words were hissed. “You forget yourself. I am no longer welcome in your land because your people are cowards who fear truly powerful warriors.” She easily heard him bodily jerk at such an insult to the Æsir but took no pleasure in giving him a much needed truth. “I will tell you something more. The status quo will not be maintained. Either the nine realms will enter a new era, or it will end but change will move swiftly. The amulet that you wear, you do so to remind you of a friendship long dead. Do you expect him to return that friendship when you offer nothing but disrespect?”

Reflexively clutching the necklace around his neck. “I have jested with the prince-…”

His voice trailed off as she turned, presenting him with blue skin and burning red eyes. Her words were a low growl escaping sharp teeth, refusing to label the treacherous undertone in her voice as hurt. “Speak your pretty words now, Æsir. Dare to placate the Jötunn runt before you that you are horrified you’ve been fucking. Do not think that Loki will be any more forgiving if you make your opinions known to him.” Her lip curled in a hollow victory as Fandral’s horror deepened.
“I knew if I waited long enough you would prove yourself no better than the rest of your kind. Fair well, Asgardian.”

Fandral was horrified, but not for the reasons that Hela believed. Hela had always been gorgeous. She didn’t hold typical AEsir beauty but he had always found her ethereal. She was so much more now. The true image of a goddess. Had he truly called such an exquisite, beautiful creature repugnant?

She turned and disappeared through the golden passages, leaving a speechless Fandral in her wake.

Author's Notes:

In spite of G'dath's teachings...in spite of falling in love with Jane...in spite of having children and striving to be a good role model for them, Loki is still an asshole at times and we love him for it ;)

Next:

A confrontation with Odin long overdue
Chapter 46

ALFHEIM

Jane couldn’t say what pulled her from her sleep but she was suddenly awake and staring at the ceiling. At some point she was curious if Loki was just going to create a third bedroom but she wasn’t brave enough to ask. Because thoughts and questions like that led to other questions about him sharing a room with her. Sleeping next to her. She would gladly volunteer to be the little spoon to his big spoon. And other big…

Jane kicked off the covers and squirmed as her face flushed. She was never getting back to sleep now. Stupid Asgard and its stupid traditions.

She frowned when she heard a creak. Not a normal creak of the house settling but the kind caused by feet crossing floor. Deciding since she wasn’t going back to sleep soon she’d check to see if one of the children needed a glass of water, she climbed out of bed and opened her door. She doubted if it was Talia. The little girl was a disturbing quiet now that made her prior to Abril’s sentencing before the Senate look like a loud, boisterous child in comparison. She rarely ventured far from Loki’s side. Jane could tell Loki was growing concerned.

Her eyes widened to see a man with white hair slip into the neighboring room and she didn’t think twice to snatch up one of Loki’s throwing knives before charging for the door. A weathered hand reached out and snagged her wrist effortlessly and she started to look into Odin’s blue eye. She dropped the knife, mouth hanging open and he caught it with an easy movement.

He wasn’t dressed in his armor, a simple cloak thrown over robes. He inclined his head towards her in greeting. “Lady Jane.” Her mouth opened, her eyes darting to the three sleeping figures curled together on the bed. “Not to worry, they will sleep the night away peacefully.”

“All-Father…” Throat working, panicking as she quickly resorted to pleading. “You can’t take him. We-Indel needs him. Please! He’ll just waste away in prison-…”

Odin held up his hand to stall her panic. “I have no intention of interfering, but-…I found myself needing to check on him.” After such a close call, to see him well with his own eye.

Jane was clearly afraid for them all, but felt herself calm as Hela’s voice washed over her mind. Fear not, Jane. Let him speak. I am most curious what he has to say but Loki will go nowhere until he wishes it.

She wasn’t certain that Hela was more powerful than Odin but she gained strength from her presence. Brow furrowing, speaking almost to herself. “You knew he was here the whole time.” It wasn’t a question but a realization.

“And I ask that you not tell him, for I fear it will only cause him to run again.” One of the reasons he was here without his son’s knowledge. Nodding to himself as he slowly sat on the edge of the bed, hand reaching out to idly stroke through Loki’s dark locks as if to chase away bad memories. Despite the fact that Loki shouldn’t have noticed, his spelled sleep so deep, his head moved in the direction of his father’s hand and Odin felt years of regret ease and strengthen all at once. A child that rarely touched others, but obviously needed that contact.

He had never been prone to hover over his sons as his late wife had, not since they had both been very little, but now that she was gone the compulsion to protect the family that remained had only
grown stronger. He missed Frigga terribly, probably always would, and he was desperate to preserve what little of her remained. The fact that of both of his sons, Loki had been the boy she had doted on the most only strengthened his need to earn back his child’s love and trust.

His gaze moved from his rather unique son to the two children sleeping next to him. Pride filled him in a way it rarely did. A fine grandson, and if he wasn’t mistaken, a granddaughter as well. Indel was in the middle, thin white hair sticking up in random sections and face serene. Talia was snuggled next to him, her corn-silk colored blond hair out of its usual braid.

Jane frowned to herself, not sure she agreed with that assessment. And then she thought about it. Loki was still hiding something very big about himself from her. And even to those in the village he was friendly with, he was using an assumed name. Odin was right, for a lot of reasons and most of them justified, Loki would run.

The All-Father’s voice pulled her from her thoughts. “With his mother…gone, I knew there was nothing in Asgard that could help him recover. I had hoped that perhaps some time left to himself would speed matters along…but time is always so very short.”

“You let us escape Asgard.”

Something in his gaze told her he was amused rather than insulted at the assumption to the contrary. “I am the All-father, Lady Jane, and my sons are not nearly as clever as they believe themselves to be.” Jane coughed a laugh behind her hand. “Thor would do what he thought best with or without my blessing, so I provided neither.”

“And when Loki pretended to die…”

He nodded and completed the thought. “I understood the circumstances better than his brother, so I did not correct the assumption of his death. Asgard will continue to mourn her prince until he is ready to be found.”

Jane frowned as she asked, “Does Asgard mourn? I was under a different impression.”

Odin sighed softly. “As perceptive as Loki is, he seems to have an inability to perceive the truth for the good when it is in his direction. There are a great many in Asgard who mourn his loss…” His eye told her he was one of them. “The boy has helped him rediscover his heart but he needed a push, and then I thought of you.”

And the pieces all fell into place. She knew someone had tampered with the arch. It was too obvious. And she did believe Loki’s claim of innocence, especially after he explained why going to earth was out of the question. But it did leave her asking the question of who would have anything to gain in her being here. “You manipulated the wormhole.”

“Loki is not the only one skilled in magic.”

Huffing to herself. “But why would you want me anywhere near your son? I felt like you-…”

She blushed and ducked her head. “Didn’t approve of you?” She looked up in surprise at his question but she shouldn’t be. Odin was blunt, much as Thor was. “You are very perceptive, but it is not a personal dislike.”

Frowning softly. “Then why…”

Her mortal upbringing was only one of many factors. Even as an immortal she would never be AEsir or Vanir, never hold the physical strength that would allow for Asgard’s respect. He believed in love,
but he was a practical king who knew that what Asgard needed had to come first. The same was true of his sons. Thor held the gift of inspiring fealty and the respected battle skills necessary for AE{sir} rulership while Loki held power and intellect. His youngest would be a more beneficial king for Asgard’s future but in the end he’d decided that the positives of Loki ruling weren’t significant enough to balk the tradition of the eldest assuming the mantle. Odin nodded to himself. “Thor is to one day be king of Asgard, a privilege and a burden. He must have a shield maiden at his side who is an equal counterpart, a warrior the people respect who is also a queen. Do you see yourself able to fit that role?”

Tucking a lose strand of her hair behind her ear. “No.”

Nodding. “A wise assessment, which is why I felt you and he were an ill-fit match.” He studied her for a moment, face unreadable. “I can return you to Midgard, if you so choose.”

Jane blinked in surprise. G’dath had asked her what her response would be if the way back to earth presented itself. She couldn’t answer at the time. She could go back? Pick up where she left off, pick up her research now that she knew the arch worked…and do what? Research and watch someone else leap through the arch to exciting new worlds. Leave Indel and Talia and Loki and go back to her boring, nothing life instead of…

She felt her heart break and reform in the same instant. No. She’d finally been given a dream of a future she hadn’t known she’d wanted until she’d met the man who could give it to her. Not just of what he could do and what he knew, but a life with a man who was challenging and brilliant and aggravating and loving. He made her head spin and her emotions burn. He brought her to life. He was a pain in the ass and she couldn’t imagine spending the rest of her life without him in it.

She was in love with him. Such a simple word for something so profound. Not just in love with him, but the type of love that she’d only read about in books and fairytales. An emotion deep and meaningful enough that she loved him more than she loved herself. “No.” Odin blinked at her. Shaking her head firmly. “I’m staying with Loki.” It felt right and her heart throbbed with joy. “I’ll return to earth only if he’s going there…” Smiling a little. “…which I doubt is any time soon.”

He approved of her courage and her loyalty. “And the boy?”

Eyes narrowing, protective emotions she couldn’t even label making them the color of amber. Not just his boy, their boy. Her boy. “If you do anything to that little boy it will be a race to see who tries to kill you first.”

By the Norns what have I done? Any child the two of them created would be absolutely frightening. Still, he couldn’t have asked for a better match. Both of them highly intelligent. Both of them passionate, Loki’s was just a carefully guarded passion. Her wisdom to combat Loki’s foolishness. Her kind nature to temper Loki’s selfishness. A nature that could finally give Loki the acceptance he’d been so desperately searching for all his life. Odin allowed a very small smile to cross his face to reassure her he meant the child no ill will.

His gaze moved to the children again but his hand remained. “I am aware of your actions to save Loki’s life, which makes you more than worthy of Asgard, but your strength is not as a warrior. You are an intellectual. That is not to say that you are not brave, but you would be a strategist, a negotiator, an innovator. As soon as I met you, I knew you would be a more suited match for my youngest. Loki is intelligent but unwise. Cunningly adaptive but stubborn to a fault…but then he takes after me in that regard.” Instead of annoyance as she might expect, she got the impression Odin was proud. “You will challenge him and my hope is you will remind him of the man he used to be.” Odin shook his head slightly, gazing down at Loki who looked so young and peaceful in sleep. “Time is such a vicious adversary. You think you have all the time in the world. I wanted so much
for my sons…and suddenly you realize all your good intentions were for naught. Hopefully Loki is wiser with Indel than I was with him.”

“Wiser?”

He seemed to speak distantly as he answered her question, as if he were focused on an event a few years ago. “We tell ourselves to keep secrets to protect innocence. We tell ourselves that things are hidden to spare feelings but when a truth is discovered that cuts too deeply, there is a fallout. I am afraid Jötunheim and your world suffered because a truth was hidden from Loki for far too long.”

Jane looked like she was about to ask but didn’t as Odin smiled slightly, rubbed his thumb affectionately across his son’s forehead, and rose. “It is not my truth to tell. I can only tell you that this truth, when you discover it, is at the core of his heartbreak. If you can somehow manage to mend what has been broken, you will have Asgard’s gratitude.”

Inching towards them protectively as she asked for clarification, “And then what? Banishment? The loss of his powers if he ever returns to Asgard?” She knew it would kill Loki to lose his magic. She wasn’t sure about it literally harming him but it would devastate him, possibly beyond recovery.

Odin’s tired smile had a tinge of sadness. He’d more than earned her mistrust, and he knew Loki would be even harder to convince. “That will be for my son to decide. If he can heal, there will be no need to protect him from himself and…he has been punished enough. Perhaps too much.” Nodding slowly to himself. “Yes…too much…” He walked quietly for the door. “All that he needs, all that he ever needed, was acceptance.”

“Why couldn’t he find that in Asgard?” She slapped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide in shock.

He glanced at her, a spark of pain in his blue eye even if he knew her question didn’t come from a malicious place. “Because even those ancient and wise…can be foolish.”

The distance from the bedroom door to the front door was only a matter of a few feet. He opened and closed that last barrier quietly, turned on the porch and sighed. Hela was staring at him with deadly intent and arms crossed. “Hela.”

Not moving an inch. “Odin.” Her eyes narrowed. “If you ruin everything I will help Thanos burn Asgard to the ground.”

“Ruin what, Hela, what bedevilment are you concocting?”

As if I would tell you. Her lip curled from her teeth as she asked almost rhetorically, “What do you care? Are you not content now that there are no tricksters on Asgardian soil to muck things up?”

Voice rumbling. “I am the All-father-…”

Snapping at him impatiently. “You’re a tired old man who has the communication skills of a newt.”

Blinking once at her, distracted from his ire. “You are fixated on reptiles this year.”

Smiling reluctantly at him. “Maybe.” Then her eyes flashed coldly, as mercurial in her moods as her father. “Manners, Odin. You and your son need to work on that. How is it that someone so politically skilled, so indulgent in other customs…who manages to speak politely to mortals forgets himself so easily around us?”

“I will not hold mortals responsible for knowing court protocol.”

She nodded slowly. “Ah. I see. So because we are not inferior we are not deserving of courtesy.”
“There is still a certain decorum that both you and Loki are well aware of and ignoring it is an intentional insult.”

She ticked the point off with her finger, giving him a blank look. “One, I have no interest in speaking to the king of Asgard. As far as I’m concerned, he’s a blind, arrogant fool who I have no use for.”

Odin rumbled with authoritative displeasure. “Hela.”

She crossed her arms and shrugged. “It is painfully obvious to all that the king of Asgard places no value on either of us. Deny it.”

“Acknowledgement does not satisfy—…”

She cut him off more viciously than she’d intended, “Why should it? Your acknowledgement is useless. Is it not you who said that a king does not make mistakes?”

“Aye.” Odin nodded stiffly as he confirmed this.

“A father, however, makes many mistakes. Yet pride will not allow you to account for those mistakes. Loki will acknowledge nothing so long as you refuse to admit to your culpability. You place more value on pride than on the love of a son, therefore, we have no value.” Her expression showed victory that her point had been made, but it was a hollow victory. Odin’s face gave nothing away but there was a spark of pain in his blue eye. She held up a second finger. “Two, we are on Alfheim soil so at most you are a king and I am a queen. And despite AEsir chauvinistic opinion as I reign alone we are on equal footing. I might be interested in speaking to Odin but since you have a pathetic track record of listening to queens I probably shouldn’t bother.”

“When have I not listened, Hela? We have not spoken in centuries.”

Snapping at him again, throwing up her arms. “Whose fault is that?” He frowned at her silently. “And I wasn’t talking about myself. Frigga knew Loki better than anyone and you never listened to her.” Odin flinched but he couldn’t deny her words, they cutting as deeply as she’d intended. He hadn’t listened when it concerned his sons, and he was truly regretting it.

She was just like Loki, her words her weapon. As much as it pained him to do it, he pushed the mantle of king to the side. It was a subtle change in his tone, but she still remembered it as he asked, “Can you acknowledge that your love of lies makes it difficult to hear sincerity?”

Her lip twitched, the tension along her spine easing slightly. She trusted Odin the father a hell of a lot more than she trusted Odin the king. “I might be willing to acknowledge that in a decade or two…I make no guarantees about father.”

Odin felt his own lips twitch as he asked, “What is it you would speak to me regarding?”

Crossing her arms. “I just want this confirmed: did you tell Thor you would be attempting his coronation again?”

He frowned but responded truthfully. “I have other matters on my mind at the moment.”

Raising an eyebrow at him as she asked, “Jötunheim?” He silently nodded and she nodded in return. “Since I have a feeling this needs to be said I will: if you attempt Thor’s coronation while matters between you and Loki are unsettled I will be displeased.”

“Hela, what do you want?”
She squared her shoulders. “To settle a matter, first and foremost.” Odin stared at Hela in surprise, his left hand reflexively holding his bruised right shoulder. Her eyes flashed again. “I have never in my life encountered such an idiot. You managed to surpass Thor so…bravo.” She started clapping sarcastically.

Voice rumbling with anger, demanding an explanation, “What is the meaning of this?”

“The words were from me, the punch was from Frigga. Whatever games in court you play, you knew that she would want Loki at her funeral rites.” She gave him a nasty sneer. “Don’t worry, I’m sure father will have his own anger to express.” Crossing her arms in a huff. “Now onward to the rest. The bracelets were my biggest contention. Your ability to communicate with Loki my greatest concern.”

“Loki never has issue in speaking his mind.”

Fists clenching, keeping her arms crossed to resist the temptation to reach out and shake him. “But you don’t hear him. You hear sentences and you pick and choose what you will listen to. You pay attention to what was done but not why.”

“Actions speak the loudest.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Actions. Do you really want to focus on actions because there are certain ones you have committed, just in recent memory, I would love to discuss with you.” Odin’s mouth opened, then closed. “I didn’t think so.”

Rumbling softly. “Then what would you have me do, Hela, the past is what it is—…”

“Apologize!” Odin was taken aback, her unrestrained scream in that moment an echo of Loki’s devastation when he learned the truth of his origins and lost all control over his emotions. “Cast aside your pride, which means more to you than your family, and admit to your mistakes.” Her fists trembled at her sides. “I don’t care about me, but you owe him at the very least that much.” Odin shook his head slightly. “Don’t you understand anything?? He has a right to be angry. Hurt. He should want to gut you for the lies that not only gave him a physical reason for why he was mistreated, but confirmed that you don’t care about him. That you don’t even like him, let alone love him.” Pointing a shaking finger at him. “Say them. Say the words.” Roaring the truth without allowing himself a second thought. “Of course I love my son.”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously, studying him for far too long before slowly nodding. “If you tell him that, then I’ll forgive you.” Her eyes flashed. “And if you dangle chains in front of him again—…”

“He has been exonerated, Hela, save your threats for someone truly afraid of you. Were he to return this very evening he would do so as a free man.”

Crossing her arms. “Fine.”

Unable to hide how deeply troubled he was to even ask this question, “Will he return?”

Her head tilted just a little, measuring the sorrow she could see. Enough sorrow and regret that not even pride could keep Odin away anymore. “Yes. He will fight to save Asgard.”

“That—…that is good.” It wasn’t what he meant, but he stopped himself from saying more.

Hela exhaled slowly through her nose, an impatient look on her face. “You exiled Thor once for
arrogance. You should have condemned yourself to the same punishment for pride.” Odin seemed to struggle within himself and in the end he said nothing. Her lips thinned, speaking what he wouldn’t allow himself to say. “Will he stay is the question you really want to ask. And the answer depends on what you do with the time you have. He might, if you make it clear enough that you want him there. I can say this much, welcoming him officially and then ignoring him isn’t going to cut it. You have to have a real conversation, with words, or he’ll just assume the worst as he always does and he’ll leave at the earliest opportunity with his family. And no, if you screw this up I won’t interfere again.”

Odin knew by the tone of the conversation and the late hour she expected him to take his leave. He walked up to her slowly, not wary for his sake but her own. He held out his arm in silent invitation. “Walk with me to the Bi-frost site.”

After a moment she nodded silently her acceptance, slipping her arm through his as regally as any queen being escorted. She went without fuss, the pair of them walking through the barrier surrounding the house. “I know you want to, but you can’t visit him again. He has to come to you.”

“Why the games, Hela?”

“He knows about your interference in sending Jane to him.” Odin stiffened but didn’t bother denying it. “Right now he’s waiting, expecting any day now you will send an edict demanding his return. Or you’ll just send Thor. You have to wait until he’s ready.”

His brow furrowed as he asked, “Why is he afraid of me?”

She shot him a look that needed no explanation. But then subtly it changed into a frown. “He’s not. Not really. He’s afraid of what will happen to Indel if Asgard learns his heir is a dark elf.”

Odin nodded slowly, beginning to understand. “He truly is a magnificent father, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he is.” She didn’t say it out loud, she just thought it very hard. Especially compared to the paternal examples he had. She stopped suddenly, staring at him. “You know, don’t you?”

“I do not know what you mean.”

She stared at him, her knowing eyes focused, picking him apart. He stared right back without flinching. It all added up in her mind suddenly. His easy acceptance that Indel was half dark elf as well as Loki’s son. He knew how Indel had been born and she felt herself thaw a little towards Odin. A typical AEsir would have disowned both Loki and Indel in the interest of protecting the family from scorn or worse. That Odin was more than willing to maintain the secret of Indel’s true birth spoke more clearly of love than the old king had ever been able to express. Idly she wondered if Odin would weather the political storm should it become known how Indel had been born. But it was a curiosity too dangerous to her brother to ever satisfy. Not to mention even Thor’s popularity might not be able to overcome it and ruin his ability to rule. Instead she cast about for something further to say. “You do realize Loki and I react alike to many of the same situations.”

“I am well aware the pair of you have vicious tongues.” She smirked since it was true.

But then her smirk slipped as she thought of a childhood centuries ago. Mumbling under her breath. “He likes hugs.” Odin paused to look at her strangely and she shrugged. “What?”

He shook his head slightly. “Loki has fought being held by Thor for centuries-…”

Rolling her eyes at him. “Thor hugs like a boa constrictor. You give good hugs.” Her voice took an imperious turn. “If you’re to be a good father, he requires more of them.”
Frowning thoughtfully as he asked, “Is that the truth or a deception to torment your father?”

Grinning and delighted he remembered that was one of her favorite games. “What do you think?”

He studied her for a moment before grumbling gruffly. “Very well.”

She looked over at him, frowning gently at the pain she could see and it didn’t all have to do with the possibility of losing Loki. “I’m sorry about grandmother.”

Odin would never cease to be amazed at the strange contradictions that made up Hela’s nature. Much like Loki, who could dispense death coldly without a care and yet be so loving in the next instant. “As am I.”

She slipped free just as the Bi-frost markings came into view and he knew she would erase them so Loki would never know he was here. As he stepped within her soft voice reached him. “He loves you…” Odin turned, feeling something catch in his throat, realizing she wasn’t just talking about Loki. What followed threatened to break his heart all over again. “…he just stopped believing that you love him.”

“Why?”

She looked thoughtful for a moment. “Because of something I said once I suppose…and it turned out to be true.” He kept listening so she continued and even he could see the wistfulness in her eyes. “Odin will do what is best for Asgard, even if it’s not best for us.” Before he could ask what she meant by that. Before he could deny it. Before he could apologize—he was swept away by the Bi-frost. Then a slow, trickster smile spread across her face. “…not to worry, father, you won’t have to believe that for too much longer…”

With a sweeping gesture the runes faded from sight, and so did she.

Author's Notes:

I've read a lot of fics where Odin is an ogre and enjoyed them all. This time I wanted to give a different spin of a heavily flawed father with too much pride who, as Hela said, has the communication skills of a newt.

Next:

Heart break comes in many forms; Helblindi and Odin chat
Talia hadn’t spoken a word since Utterow had snatched away Abril, her mother. As much as Loki appreciated a quiet child, he knew this wasn’t a good silence. Not when the silence had stretched from days to weeks. She was listless and only wanted to curl into his arms and sleep.

As much as he loved Indel, his boy was an attention seeker and what she needed was his focus. He planned to take as long as needed, currently leaning back in the branches of a tree not horribly far from the under-forest with the elfling in his lap. He had a very specific warming spell wrapped around the both of them so there wouldn’t be the risk of a chill.

This little one was the exact opposite of him in many ways and it was a struggle for him to figure out what he could do to help her. She shut down where he would react by exploding. She was undemanding while he thrived on attention, and gained it in creative ways. She was an artist while he was a logical creature.

Not surprising Jane had been more than understanding. She’d been a bundle of other emotions after hearing what had happened: shocked, saddened, angry; but she’d made it clear she’d look after Indel until they returned. And as shocking as he found it, he wasn’t even a little bit nervous leaving Indel in her care. He’d left Mischief with them in case of an emergency, not because he didn’t trust her.

They’d been here for a few hours now, and he’d brought enough supplies that they could be here for several days if needed. Talia’s face snuggled into his neck a little more firmly, unavoidably though intentionally breathing in his scent. The little fingers of one of her hands played with his ear, tracing along the rounded exterior. Loki stared off in the distance before inspiration struck. “I lost my mother recently.” The fingers paused. “She was the most beautiful woman in all the nine realms. There was a time when I lived for her smile, would conquer the impossible to make her laugh. She had an enchanting voice and I would sneak into her garden after I was supposed to be in bed just to listen to her sing.”

Voice nothing more than a whisper on the wind. “What did she look like?”

Loki smiled a little just thinking about Frigga. “She had beautiful golden hair like yours, and eyes as blue as the ocean. But for all her grace and beauty she was a fierce AEsir warrior and it just made me love her more.” She was his mother and he would never again say differently.

“How do people die?”

How he wished he had the answer to a question like then. Because then he might find a way to stop it. Rubbing her back with the palm of his hand. “I don’t know. We wish they didn’t, but they do. And we miss them, it hurts. It feels like a fist punched a hole in our heart and nothing good will ever happen again.” But he had to find a way to inspire her to move on. This was not his forte. Not at all. He didn’t think or feel this way, his mind always focused on the brutal reality that life was a series of disappointments…and then you die. So he imagined if Frigga were here reassuring a small trickster and envisioned what she might say. “But it will. It takes time but eventually the hurt is less. I will always miss her, but I wouldn’t change knowing her to make that go away.”

“Did you cry?”
He nodded slowly, reluctantly. “Yes, and it’s alright to cry. Warriors—…” He paused to consider his words again. She was an elf, not an AEsir. He would train her to defend herself just as he would Indel, but he didn’t think her interest would go beyond that. Her small hand tugged at his own until his fingers were brushing lightly against her ear and she sighed softly in contentment. “There is nothing wrong with crying. You see, the people in Valhalla can look down on us. To shed tears tells them they will be missed.”

“No elves go to Valhalla?”

Brow furrowing slightly. “All creatures who are worthy may enter.”

She pulled at his jacket until it was near to enveloping her before she asked, “Was she?”

He doubted it, but he didn’t think she would be considered wicked either so Hela would probably find a place for her in Helheim. Still, as blunt as he could sometimes be, he wasn’t about to tell a little girl that her mother wasn’t worthy of Valhalla. “I like to think so.”

Talia’s fingers gripped his jacket tighter. “I wanna stay with you.”

Kissing the top of her head, understanding now what her worry was. He’d expected sorrow. It would be a normal reaction but this complete withdrawal was foreign and strange to him. “You may.”

She pulled back a little, her summer-sky eyes swimming with tears. “Forever?”

Sharing a smile with her, rubbing her cheekbone with his thumb and thinking of another girl he’d made the same promise to. “That is what fathers do, they keep their daughters forever.”

She smiled as the tears slipped free and cried into his chest. Loki held her a little tighter. Her tears were a much needed catharsis but he would be here for as long as the storm lasted. But eventually it would pass. His daughter would be alright.

ALFHEIM

Time heals all wounds, but more so when dealing with small children. But then with the limited time she’d spent with her mother in the last two years the reaction was even more understandable. Two weeks later showed a much improved Talia. She was still quiet and she sought Loki out often to be held but she’d again joined Indel for playing and general mischief.

“When do we get presents, dada?”

Talia shot Indel an excited look before looking to the adults. Jane sent up a silent thank you to Azni who had been kind enough to warn her about two very important dates for a young AEsir child: their name day, similar to a human birthday; and New Year’s Eve, which celebrated another year of living with exchanging gifts amongst family members.

Thankfully both children wouldn’t be celebrating their name day until months from now. “On New Year’s Eve.”

Indel squealed happily. “Maybe I’ll get a puppy!”

Jane shot Loki a quick look who subtly shook his head. Indel may have his heart set on a dog but Loki knew a pet would be impractical, at least for now. He would give in eventually.
Talia squeezed her eyes shut, lips moving as she mumbled and Indel clapped as a large pair of glittering, orange wings appeared on her back. She looked left and right, trying to see behind her before running for the mirror. Grinning, her tongue stuck in the corner of her mouth, she tried to make her wings move. Jane was giggling in delight as Loki came up behind Talia and gently pushed at the two wings. She gasped, feeling new muscles move and concentrated harder until she could move them without assistance.

“I want wings, dada, I wanna fly!”

Chucking him under the chin. “She can’t fly with her wings, they’re just for show.” Talia skipped around the room and Indel shrank into a kitten before chasing her.

Jane frowned thoughtfully. “Could she?”

Loki paused for a moment to consider the feasibility. “Not without several spells that I will not go into detail now since little ears are listening.” They both looked down at Indel who had paused in his playing, cat ears pricked to listen. His ears flattened against his head before he hissed at Loki. The trickster raised an eyebrow at his son. “You are near to convincing me you are in need of a nap. Pray continue.”

Indel started to skulk away, Talia skipping by and picking him up with a giggle before continuing to flutter around the room. Jane was frowning now. “What’s wrong with those spells?”

“Something to lighten one’s bones could break them. All of them.”

Jane shuddered at the very thought before remembering what she was going to ask. “Will Hela be here early for New Year’s Eve?”

Loki closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. “She won’t come.”

Blinking in shock. “What? But-…but Azni said New Year’s Eve was a very important day.”

Nodding slowly in agreement, wishing things were different. “It is. Every year I invite her since Indel was born and every year she refuses.”

“Why?”

Shaking his head slowly. “It’s complicated, unfortunately.”

“Then un-complicate it for me.” Jane looked back to watch the children pretend that every third board on the floor was a stone and all others were molten lava, hopping from board to board. Loki’s lips pressed together, Jane taking the hint that this wasn’t a topic he wanted to discuss in a room filled with little ears. “She’s never even met Indel, has she?”

“She already-…”

She held up her hand to cup the side of his face, thumb brushing over his cheekbone. He
immediately forgot all about speaking, content to nuzzle her palm and close his eyes. Jane felt her insides just melt but kept her head, speaking quietly. “By the lake or on the path, maybe.” Loki paused to frown at her, eyebrow quirked in a question. Jane grinned. “And the two of us can convince her.” Loki felt an echoing grin tug at his lips.

MIDGARD

Hela had no idea how long she’d been wandering. It hadn’t started out that way. She’d been doing what she had planned, trying to locate Amora. But the plan had been abandoned and she’d flitted from planet to planet and realm to realm. She didn’t stay for long. She didn’t speak to anyone. She just moved, even if she had no idea why.

She couldn’t go back to Helheim, the halls of the dead too much for her. Even though most had forgotten, or had never known in the first place, she wasn’t dead. She watched over them, but she was as alive as any other. It was tempting to join them. Tempting to give in and truly become one of them. To have somewhere that she completely belonged. But if she did that she’d never be able to leave, for the dead did not leave their eternity. There were exceptions to that rule, of course, but she’d never be given such a luxury.

She even considered going back to Alfheim but she knew Loki had his hands full at the moment. Days to her were weeks to him and after Helheim received Abril Hela knew his focus would be for little Talia.

She had no idea what was wrong with her. She was restless. Her mind and heart swirling and colliding. She had things to do. She was supposed to do something. She couldn’t think and she didn’t want to. So she’d ventured to this mortal planet to find what she needed. She continued to physically move to avoid thinking and feeling. She followed the rhythm and beat of the song.

The sea of bodies moved around her like a current of water, instinctively wrapping around her seductive presence. Fingers and hands and flesh pressed in around her and she moved with them, eyes closed and head tilted back as she joined the pulse of life. So long since she’d been part of a people…much too long.

OUTSIDE OF THE NINE REALMS

“Elf.”

Malekith almost snapped at Thanos before catching himself. A king among dark elves, reduced in title to his species. How the mighty have fallen. He couldn’t wait for the earliest opportunity to stab a dagger in the idiotic titan’s eye. It was the same question the titan always asked and Malekith had the same answer. “We’re making progress, slowly but markedly.”

Thanos walked the distance towards the dark elf. Every living thing on this planet was dead, once he had his gem it was time to move to retrieve the others and finally, finally, he would have a sacrifice worthy for his beloved. “What delays our progress?”

Glancing at the Titan before turning his attention to the entrance to the underground catacombs. “Your machine cut through the rock with ease, but the drones are now combing through a set of catacombs.”

The Titan ground his teeth in irritation. It was always something small and seemingly inconsequential that proved to be the biggest obstacle of late. First the Jötunn runt and now this.
“These delays are unacceptable. The Gem of Reality should have been mine weeks ago. Send more Skrull into the tunnels.”

It took a great deal of effort for Malekith to keep his tone even. “The last reserve disappeared two hours ago—…”

Snapping at him in irritation. “I don’t care if you have to conquer every species in this realm and send them to their deaths in those tunnels. Bring me my gem, Malekith.”

“My lord.”

Both elf and titan turned as a Skrull soldier approached them. Thanos frowned slightly. “What is it?”

The soldier bowed deeply, fairly quivering. “Apologies, sire, but the commander is confident in her reply.”

Smiling in delight. Ah, his loyal Other. Always so useful. He had been particularly pleased to see the AEsir gift his minion gave him. She had been a weak little thing, nothing like the Jötunn runt. It had taken months to break the runt. This little girl took only a matter of hours. Asking in malicious eagerness, “Which is?”

The AEsir’s fear had been delightful, and the pain she had endured thus far had been painfully delicious. She had broken so easily, not that it saved her from a moment of exquisite torture.

“The Jötunn runt lives.”

Now a hungry, greedy look lighted Thanos’ eyes. Malekith looked only mildly interested. “Do we know where?”

“Unfor-…”

Thanos gestured dismissively and with another bow the soldier departed. “No matter. If he lives then I truly will be able to offer a magnificent sacrifice to death’s glory.” Thanos turned slowly, looking over the elf again. He knew this one’s weakness. A destructive creature who delighted in the pain of others. Particularly if that other party was AEsir. “Malekith, find me enough slaves to search the catacombs and the AEsir witch is yours.”

Malekith grinned maliciously.

MIDGARD

“Sir?”

Tony really didn’t want to move. For reasons that currently eluded him Pepper was avoiding him the way he avoided boardroom meetings and he’d drunk himself into a stupor. He frowned and stared dully at the ceiling, flinching away as the lights slowly turned on. Grabbing a pillow and yanking it over his face. “Knock it off, JARVIS.”

“Apologies-…”

Hand shaking, reaching out from his position on the sofa to snag a pair of shades balanced precariously on the coffee table. There was a small collection of empty bottles, a half eaten pizza…
and a rubber chicken. He couldn’t remember why he’d needed that last night and he wasn’t going to try to figure it out. “Lights at lowest setting.” The command was obeyed even as he sat up with a groan. He looked out the windows, then groaned louder. It was the middle of the freaking night. Tony had planned to ignore JARVIS again but sighed instead. “Yeah, JARVIS, what is it?”

“You requested I inform you if your colleague Gorgeous becomes noticed through official channels, sir.”

That got Tony’s attention and he pushed himself quickly to his feet, thankful he was hung over and not drunk. “Shit. How official a channel are we talking, JARVIS?”

“SHIELD, sir.”

Tony nodded. That was official enough. Even with the threat of those devices aside, Fury hadn’t rescinded the order for her to be brought in for questioning. Tossing aside his shades and making his way to the lab. “Suit me up and feed me her location. Who’s on the way and how long do I have?”

JARVIS’s voice drifted through the stairwell as Tony almost jogged to the lab door and pushed it open. “Agent Barton and Captain Rogers are scheduled to intercept but…the flight pattern is irregular.”

Tony grinned as he stepped onto the platform, his suit assembling over his frame. “Tweety, I owe you some fuck-awesome exploding arrows. He’s trying to buy her some time to slip away. Alright, lets rock and roll.”

The music throbbed through the hidden underground club, the Russian emos jerking and grinding to the heavy beat. He’d gotten plenty of glances but the sea of people parted for him. Tony moved in, not even the noisy clunking of his suit could be heard over the din. And in the center there she was, wrapped like a serpent around her partners. Men. Women. It didn’t matter, they were all drawn to her.

For a moment he was distracted by the way that she moved, a level of flexibility that he found intriguing. But then he saw her face. He knew that look. Hell, he’d lived that look. A thousand and more nights of drinking and selecting faceless bodies to help him through the dark hours. He didn’t know the story, but he knew heart break when he saw it.

Hela turned, lips curled from her teeth like a predator as she saw him. Brushing aside hands and arms around her, she approached. She slinked up to him, a hand gripping the shoulder of his suit tight enough he could hear the metal creak. She spoke softly, yet he easily heard her. “Dance with me.”

He was tempted. In spite of being in a dedicated relationship with Pepper he was very tempted. It wasn’t just her body, although it was perfection. It was her mind. A steel trap and, ego aside, more intelligent than he was. The visor of his suit was already lifted so she would know it was him. “We need to get out of here before SHIELD shows up.”

Her eyes flashed black. “Let them come…”

He blinked once. “Yeah-no. Not gonna happen-…”

Her head tilted to the door behind him, her smile widening to reveal lethal teeth as Hela anticipated blood being shed. “You have no choice, mortal, for death is inevitable.”
Tony got a bad feeling about this. Flirting with danger was one thing, but Gorgeous seemed a little too eager to jump into the fray. What made it worse was he wasn’t entirely sure if it was because she had a death wish…or she really just wanted to kill someone. “Hey, I’m Tony Stark, there’s always a choice. Right now I think we could both use a drink-…”

She tried to turn away dismissively. “What would you know about anything?”

He wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her against his armor. He sucked at reassuring people but if it kept Gorgeous from going on a rampage he’d try. “You think I haven’t had my heart shattered into a billion pieces?” She looked up, her mask of sensuous disdain masking a broken heart. “I’ve been where you’re at.”

Her expression turned cold, finger lightly trailing up his suit and down again. “I see, so you offer me a cure for my misery.”

He pushed her back just enough to grasp her wandering hand. He couldn’t feel a thing through the suit but he had a point to make before she got the wrong idea. “I’m offering to get you so drunk you won’t even remember your own name, let alone anyone else’s.”

If Hela were in a better state she might be surprised at his uncharacteristic restraint. She stiffened, the cold shifting to angry heat. “Touch me and you will beg me to kill you before I am through with you.”

Sounding indignant. “Hey! I don’t sleep with every woman I bring home.” She gave him a disbelieving look and he smirked. “Okay, I do, but scouts honor. I like everything on my body exactly where it is.”

Thinking back to the pathetic stock he kept in his bar. “If you intend to get me drunk what you stock will need to be a lot stronger.”

Smiling winningly, thrusting his most charming grin in her face. “Sweetheart, don’t worry. I can get you drunk.”

“SHIELD is here, sir.”

He turned as Clint entered, followed by Steve, her voice drifting in his direction. “I’ll meet you there.”

He pivoted back in her direction but she was already gone.

JÖTUNHEIM

The delegates from Asgard arrived at the meeting place on time. An informal gathering first, so the two kings could get a feel for one another. Odin didn’t like the idea of venturing into the throne room of Jötunheim and Helblindi refused to allow the AEsir near his vulnerable village. Thor stood at Odin’s side, Mjolnir at the ready. Sif, Fandral, Volstagg, and Hogan all with weapons in hand but sheathed. And surrounding them were 10 guardsmen.

AEsir eyes sharpened as five frost giants walked slowly across the barren stretch of ice. Four warriors surrounded the king in the middle. Fandral looked over each one carefully, noticing what he hadn’t before. In spite of similar coloring, the markings and facial features of these Jötunn all looked unique, much as his own race. She was right, they were a people and it felt like a blow to the sternum. *Is this why Hela assumes I can’t accept her as she is?*
King Helblindi had a strong resemblance to Laufey, just not as tall. Thor shifted warily but he was determined to maintain his decorum this time, to prove to his father that he could interact with the frost giants without igniting another incident. The Jötunn stopped and Helblindi nodded slightly in acknowledgement. “King Odin.”

Odin nodded in return. “King Helblindi.”

“You honor us with your presence.”

Odin felt his spine stiffen. So, Loki’s biology was the source of that sarcastic tone. It had been a theory of his for centuries now. Ignoring Helblindi’s subtle jibe as easily as he ignored his son when he spoke that way. “As your previous king, Laufey, declared war between Jötunheim and Asgard, I am here to arrange for a return to peace between our two peoples with you, King Helblindi.”

Helblindi laughed without humor and shook his head. He knew why Odin was here, but it was still laughable once uttered. “What is the point of peace gestures when we are nothing more than a conquered people, wasting away as our planet erodes to nothing?”

Odin tilted his head forward slightly. “With peace, trade agreements may be opened between the realms once more.”

What mask of false humor Helblindi had worn now fell away. “And what do we trade, King Odin? Your lovely attire and shining armor is no doubt new daily. What you see on our backs is the entirety of our wardrobe.”

The older king was well aware of how impoverished the Jötunn were, another reason that he was here. “I offered compensation for the damage done to your world.”

Helblindi growled softly, looking insulted. “You offered to send your second son here for exile as a punishment but how did that benefit my people, except to force us to feed yet another, to clothe yet another? How is that compensation when you and your first born are to blame for staying his hand of mercy?”

Thor was thrown, both at Helblindi’s words as well as his father’s actions. Father had intended to send Loki to this forsaken land in punishment for his actions on the Bi-frost? Thor didn’t step closer, but his question carried, “You want to die?”

Odin didn’t even turn towards his son. “Thor.”

The frost giant’s eyes turned to Thor. “We want this stagnation to end. Good or ill it must end and all other alternatives are cruel.”

Bristling and snarling, Thor hefted Mjolnir reflexively. “The All-father is not cruel.” The warriors all stepped closer but Odin held up his hand to stay them.

Helblindi smirked in triumph and it was a vaguely familiar pull of the lip. “I did not say that he was, thunderer, it is you who misinterpreted my words. The most vocal denials tend to lend themselves back to truth.”

Thor took a step, eyes narrowing as the Jötunn guards stepped around Helblindi. Sif and the Warriors three instantly moved around Thor, weapons now out and in hand. “You will retract your words.”

Smirk growing in amusement. “You will attempt to order me, a king, when not on your
“I am-…”

“THOR.” Thor froze before realizing he had in effect done exactly what he had promised himself he wouldn’t do. He turned to regard his father who was not happy.

Helblindi looked at Odin, dismissing the AEsrir prince. “I will speak with you monarch to monarch.” An ancient custom but one that a man of honor must heed. Thor moved to object but a severe look from Odin and he subsided. Positions reversed, Thor knew he would have expected the same. Odin and Helblindi walked away, enough so they could not be overheard. “So that is to be Asgard’s future king.”

Odin would always defend his son and felt every muscle in his body tense, a deep rumble in his voice. “And I suppose you were born to rule.”

Helblindi shrugged loosely, unconcerned that he was intentionally trying to get a rise out of the AEsrir. “I am the second son, but with my brother dead there was no choice.”

“What happened to your brother?”

You should know. Helblindi felt a flash of pain though he hid it. “Laufey left him to die instead of taking him into the caverns as he should until he grew stronger. And yourself? What has become of your second born?”

“He perished in defense of his brother.”

Something knowing sparked in Helblindi’s eyes, hearing the lie most couldn’t. With that one lie Helblindi knew that Odin was well aware that Loki lived. But he didn’t focus on that just yet, needing a different question answered first. “Why do you speak of a hollow peace, Odin? Asgard is the least of our concerns in comparison to starvation and surviving the coming winter.”

Odin gave this young king another assessing glance. Intelligent, articulate, and proud. In fact in many ways this man may have the resemblance of his father, but he held Loki’s strengths. “You are very different from your father.”

“I only match him in appearance. Farbauti, our mother, influenced our personalities.”

Frowning, not familiar with that name. “She-…”

“Died over a century ago. It was a vicious storm that took many.”

Odin nodded slightly to Helblindi, his tone sincere. “My condolences for your loss. May she find peace in Valhalla.” Helblindi doubted that was her face but he kept his peace. “I can offer a wergild for my son’s actions when there is peace between our realms.”

Helblindi stared at Odin for several seconds before nodding slowly to himself. “Have your second son negotiate with me and I will agree.”

Blinking rapidly. “I told you-…”

Interrupting the AEsrir king, eyes amused. “Farbauti is most famous amongst her people for knowing instantly truth from lie…a trait she passed on to her sons.” That knowing smirk again appeared, Odin now realizing yet another gift of Loki’s was shared by Helblindi. “We’re not going anywhere, King Odin. I’ll wait to speak with Asgard’s second son.”
Eye glinting and casting aside the illusion of confusion. “You said once you would kill him, why would I trust you with my son’s life?”

“You have the honor vow of King Helblindi of Jötunheim that I will allow no harm to Loki of Asgard by thought, will, or deed.”

Odin observed him with suspicion. Did he give Helblindi Loki’s name? He didn’t remember doing so. But the vow had been made without deceit and Odin nodded reluctantly. “I will not send him alone.”

Nodding slowly. “Were I to have a child, I would react the same. Any may accompany him, so long as they mean no ill to us.”

Tone warning. “It could be quite some time before anything could be arranged.”

Feeling amused that Loki still hadn’t announced his status among the living, and intrigued by that. “As I said, King Odin, we aren’t going anywhere. We will wait until the prince wishes to make his presence known.” The two kings nodded and rejoined the others. “Your terms are acceptable. Once Asgard has fulfilled their part, peace.”

Helblindi gave a slight, acknowledging nod to Thor before turning and walking slowly back the way he’d come, his guards falling in step around him. Odin didn’t move, watching the young king walk away and filled with contemplation. He was well aware the rest of their party was eager to leave but he was strangely content to remain where he was a moment longer.

Odin wouldn’t chastise Thor too harshly, knowing only too well where this need to prove himself stemmed from. His oldest was in many ways a mirror to his own past, just as he was an echo of his father Bor. He had been placed on the throne at the age that Thor is now, but the need to prove his worth and might burned hotly in his blood. Countless battles, many righteous wars, he was always victorious. And thousands of years later, his title as the All-Father of the nine realms secured and acknowledged, he finally felt his blood lust for battle cool. It was just in time for one last war with Jötunheim and the birth of his sons. Asgard would always answer the call to battle, but he found contentment in peace.

Thor attacking Jötunheim had been about proving himself before Asgard and the other realms and it was a need that he understood only too well. If only his youngest were as easy for him to understand. Thor sent his father a questioning look but Odin ignored it and signaled for Heimdall to open the Bi-frost.

**Author's Notes:**

Perhaps a bit more location jumping than you’re used to but I wanted to make sure that everyone was in the right place for what’s coming up. You’ll just have to stay tuned to find out :)

**Next:**

*The Avengers have a meeting of the minds; Jane decides her future*
Hela blinked slowly, feeling like her stomach was about to crawl out of her mouth...which was filled with cotton. “Ugh...” What by Hel had Stark convinced her to drink? She probably would have been fine with a few drinks, this was made on Midgard after all, but she’d finished off three bottles. He hadn’t been lying, the liquor strong and the company a little too friendly. But he’d kept his word, his hands firmly wrapped around his drink.

So this is what a broken heart feels like. She scowled lightly to herself. Enough. What we had wasn’t even an official anything. Sex and conversation did not love make. She was being ridiculous. Perhaps it was a culmination of a lot of things that had led to this small, selfish breakdown. Fandral was only a small part of it. This was her anniversary after all. The last day she’d stepped foot on Asgard.

She supposed she could pull together a spell to get rid of her hangover, but that required moving and thinking and she would rather just stay here for a little while and wallow. No, she needed to plan and kick her own ass into gear. She had to find Amora; that was first and foremost.

Loki should be warned about that particular problem but just as Odin was skittish in doing something to make Loki bolt so was she. Thanos would make him run. She hadn’t been lying, Loki wasn’t afraid of Odin for himself. It was his children that made him wary of acting, since he knew the Midgardian myths as gruesome as they were of what happened to his offspring were potential reality.

Hela rolled onto her back slowly, staring up at the ceiling. Jane was the key. She knew Loki intended to train Jane to be his shield maiden. Once he had more confidence in her capabilities, his going to Asgard or even Midgard with his family would no longer be this emotional minefield. With his concerns at rest, she could envision two courses he would most probably take. One, he would travel to Midgard to squash the Other, then wait in disguise until Thanos moved against Asgard before stabbing the Titan in the back. Two, he would brazenly go to Asgard and see where the chips fell.

Then she frowned. No, the second was more Thor’s approach.

Sighing, she whispered and passed a hand across her forehead, her pounding headache fading. Better.

Two, he would lure Thanos to Asgard, enlist Thor in a clever ploy and avoid Odin completely.

Huffing to herself she crawled out of the bed in one of Stark’s guest rooms, her clothing appearing on her body as she moved from the bed to the door. Neither was going to work for what she had planned, but one problem at a time. She would drop by Alfheim just long enough to hint to Azni that it was nearing time she showed Loki and Jane what light elves trained as soldiers were capable of.

Tony strolled into the barren warehouse, hands in his pockets and affecting a casual stroll
of a walk. He’d had JARVIS triple check the source of the message and the only reason he was this casual was the nervous scientist that was walking at his side. Bruce kept glancing around, feeling the Hulk within growling with unease.

He would have invited Gorgeous to come along, if he could find her. After a night of the pair of them getting gloriously plastered, come morning she’d disappeared. But there had been no further sightings so he’d take that as a good sign.

They both stopped, seeing a door on the other side of the warehouse open, relaxing when Clint and Steve walked in. After an assessing moment they started walking towards the inventor and the scientist. Clint frowned. “Your message?”

Tony and Bruce shared a look. “Nope.”

“I called you here.” All the men turned as Natasha walked out of the shadows, her green eyes a little more cautious than normal and her body tense.

Tony grinned over his glasses. “What’s up, spider?”

She glanced at Stark, her eyes clearly showing her annoyance. “The council knows you broke into their files.”

The inventor just shrugged casually as if they shouldn’t expect anything less. “Yeah, well, doesn’t play well with others. Psyche profile, remember? It’s a given I’m going to break all the rules.”

Clint was frowning, eyeing the other agent thoughtfully. “Tash?”

Natasha didn’t even look at Clint, growling. “Your rule breaking is going to get us killed.” Steve stiffened. “They already tried to eliminate me. I assume similar kill orders for the rest of you are being initiated as we speak.”

The archer slowly exhaled. “I knew there was a reason Fury had us assigned away from SHIELD.” Fury may not have received a direct order to set up the Avengers for a kill order, but he would have caught wind of it and done his sneaky best to get them out of the line of fire. Steve looked at Barton. “You didn’t question why he has us under orders not to report in?”

Steve just frowned. “I don’t question orders.”

Tony snorted. “Maybe you should start, Cap.”

Bruce took off his glasses. “What secret? What could be so big they want to kill us to keep it from getting out?”

Natasha shook her head at the scientist. “It’s the action, not the content. It’s because you’re not military. You’re civilians who don’t follow orders without question and that makes them nervous. The rest is more of where the files were located than what was discovered.”

Bruce sighed, instantly knowing what she was talking about. It had been an all-night argument between the pair of them. “Tony, I told you no.”

Tony’s tone instantly turned whiny. “C’mon Bruce, it was a Blue Gene/Q super computer…I couldn’t resist. I was a slave to the thrill of the moment…”

Natasha snarled and crossed her arms to resist going for the throat.
Steve glared, tone authoritative. “Your thrill put our lives in danger, Stark.”

Pointing a finger at the soldier. “Back off, Cap, I don’t take orders from SHIELD or you.”

Clint frowned. Tony was known for being difficult but he was usually more forthcoming when SHIELD wasn’t around. “I’d really like to know what the hell is going on.”

Tony jerked a thumb in the assassin’s direction. “Ask Agent Red.”

“Me?” Natasha just blinked at him, unimpressed.

Crossing his arms to mimic her. “Anything you’d like to share? Maybe a tiny little secret to show you’re actually on our side.”

Slowly she raised an eyebrow. “I’m a spy, Stark, I have a lot of secrets.”

He smirked at her. “Yeah. I know. And I don’t really care if you know about Kennedy… actually I do, but anyway. A show of good faith. You tell me what you didn’t tell us during the Chitauri fiasco or meeting over.”

Natasha didn’t blink, staring at the billionaire for several long moments before a tiny smirk curled her lip. Nodding slowly. “I told Fury what I told you…I was ordered to leave out my suspicions.”

Steve looked back and forth between the pair of them. “What suspicions?”

Tony shrugged his shoulders before pointing to Natasha who nodded slowly. “Loki was tortured to cooperate with whoever sent him.”

Clint, tone demanding, stared the inventor down. “You know that for a fact?”

Natasha’s face was blank but a haunted look flickered in her eyes. “I knew what to look for.” Gaze flicking back to Tony. “And you, Stark? What’s your secret?”

Tony glanced at Bruce. “I figured out he was mind controlled.”

Nodding slowly, processing and agreeing with him, ignoring the protests of the others. “His brother commenting on the rarity of his green eyes in Asgard.”

“And we all know he had blue eyes, just not as shiny as yours, Tweety.”

Clint jabbed a finger in Tony’s direction. “Fuck you, Stark.”

Tony looked him up and down. “Okay. Now?”

Bruce coughed a laugh behind his fist and the tension in the air dissipated. Steve looked around and nodded. “So now we just have to come up with a plan to save ourselves.”

Natasha tilted her head. “Or wait to see what Loki’s plan is.”

All the men turned to stare at her, some more surprised than others. “I thought he was dead.”

She glanced at Steve and explained why she believed to the contrary. “A green magic window popped up and allowed for my escape.”
Inventor and scientist shared another look. “Bruce and I talked to him briefly, well, I talked and the green mean machine napped, anyway, just a bit of magic but he chatted for a minute.”

“And?” Clint asked impatiently when Tony didn’t elaborate.

Tony shrugged at Clint. “He’s still an asshole but he’s not a ranting asshole so it’s an improvement.”

Clint snorted. “Takes one to know one.”

Tony batted his eyelashes at Clint playfully. “Aww…I thought you liked me, Hawk.”

“Did he tell you his plan?” Steve asked in all seriousness.

Tony resisted the urge to laugh in the soldier’s face. “This is Loki we’re talking about, Cap, he plays his cards really close to his chest. I think he might be coming here, but I didn’t get a chance to talk about all this. I’ll write him a memo.”

Bruce muttered almost to himself. “I just don’t see him sticking his neck out for us.”

Tony grinned at Bruce. “He likes us.” They all sent him dubious looks. “What? He does. You don’t see me hugging you all and singing by the campfire with doe-eyed looks of brotherly love but in a fight I’ve got your back. He’s me, just not as awesome…and magic instead of tech.”

Bruce just looked rather dubiously at Tony. “I might believe he views us as a favored pet.”

Tony shrugged. “Whatever.”

“Great, but let’s assume the Loki-fairy isn’t going to come charging to the rescue. What do we do?” Clint asked while glancing around at everyone.

Tony sniffed and fixed his sunglasses. “I’ve got a nice little house in the Bahamas, off the books so no one knows about it. We could hide out there for a while.”

Natasha knew how the World Council thought. Tony was a liability, Bruce couldn’t be contained, and both she and Clint knew too much. If they considered a project done, they would kill it by any means necessary. If the Avengers dropped below the radar mercenaries would be the next step. Ex-military at the very least. Her eyes almost dead, her voice hard as she asked, “How long do you think we have, especially if the council is sending mercenaries after us? And if they’re clever enough, what would stop them from using civilians to lure us out into the open?”

The Avengers all stared at one another, and no one said anything.

ALFHEIM

“Are you certain, Jane?” Loki asked the question again quietly, straining to keep his own opinion out of it. He desperately wanted her to say yes, but it had to be her choice.

Jane silently studied his eyes, the two of them at the edge of the porch. Mischief was inside with the kids, entertaining them with a story. The question had been sudden, as if in a moment of spontaneity he had decided to unlock her magic. But Jane knew that wasn’t how Loki thought. Something had changed, whether in him or in her she wasn’t sure. It hadn’t changed her response.

They sat facing one another with legs folded, knees touching. A million and one thoughts raced through her mind but it all came down to one realization. Yes. This demi-god was offering to
bring her up to his level, to make her his equal. She would be able to use something as fantastical as magic. She would be a fool to say no.

“Is it painful?” She asked without fear, wanting to prepare herself if it was.

Loki looked thoughtful for a moment before slowly shaking his head. “No, what I’m proposing isn’t physical.”

Now it was Jane’s turn to look thoughtful as she asked, “Then why are you hesitating? I thought you loved magic.”

His reply was immediate, almost as if the thought of not loving his magic was offensive. “Of course I love magic. Even as an infant magic was with me. My mother was from Vanaheim, who are known to house some of the most accomplished spell casters. She taught me some of my first spells.”

Jane shrugged loosely as she asked, a hint of suspicion in her voice, “Then why would you think I wouldn’t want to do what you can do?”

His eyes shifted away from her, that trickster wall starting to descend. “Of course, how silly of me—…”

She reached out and cupped his face, coaxing him to return her gaze, brushing her thumbs across his cheekbones. He practically purred at her touch. Asking him softly, “Loki?”

He reached up to gently grasp her wrists, pulling her hands away from his face but not letting go, folding her hands in his. “I never had a choice to be one way or another. Indel, G’dath, Talia, they were born with this. A force at our beckoning more powerful than any weapon. Even as a child I had to be so careful. Magic is ruled by emotions more than words, I didn’t have the luxury of mindless tantrums and raging fits of anger. You have the choice, but once I do this you’ll have no room for regret.”

She realized it suddenly, seeing him with new eyes as she asked, “You regret being a mage?”

“Only a few times, when I was young.” Untrue. He regretted every time he was mocked by the other warriors. Every time Thor would chide him for studying spells instead of being out in the practice field. Every time Odin would brush aside his questions or desire to show off a new spell in favor of something Thor was doing. Thor was a proper prince of Asgard with his might and his warrior skills and he was the strange witch-boy who lied without remorse and fought without honor and who didn’t fit the mold of prince any more than Sif fit the mold of a lady.

There was too much understanding in Jane’s eyes for his comfort level but she didn’t call him a liar. Instead she asked curiously, “Why would you think I would regret it?”

Releasing her hands. “Because it will set you apart, irrevocably.”

“I’m an astrophysicist and I like being one…fitting in was never a strength of mine.”

Loki felt like laughing but he swallowed it. So adorably naïve. “It’s not a matter of fitting in. This will give you an Asgardian lifespan. Your friends will grow old and die and to them you will not age a day. Life will move on, the world will shift and evolve and you will not. Mortals liken the AEsir to primitives in comparison to themselves with our love of war and our warrior’s culture, but it is merely that change is slow for us. It’s a harsh comparison but I still hold it to be true: you would be a boot among ants.” She frowned and he explained his logic. A logic he hadn’t explained to Fury
because he simply didn’t care what the mortal thought of him. “Even if you never act, you will have the capability to squash them on a whim. Not necessarily above them, but you will be beyond them.”

It was almost like she could hear an echo of his thoughts. *As beyond them as I am among the AEsir.*

Loki wished he could believe that his magic meant he was beyond the AEsir, but a traitorous little thought would usually follow. That the AEsir were the ones beyond him. Struggling to keep his thoughts off his face. “Humans will become petty and tiny, small minds and small hearts that don’t truly understand what’s important. They will be children…and you will have grown up.” He seemed reluctant to say more, she could see it in his eyes. This so-called selfish man was putting her first. “But you’re young. Younger than me by far. Indel has more knowledge of the nine realms and that will set you apart from everyone else. An immortal human, with a wealth of power and ties to only myself and my children.”

Loneliness. With her work it didn’t strike often but it had from time to time. Then Thor crashed into her life and when he left the lack of his presence was almost overwhelming. This time she’d crashed into Loki’s life, and he was the cautious one about opening either of them to the potential pain of loneliness.

Smiling softly. “And G’dath. And Azni…it’s a larger circle of friends than I’ve ever had.” Reaching out and squeezing his hands. “I’m not stupid. I’m probably way in over my head but I’ve never been so sure of anything. We both stand out or apart or…we don’t fit in. Let’s not fit in together.”

Loki grinned and leaned his forehead against hers. *Such a silly, sweet mortal.*

*Jane?*

*Jane opened her eyes without realizing she’d closed them, except she didn’t see Loki sitting in front of her, she saw a forest. The trees were like the ones on earth, the plants familiar to her, but everything was newer than any forest she’d ever been in, as if the plants were only a few years old.*

*Jane?*

*She followed the sound of Loki’s voice, stepping around trees. She could see a meadow of wild grasses in the distance and something told her this is where she needed to go. There was no real scent here. No normal animal noises. Strange. But she stepped into the clearing and gasped. The forest that she’d walked through formed a half moon shape, but there was a distinct distance with nothing in between to the forest behind Loki.*

*The forest that formed behind him towered into the skies, reminding her of Asgard’s forest, with the majestic peaks of the mountains. He held a hand out, gesturing lightly to a point that he wanted her to walk to. She stopped at the edge and looked down, seeing the bottomless drop with stars and constellations in the distance.*

*Are you certain, Jane?*

*She looked up with a small frown, meeting his eyes.*

*This is not something you can ever take back.*
His magic and her magic, mingled together for the rest of both of their very long lives. They would be together in that fictional, forever sense of the word. It was exciting. It was overwhelming. But of the million emotions pulling her in a thousand different directions, fear wasn’t one of them. It felt right. It felt like this had been what she’d been searching the stars for all this time. They would hold each other up. He would give her strength and she would remind him of compassion.

But would they ever be more? He liked her. He lusted after her. But would he ever trust her enough to give her what she knew he feared the most? But then she saw that here there were no shutters, the eyes truly the window to the soul. She gasped to see what he couldn’t hide here. His eyes weren’t just green here, they were a piercing, otherworldly emerald and they shone with strong emotions.

Tears slipped down her cheeks and she laughed, hesitation gone. He loved her.

I’m sure.

The ground rumbled and shook, as two halves that didn’t quite fit were forced together. Inch by inch the gap sealed, and though Jane suspected something might happen she wasn’t prepared for the flashes of moments of Loki’s life that assaulted her untrained mind. It didn’t hurt... and yet it did.

The first memory of Frigga’s smile.

Making friends with a little boy called Fandral.

Showing off a spell for his father.

The two pieces were almost in place, and the memories, newer, more painful, started to pile up.

A woman breaking his heart.

Blue skin and a jumble of disgusted/horrified/terrified emotions.

His father saying ‘no, Loki’.

Flashes of his time trapped with the Chitauri.

She saw him as if a dream had become a reality. For an instant he stood next to himself, a handsome young prince dressed in finely polished leathers, hair slicked back and hands folded behind his back. The man Thor had known as his brother. The trickster prince of Asgard, before knowing a truth had torn him apart.

Then he smirked and winked mischievously, fading to leave the man he was now. Silently she wept for him, even as no tears fell. She understood. In spite of all the negatives, he needed to go home. A confrontation with his father and brother were too long overdue. He was trapped in a limbo state and would never find true happiness with her until Asgard either accepted him or rejected him. His pain had become her pain and she knew what he needed in order to be whole once more...and she would do everything in her power to help him.

A shimmering border that kept the forest behind her from growing any further upward folded like a pair of pants and drifted away like paper fluttering on the wind. The memories faded and she felt herself re-center once more. But she wouldn’t forget, even as she would never say a word to anyone.
The gap between them held and sealed and she was delighted to feel a light wave of his emotions wash over her. Wind suddenly rustled down from the mountains behind him, rushing past her and carrying the scent of pine and snow. Water started to trickle between the space left by the two sides, gently rushing past them until the babbling brook went as high as their ankles spread out around them.

His head tilted back, overwhelmed by what he could feel of her. Her eyes followed the path of the wind, blinking in amazement as she watched the trees grow and age. Glancing back, she took a step, pulling him down and kissing him.

She could feel the maddening darkness in him. All the negative emotions forming a slippery slope that would leave him tumbling into madness and hatred. His anger. His despair and heartbreak. His fierce pride. But there were fledgling positives, forcing back the darkness, pulling him out of the abyss. A tiny spark of hope. Tentative happiness and innocent mischief. Wary, fragile love. Love for Indel. Love for Talia. Love for his brother and father. Love for Asgard.

Love for her.

Loki felt absolutely overwhelmed. She was amazing. A brilliant flame of vibrant emotions tempered by a fierce yet gentle spirit. She was strong and kind. Intimidatingly intelligent but quietly patient. As young as a child and more wise than the oldest of Asgard. He was her teacher and she was his guide. She was strong where he was weak.

They both opened their eyes and stared at one another. An echo of the emotions they’d each felt in one another remained. They couldn’t read each other’s thoughts, the bond that they shared touched each other’s magic, which fed on emotions. She gasped into his mouth as he pulled her into his lap and kissed her breath away.

One word pulsed through his mind over and over again. Mine. And for the first time he truly believed it.

Jane eagerly strained upwards, not wanting to miss a second of memorizing the feel of his body pressed against her. His lips. His thick, silky hair clutched lightly in her fingers. His strong arms wrapped around her, making it impossible for her to escape though she had no intention to even try. She clutched at his firm shoulder with one hand and melted against him.

But excitement was building. Jane could feel it from both of them and it was thrilling and overwhelming, so new and yet so natural. She gave his lips a final, gentle kiss before pulling back to breathe. He panted quietly, his face hovering inches from hers. She grinned suddenly, wickedly.

“When do we start?”

Loki laughed.

Author's Notes:

I'm behind! Oh no. I'll make up for it. Promise!

Next:

Tony get's a new best friend; Operation Ambush-Hela
ALFHEIM

Jane and Indel shared a conspiring look and all Loki could do was stand back with a smile and watch. Talia was sitting on the porch, a new coat wrapped around her to keep the chill in the air at bay and frowning as she tried to read high elvish. Every so often she would come to Loki and point to a word for him to pronounce. She didn’t love books quite as much as he and Indel did, but then the pair of them had a love that bordered on obsession.

Jane and Indel both disappeared and Loki clapped loudly, having been overseeing the pair of them practicing spells. “Excellently done!”

Indel appeared a second later, jumping up and down excitedly. “We did it! We did it!”

Jane reappeared a few seconds later, grinning and lightly bouncing in place. Loki froze, eyes mesmerized as she bounced. She had to know. How could she not know?

Indel had been skipping around but came to a halt next to Loki, a perplexed expression on his face. “Dada?”

Somehow Loki managed to make his mouth work although disturbingly inappropriate thoughts in front of his children kept him monosyllabic. “Yes?”

“What are those?”

Loki hated to say anything because he was really enjoying the view; hearing Talia start to giggle quietly behind him. “Those are breasts.”

Jane froze, her overwhelming excitement evaporating and suddenly aware of a breeze before her head jerked down. With a scream she tried desperately to cover herself before running past them for the house. “LOKI.”

He wished he’d thought of that. Indel was frowning up at Loki and the trickster could see the no doubt interesting questions piling up. “Do you have breasts?”

Loki squashed something tickling his throat. Laughter? No, most probably an unmanly giggle. “I am a male, I do not.”

Sniffing and wiping his nose with the back of his small hand as he asked, “So why does Jane have breasts?”

Loki raised an eyebrow before replying. “Because she is a female.”

Indel started twisting left and right, feet not moving. “But you said you can look like a girl when you want to.”

“I can.”

The boy sniffed and went to wipe his nose again, Loki catching him with a handkerchief he’d produced out of nothing. Indel tried to wiggle away, unable to avoid his father. He was scooped up a second later, Loki walking up to the porch and holding out a hand for Talia to take. To make sure no one came down with a cold it was time to spend a few hours indoors. “When will I grow
Loki made a choking sound at Indel’s question as Talia followed him in, taking over a section of the sofa with the book in her lap. He smirked at his eternally curious son. “I thought you didn’t care to look like a girl.”

Indel made a face and shook his head. “Nuh uh.” He kept wiggling until Loki put him down, but the boy only backed up a step. “Can I see you as a girl?”

Loki quirked an eyebrow and shifted into a girl a few years older than Indel. A few inches taller than either of them, black hair long and wavy and green eyes sparkling in amusement. Indel grinned and clapped his hands, Talia putting down her book and running over to see.

Indel pointed at him. “Now do a grownup girl.”

Smirking, Loki shifted again, then grimaced. With a flick of his wrist he adjusted his shirt. He was still thin as a woman, but well stacked. Now he looked a lot like Hela, his eyes not as dark as hers. He also didn’t hold the fascination with makeup that she did, his look natural. Talia grinned in delight.

Jane’s dry tone pulled his attention as she asked, “And you couldn’t have made my clothes reappear because…?”

Loki’s voice was higher but still rich. “You mispronounced. There was nothing to bring back.”

Stomping up to Loki, arms crossed over her chest. It was a silent testament to Jane’s ability to adapt since she didn’t even pause to glare up at a female face. “And you couldn’t have borrowed something from my closet because…?”

Smirk growing and purring. “I was enjoying the view.”

Jane huffed a laugh, then leaned in to kiss Loki chastely on the lips before holding out her hands. “C’mon, you two, help me play with fire.”

Both eagerly taking her hands, intent on walking next to the hearth to cut down on the fire hazard, Indel answering for both of them. “Okay!”

MIDGARD

Loki frowned thoughtfully from his position on the outer balcony, slightly confused. Stark Towers was abandoned, not even Jane’s friend Pepper occupying the space. He was a very routine creature, he didn’t like things like this to disrupt his expectation. So he threw himself to Stark’s life force and found the mortal in a hot local surrounded by a lot of water. Feisty Pepper and the other Avengers were here as well so it only deepened his confusion.

More than just the personality of this strange human intrigued him. It was Stark’s ability to manipulate mortal science. That and the reactor he’d created. It was a level of understanding of the basics of cosmic truths that led to an understanding of the principles of magic that rivaled his own. Again that pesky little thought tried to burrow into his brain. Did Tony Stark have potential?

Tony noticed movement out of the corner of his eye and since this lab was locked against all of his guests he knew it could only be one person. He threw down a wrench, storming up to Loki and glaring up at him. “You have no idea how much you suck right now.”
Loki may be confused but that didn’t mean the mortal had to know it. Voice purring. “You wish.”

The inventor blinked twice before downgrading his glare a bit. “Okay, that makes up for it a little.” Loki smirked briefly, waiting for the mortal to make sense as Tony turned and ran a hand through his hair as he ranted. “Do you have any idea how much crap I took for that? Bird-brain was the worst but I mean…come on!”

_Ah. The false hint that the inventor might be carrying a slime creature’s offspring._ Loki fought valiantly not to start laughing again. Only Jane was allowed to see him collapsed on the floor because he couldn’t stop laughing long enough to breathe. “Payback.”

Whipping back around. “For what??”

Thinking back to the New York invasion, green eyes narrowing. “Your comment about performance issues.”

Tony seemed to consider this before shrugging. “Hmm…yeah, okay, that one was too mean. I should have waited until I’d bought you dinner before diving into the more personal issues.”

Raising a dark eyebrow in amusement as he asked, “You assume I to be the female of this relationship?”

Stark thought for just a second, not certain if Loki was about to take offense or not. But then again, he’d never controlled his mouth around staggeringly powerful people and he wasn’t about to start. “I’m awesomely manly and you don’t have money.”

Loki’s lip twitched in amusement. “I have magic, I do not require your monetary conveniences.”

Whistling through his teeth, fists shoved into his pockets and rocking on his heels. “Damn, you are a cheap date.”

Loki slowly narrowed his eyes in irritation. He appreciated a certain amount of sarcasm and whit but Stark didn’t know when it was time to shift gears. “Just because there are no windows here does not mean I cannot create one.”

Which reminded him of the window that had been created to save Tash. Tony thought about commenting about someone being premenstrual, but decided he liked his lungs in his body. “So. Are you here to save our lives or what?”

Raising a single eyebrow again. “And what foe needs vanquishing that you and your _mighty_ force cannot conquer?”

Tony grimaced. “I may have pissed off some big wigs.” Loki continued to stare at him and Tony got the impression that particular colloquialism went right over the trickster’s head. “Err, the council runs SHIELD who sorta runs us.”

Studying Stark again before asking, “And you insulted SHIELD or this council?”

“I’m more concerned with the mercenaries the council is probably sending than hurt feelings.”

Frowning slightly. “I am unfamiliar with that term.”
Tony shrugged. “Soldiers for hire. They go where the money is.”

A repulsed look crossed Loki’s face as he asked, “You mean to say that there are warriors on this planet who sell their loyalties and their services to the highest bidder?” Loki hid a smirk. As if he weren’t known for switching loyalties as the mood struck him.

Tony decided right there he was not mentioning Natasha’s past. Ever. “Everyone needs a hobby, I guess.”

Loki was not in a habit of solving other people’s problems, particularly when they caused the problem with their idiocy. In fact, were it anyone else he wouldn’t even consider getting involved. However, if he thought about it from an honorable stance, the Avengers spared his life when they were within their rights to end it. He didn’t like feeling beholden to anyone. Well, perhaps beholden was the wrong word. He liked the idea of their being in his debt. Yes, that worked much better. “I will consider the matter.”

It was the best Tony was going to get out of the trickster and he knew it. Tony leaned back against his work table, asking curiously to what he assumed was still a fancy magical illusion of Loki, “So, you ever coming back so I can give you that drink?”

Amusement flashed across Loki’s face. “Ah, yes, a drink and a shiny new muzzle?”

Looking a little indignant. “Hey, we may have to put on a show for SHIELD but I promise not to leave it on. You can escape with it off, right?”

“Easily. I can escape with it on, as well.” Tony froze and slowly turned around, both eyebrows in his hairline. Loki gave him a toothy smile. “I require no words nor gestures to teleport. Thor assumes much concerning my abilities.”

The inventor appraised the God of Mischief with new eyes. “You wanted to be caught.”

Now Loki rolled his eyes. “I could have lived without being muzzled, collared, and shackled like a dog but yes, I wanted to go home.”

Tony frowned, thinking. Handcuffs and a muzzle, check. Collar, no. That was taking things to a strange S and M twist. “We didn’t put a collar on you.”

Loki blinked before remembering himself, turning to look over the suit stretched out on the work table. “Hmm…must have been someone else…”

“They put a collar on you?” Tony asked with a hint of something in his voice Loki couldn’t label.

The mage made a dismissive gesture at the inventor, not looking at him. “The All-father understands the dangers of handling a mage better than you do, he did what he felt was necessary.”

Something bitter and angry filled Tony’s voice as he asked, “In front of everybody, right?” It wasn’t just for Loki’s sake that he was angry. It was for himself. He wore the egomaniac persona like a cloak for a reason. Yes, he was arrogant. A smart mouth. Narcissistic. But that wasn’t all he was, he just hid the more vulnerable bits from people like this man’s father who got off on kicking someone while they were down.

Shrugging as if to say that it didn’t matter. He didn’t care what Asgard thought of him. Odin was nothing to him and Thor he hated…it was starting to scare him how well he could lie to himself. “Just court.”
Announcing loudly. “Okay, I retract that you suck-your dad sucks. He sucks worse than mine and that is an achievement. In fact, I hereby upgrade him to sucking monkey balls.”

Loki sighed tiredly as if correcting a child. “Humility-…”

Tony vigorously waved his hands in the air. “Whoa, stop. Stop right there. The only reason I thought for a second you were in control and not being whammied was because I got where you were coming from. You were angry, stuck living up to a perfect big brother. Okay, over kill with the whole murder thing, but you know what, I got it. Incidentally: bad Loki. There, all better.” Tony jerked his thumb behind him, as if he were pointing to the past over his shoulder. “But that? That isn’t humility, it’s humiliating and it was the last thing you needed. Guaranteed just to make you angrier which we really didn’t need, thank you very much.”

Loki struggled desperately to keep his composure, lips twitching dangerously. “Did you just say my father, the king of Asgard and All-Father of the nine realms, sucks monkey balls?” Tony shrugged slightly after a moment and Loki snickered. A tiny, tiny smile curled just the corner of Loki’s lip and if Tony hadn’t been watching him carefully he might have missed it. “I do believe you will be my first human friend.” Smile smoothing away. “So, what challenge do you have for me today, Stark?”

Tony paused to observe him for a moment. Somebody brilliant he could bounce ideas off of. Somebody just as sarcastic as himself. Not to mention if Fury ever found out he would have a stroke. All viable reasons for jumping at the offer of friendship. “When SHIELD isn’t around, it’s Tony.”

Nodding his head slightly to the mortal. “Anthony.”

The two of them shared a smirk, a silent agreement to friendship, and then pretended nothing had happened.

ALFHEIM

Hela appeared next to the lake, staring out at the still waters. She smiled a little to herself, feeling more than one pair of eyes on her. She thought about wearing her disguise but decided she was above such shock tactics and turned. With her dark green eyes she could see what no one but a mage could. The tethered magical connection between Loki and Jane. Not that she would need to see the connection to know it was there. Their hands were linked, Jane leaning into Loki and there was no denying that he was leaning in return. Once she was done with her little visit she would clap and skip around in glee that she was that much closer to success but for now she smirked at the both of them.

But Hela knew something was up when she saw stubborn resolve on both their faces. She looked back and forth from one to the other and narrowed her eyes, now recalling how close New Year’s Eve was here. “Okay…no.”

Loki shook his head in exasperation. “Hela-…”

Pointing a halting finger at Loki, ignoring Jane. “You two are not double teaming me.”

He huffed at her. “You have no idea why I called you here.”

Face expressionless, Hela glared at him, not liking that Loki actually thought he wasn’t transparent. It was insulting to both her cunning and her intelligence. Asking quietly, “Why did you call me?”
“New Year’s—…”

Cutting him off with a decisive gesture, viciously squashing the fear aching to spread through her limbs. “No.” It was easier this way. She kept everyone at a distance to protect herself from the inevitable betrayal. A lesson she’d first learned on Asgard and Fandral had only reinforced it.

Hela watched Jane give Loki’s hand an encouraging squeeze and he continued talking. “Indel and Talia should meet you.”

She narrowed her eyes, this time at Jane. “No.”

Jane frowned thoughtfully, mouth opening to blurt out the first thing that came to mind. “I thought there was no room in the universe for cowards.”

Getting in Jane’s face, Hela ignoring Loki stiffen protectively. “I’m not a coward.” He should know her better than that. Anyone important to Loki was safe from her. Unless they betrayed him then all bets were off.

“Then why not meet your brother?” Jane asked in all seriousness.

Hela’s lips thinned as she pressed them together but she refused to say anything. Loki sighed in irritation but it wasn’t with her. He was irritated with the situation that bred her hesitation and he damned the rest of the universe silently. “He’s very eager to see you.”

Hela choked back a laugh, crossing her arms over her chest protectively. “Of course he is, until he learns I’m Lady Death.” She was not going to become emotionally invested in more people who would only reject her later.

Jane looked back and forth between the two of them. From a human perspective someone known as Lady Death sounded scary but not now that she knew that Hela was very much like Loki. “So what?”

Loki’s voice was quiet and bitter. “Æsir warriors only go to Valhalla.”

“So what?” This time Jane focused on Loki as she asked.

Hela shrugged and finished the thought. “And since it is the one realm I do not control, that in fact I am the guardian of not just Helheim but the dishonorable of Niflheim as well…”

Jane got it. People thought that somehow that meant she was evil and dishonorable. “That is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!” Both tricksters jerked and she held out a halting hand. “They’re stupid, not you. I believe you, but you’re not on Asgard right now. What he thinks of you has nothing to do with them.”

The hand resting on her bicep, arms still crossed, tightened. “The Æsir aren’t the only ones. Elf-kind know me by sight as Lady Death. How long before their opinions turn me into a villain?”

Jane shook her head. It was Loki all over again. Loki didn’t fight how he was perceived, he just used that perception to make the best of a situation. “All the more reason for him, both of them, to know you now, to see that you’re not a villain. Besides, Loki’s opinion of you will always be more important, you just have to explain things.”

Hela scoffed. “He’s too young.”
“Then explain what he’ll understand now.”

Her jaw tightening. “No.” Loki’s mouth started to droop, the lower lip trembling slightly. Hela’s eyes widened in horror as his widened in despair. “NO!” A shine glazed his eyes as they filled with unshed tears. She jerked as if to run and he grabbed her arm to keep her from escaping. Wiggling and trying to pry his fingers off, turning her head this way and that to avoid looking at him. “You no good, dirty bastard. I hate you so much!” Jane looked back and forth between the two of them before slapping a hand over her mouth to muffle her laughter. She knew he pouted just to get his way. Only his pout had reach a level of kicked puppy that even put Mischief’s pout to shame. Hela punched his shoulder hard and turned, growling. “Fine, asshole, I’ll come now stop it!” His eyes instantly cleared, grinning in maniacal delight as he started walking and hooked an arm through hers. “I didn’t say I’d meet him now! Loki, I’m going to hate you from now until the end of eternity!” Scowling at Jane who followed the pair. “I pity you.”

“Thanks?” Jane couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Loki kept walking. The fact that Hela hadn’t tried to vanish told him plainly her protests had more to do with nerves than actual refusal. The walk was relatively short and suddenly the house was within sight. Not ever had Loki seen Hela skittish, but she looked ready to bolt. Unfortunately he understood her fear only too well. He glanced at Jane who smiled slightly and slipped past the pair of them. “Hela-…”

She was still and pale now, her voice soft with resignation. “You can’t tell me he’ll always accept me so don’t lie to me. We’re above that.” Seven hundred years had proven to her that the only person she could depend on to never abandon her was Loki.

Loki took in the slight shaking she wasn’t aware enough to control and narrowed his eyes. “Who hurt you?” Her eyes widened, not looking at him, but the shaking stopped. Cupping her face carefully, startled to see so much sadness in her eyes. He wondered how long she’d been hiding this from him. “I can tell you he’ll accept you now. I wouldn’t trade knowing mother in spite of how matters ended, would you?”

Whispering hoarsely. “No.”

His lip quirked upward slightly. “I can’t speak 500, a thousand years from now…but at least you’ll have that time and those memories. But you won’t if you never try.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly at him. “Just as you tried so hard to listen.”

Loki pulled back slightly, expression closing off. “That’s different.”

Hela’s jaw tightened again, eyes still narrow before a crafty smile pulled at her lips. “Quid pro quo, Loki.”

“Meaning?” He understood the words, he wanted to know what she wanted. “I will try…but so will you.”

Pulling back warily as he asked, “I will try what?”

Crossing her arms slowly, a self-satisfied smile gracing her face. “If and when Odin reaches out to you to talk, you will listen.”

His mouth dropped open slightly, surprised. What was she saying? Was she saying that was a possibility? Neither of them had a gift for seeing the future but Hela had access to spells and
tricks that he didn’t. “That will never happen. He turned his back and is most probably ecstatic to be rid of me.”

Hela ignored him. “But if it does as a fair exchange you will listen or I disappear now.”

“Hela?” Hela visibly stiffened at the sound of the young voice, now glaring at Loki since all three of them had crept behind her.

He didn’t want to listen. He wanted to stay angry because the alternative was feeling hurt and guilty and that just wouldn’t do. But Hela’s threat was very real and he didn’t want to have to explain to his children why Hela ran away. His jaw clenched, Loki nodded slightly and after closing her eyes to exhale, she turned to look down at the cherubic faces staring up at her.

Indel tilted his head a little, frowning. “Are you my big sister?”

Glancing at Talia before kneeling down, a hesitant smirk slowly pulled at her lip. “That depends. Do you mean your tallest sister? Your oldest sister? Or the sister most blessedly endowed?”

Loki snorted and Jane slapped a hand over her mouth. Indel considered the questions for a moment before shrugging. “Yes.”

Lip twitching. “Then yes.”

Indel pouted and sounded sad as he asked, “Where were you? I’m four now. You missed my name day.”

Hela pulled that little boy into her arms, his arms immediately going around her neck. “I was unfortunately detained but I promise to attend your next one.”

He nodded in satisfaction as he asked, “You promise you’ll be here when I turn five?”

Hela slowly nodded and Indel grinned. “Okay.”

“Mine, too?”

Hela looked at little Talia in surprise. The little one that hardly ever spoke and whispered most times when she did was speaking quite well to the trickster queen. Grinning and pulling her into the hug as well. “Yes, yours as well.”

Author's Notes:

Perhaps less about plot and more about fluffiness but hey, I like FLUFFY!

Next:

New Years (or Christmas if you squint); the World Council get a nasty surprise
Chapter 50

ALFHEIM

Jane mentally rolled her eyes. Loki’s voice cracked and it was unsteady when others were listening but Indel’s description of a strangled cat was a bit of an exaggeration. Indel’s voice, however, was beautiful. Talia was lying on her stomach on the rug under the dining table, chin propped in her palms and legs swinging behind her as she listened.

“Where do the second set of stairs go?”

All activity halted to stare at Hela for asking such a strange question. All that anyone could see were a single set of stairs that went from the main room up to the second story.

Loki grinned impishly as the surprise he’d hidden appeared. Talia and Indel shared a look before scrambling down the steps to a basement that no one had known was even there. The adults followed at a slower pace, Jane looking around as curiously as the little ones. Everything that had been on the second story had been moved down. Potions and ingredients, advanced spell books and several work tables. The two pouted with a frown, Loki behind them and speaking softly. “Perhaps you should see what has replaced them upstairs.”

Both squealed and clambered upstairs, racing each other to the top before freezing. Two little beds had been placed, one on each side of the window. All of Indel’s pictures had been put up on half of one side of a wall, a bookcase with his books on the other. The far wall was blank on half, waiting for something to fill it but the other held a bookcase with a few of the books Talia currently enjoyed. There was a twin bureau with clothes for each of them and a chest of toys.

Indel turned back around to his father as Talia climbed onto a bed and started jumping, asking curiously, “Why are there two beds, is it for when Tali visits?”

Loki had been debating how to address Talia’s addition and had decided to allow the truth to be known naturally. As if she had always been here. “Because this is the room that the two of you will share.”

Indel’s green eyes widened in hope, his question almost a plea, “Tali gets to stay?”

Grinning back at his son. “Yes, she does.”

Green eyes sweeping from Loki to Talia and back again, Indel asking almost hesitantly, “For how long?”

“Forever.”

Indel raced over and tackled the elf, the girl giggling. Hugging her tightly, asking Loki just to be sure, “Is she my sister now, too?”

“Yes, she is.”

“And Jane is our mama??” Jane turned bright, bright red while Loki started sputtering. Hela doubled over, cackling. Jane’s eyes moved quickly around the room before retreating down the steps with a squeak. It wasn’t that the idea didn’t appeal. It did. It really, really did. She’d just never thought about someday her being someone’s mom. Indel pouted suddenly as something occurred to him, pointing at Hela. “But I already got a big sister, I want a brother.”
A completely evil look spread across Loki’s face. “We might be able to convince Jane in a few centuries to give you a brother.” Hela, still bent over, looked up at Loki in surprise. Loki just flashed her a smirk. He knew how his son thought, and what he’d demand next.

Indel pouted harder. “But da-da…”

“You’ll just have to convince her.” Hela raised an eyebrow at Loki who was completely unrepentant.

Little face determined, Indel ran down the stairs, holding onto the railing to keep from falling. Grinning mischievously, Loki picked Talia up and followed. Hela pushed herself up and hurriedly followed. “Oh, this I have to watch.”

She was just in time to see Indel reach Jane, peering up at her anxiously. “Jane, I want a brother.”

The dish in Jane’s hand fell and shattered. “W-w-what??”

Indel was thoroughly undaunted. “I want a brother. Dada said we have’ta convince you.”

Amber flashed in Jane’s eyes before she narrowed them at Loki who was grinning too widely to pull off looking innocent. Instead of replying she focused a question to the girl in his arms, “Talia, are you hungry?”

The little elf nodded and leaned out to trade, Jane taking her and swatting at Loki’s hip. He dodged easily enough, still grinning. Indel continued to follow her. “Jane…?”

“Not this year.”

Indel pouted again, whining, “When?”

Her own grin growing. “Loki has to ask his daddy for permission.”

Loki froze and scowled, turning red, as Indel immediately redirected his attention. Jane stuck out her tongue and Hela’s cackling started all over again.

Loki opened his eyes to see a pair of rugrats snuggled under the blankets with him, giggling. Well intentions aside, both children had gone to sleep in their new beds but just before the adults had split to their respective rooms they both had come downstairs and curled up with Jane. Last he’d checked, they both had been sleeping in Jane’s bed. He glanced to the left, normally their spot, to see Hela curled under all the covers with her head hiding under the extra pillow. Mornings were never good for her. Or him, for that matter. Still, how can one be grumpy with that much cuteness snuggled so close?

His lip quirked, pushing back the covers to see two elflings grinning up at him. Indel, as ever, was chirpy and happy in the morning. “Hi, dada.”

Resigned in the knowledge that he wasn’t going back to sleep, he greeted them properly. “Good morning.”

Indel’s little body started to vibrate in excitement as he asked, “Presents?”

Loki smiled and nodded, left behind as both tore out of his room with happy squeals. The question was asked softly but there was a definite growl in her tone, “What time is it?”
Loki sighed softly, rubbing at his face. “Early.”

Hela grumbled under the pillow. “Wake me up in an hour.” Stretching with a grunt before pushing himself out of bed, he reached under the covers for an ankle. Her tone mocking, she not even trying to kick loose his grip. “I’m immune to the cold as you are, idiot.”

Loki lifted an eyebrow, clamping down on her ankle and yanking her out of bed. She landed on the floor in a disgruntled heap and glared up at him. He just asked her smoothly, “Idiot?”


“Daa-daa!”

Sighing, he left her to waking herself up, not bothering to change beyond some breeches over his legs with his under tunic. Both children were bouncing around the table, Jane grinning at them as she made tea. The table vanished and both paused in their play to send Loki a questioning look. He waved his hand as he passed, a small pile of simply wrapped packages appearing in the middle. With a squeal Indel dove for them, caught by the back of his under tunic and lifted into Loki’s arms.

His son was a little tazmanian devil when it came to gifts and would rip through them without a care as to who they belonged to. Ignoring Indel’s squirming, Loki bent to share a good morning kiss with Jane who giggled against his mouth before pressing a cup into his free hand.

“You are far too awake this early.” Hela said this darkly from the doorway.

A last press against his lips before Jane turned to grin at Hela who barely had her eyes opened. “The life of an astrophysicist. I could be up all night watching the stars but for turning in research for grants I usually had early morning presentations.” Jane shrugged, hand stroking through Talia’s hair as the girl leaned up against her. Then her brown eyes moved to take in the pile of presents. “This is just like Christmas.”

Hela frowned. “What is Christmas?”

Jane noticed the subtle look exchanged between the two tricksters and lightly smacked Loki’s bicep. He raised an eyebrow at her in question and sipped his tea. “Trickster.”

A wide smile crossed his face. “I believe that is a given.”

Her rebuke was playful. “You know exactly what the holiday means.”

Loki just shrugged. “But it’s more fun when you have to explain things.”

Narrowing her eyes at him, asking curiously, “Fun for who?”

“For me of course.” Jane rolled her eyes at him. Hela sat down primly on the floor, a soft rug appearing under her. Talia looked up excitedly at Jane before running over to sit next to the trickster queen. Loki glanced at Indel who was still wiggling. “Indel, when I give you to Jane you will stay there.”

His son pouted, “But-…”

“Or you can have your gifts last.” The little boy looked close to tears and Jane raised a questioning eyebrow. Loki brushed a hand through his white hair to soothe him. He was not trying to punish his son on such a special day but he was not going to allow Indel’s unintentional
selfishness to spoil it for anyone else. “Allow everyone else to open their own gifts.”

Lower lip thrust out, Indel nodded and reached for Jane who took him and joined the
group on the ground. Loki stayed on his feet, letting the tea clear his mind and knowing Hela for all
her casualness was watching him with anticipation.

He could remember over a thousand such celebrations, he usually snuggled against Frigga
with Thor occupying her other side, all of them listening to Odin as he gave a speech such as this.
Keeping in mind that for him and his children, it had been years but technically it hadn’t even been a
year since he’d left Asgard an escaped prisoner. “New Year’s Eve is the last day of the old, before
we welcome the start of the new year. A new beginning. A chance to start life over again, to change
our course. We come together as a family, and we celebrate all those present…and we remember
those that have passed on to the glory of Valhalla.”

He paused for a moment, remembering her smile. Her laugh. Talia no doubt remembered
her mother and father in that moment. Hela glanced away, finger quick to wipe away the tear that
had escaped while thinking of Frigga. Jane smiled sadly, thinking of her own parents in that moment.

“But as I said, this is a celebration. We have lost, but we will continue in strength because
we have each other.” He waved his hand and a long, narrow table appeared filled with small treats
and drinks. Hela waved her hand and a few small packages were added to the pile. Jane tilted her
head back, mouthing ‘under the bed’ and Loki magically retrieved her gifts. He moved to pass out
small goblets, filled with a special cider before lifting his glass, casting aside the lingering hesitation
to acknowledge his surname. “Loki Odinson celebrates a new year of purpose.”

Hela lifted her own. “Hela Lokisdóttir celebrates a new year of possibilities.” Talia
whispered in Hela’s ear and the trickster queen smiled. “Talia Lokisdóttir celebrates a new year of
family.”

Indel looked deep in thought before pulling in a deep breath. “Um…Indel Lokison
celebrates…a-uh…oh! I get to start tutoring this year!”

All the adults grinned, Jane nibbling on her lower lip for a moment before looking serious.
Raising her glass, making sure she caught Loki’s eyes. “Jane Foster celebrates a new year of magic.”
She wasn’t just talking about her new ability and he knew it.

“To the new year.”

Everyone copied and spoke as one to echo him. “To the new year.”

The cider was drunk and soon presents were being handed out. Hela helped Talia with the
simple brown exterior, the little girl squealing and carefully hugging the beautiful doll Jane had given
her. It was every bit a little elf, but there were a pair of large, shimmering wings on the back. True to
form, Indel tore through the wrapping before freezing in surprise. With his finger he touched the nose
before pulling the deep blue dog into his arms. The ears flopped and the body was a soft texture and
Indel attempted to squeeze the stuffing out of the doll.

Loki winked at Jane who was grinning, enjoying their enjoyment.

With Jane’s opened, they both turned their attention to what Loki brought them. More
paper hastily ripped aside, more pauses to assess the gift. Indel was grinning from ear to ear, counting
each book, squealing to see one of them was a new magic book. Talia moved in a blur, her art
supplies abandoned to hug Loki tightly. Indel was quick to move to hug him as well before both
turned to converge on Jane who hugged them in return.
With a grin Hela made a come hither gestures with her finger, two little packages floating in the air. Indel snagged his excitedly, still pressed against Jane and tore through it. Talia wasn’t any slower, snuggled in Jane’s lap. It was a necklace, made with the strangest stone Jane had ever seen. It was dark like onyx but it sparkled like fire opal. While hugs were exchanged and the necklaces were put in place Hela and Loki shared a look. The pair of them were the conquerors of Helheim, it was within their right to gift protection to anyone of their choosing. Those stones were a warning to every living and nonliving creature that there would be Hel to pay, literally, for any harm to come to Indel and Talia.

Once the children were entertaining themselves the adults turned their attention to their gifts. Jane gasped softly as the wrapping fell away to reveal parchment after parchment of detailed maps. Star charts of galaxies she’d never even seen before. Even an intricate creation that showed the progression of a nebula as stars and planets moved. Squealing, she jumped into Loki’s lap, ignoring Hela laughing at her to plant a very steamy kiss on his lips.

Hela’s gasp pulled both of their attention, seeing her delicately holding a small doll in her hands. The kind that a child would sleep with at night, soft with corn colored hair. “Where did you find this?”

It had been a gift from Frigga. Upon discovering her creation, Odin had been beside himself but it hadn’t fazed his mother, she ordering a room created in the family wing immediately for Hela. On the bed had been that little doll. Just before her room had been sealed Loki had snuck inside and took the doll, hiding it in his dimensional storage. What had and still did confuse him was his father had ordered the room sealed, not cleared.

He winked at her and turned his attention to his own package, ripping it open and blinking in surprise. Golden and cylindrical, he lifted it to his eye and laughed softly in delight. A magical kaleidoscope. Turning it would move and twirl what was being seen in different shapes and colors. Only unlike a human kaleidoscope, this one turned and moved the stars in the sky…even through inconveniences like walls and a ceiling. He’d begged for one as a child and on his 182\textsuperscript{nd} name day it had been a present from his father. Then it had been broken, thank you very much Thor, not even two months later.

Now it was his turn to thank Jane, pressing his forehead to her temple and squeezing her tightly.

Hela permitted herself one gentle, child-like squeeze with both arms around her childhood cuddle toy before she vanished her doll and clapped her hands as she climbed to her feet. “Well this delectable feast isn’t going to eat itself.” There were smiles and there were laughs that were shared by one and all. Some of them were family by blood, some weren’t, but it didn’t matter because the bond that held them together was stronger than that.

**Author's Notes:**

Didn't forget about the Council, I promise. It just didn't flow right with this chapter so I'm saving it for the next. I'll post it in the next couple of days. Enjoy the fluffiness.

**Next:**

The Council & the Avengers & Loki...oh my
Chapter 51

MIDGARD

Four video monitors snapped on, the figures within draped in shadows and secrets. The council couldn’t see the person before them but they had entertained these summons before. What was curious was none of them were entirely sure why they had obeyed the silky requests demanded of them in the past, just that they had been impossible to refuse.

“Your last request of our time has been made, you were to no longer host these meetings.”

“The purpose of a silent partner is that you remain silent.”

Fluid, persuasive words were whispered to them in return. It was difficult to discern if the voice was even male or female. “Come now, you have always been so agreeable until now.” But then the person stepped out of the shadows, solving the mystery. “It must be a miracle then that I’ve found my voice.”

“You!!”

A cunning, pleased smirk curled Loki’s lips. “Me.” He was in such a good mood he was going to do this one favor for Stark. Finding them had been ridiculously easy. He wasn’t certain who he was impersonating just yet but he felt confident enough he would figure it out. This little game now would help him determine what he was dealing with and the best course for solving the problem. Whether Stark knew it or not it would be a favor he would collect on from the mortal at his leisure.

“Why would you have any investment in earth??”

Loki raised an eyebrow at such adorable ignorance. “I did come here before intent to conquer you, why would you be surprised?” Then he frowned thoughtfully, almost talking to himself. “Why would you blindly take orders?” Their expressions all blanked, confusion in their eyes and Loki suddenly felt his stomach twist, realizing not only had they believed him to be someone else, but this someone had used persuasion on them. “It is curious to me. You have gone to a lot of trouble to build your Avengers up, on top of my broken body apparently, only to tear them down.”

“Utilizing civilians was a mistake.”

“A mistake, I will remind, you pointed out to us.”

He got a feel for it, now, the specific psychic flavor overshadowing their will. Something had twisted their paranoia in one direction but then persuasion had honed it. It was the exact form of persuasion he used. His good mood soured. Loki silently vowed he was going to kill Hela. Usually he enjoyed her schemes, but not when his part was as one of her pawns. She had taken their paranoia and targeted the Avengers. Just as she focused him on Tony Stark, counting on his growing attachment to the inventor to inspire his interference. He just wasn’t sure of her motivation.

Why get me involved in the first place? Unless she wanted to dismantle the power behind Shield but she wanted him to do it. Why? But then why had she wanted him to save the little spider? The answer was simple. Not to destroy the organization, but to eliminate the corrupted elements. The thought intrigued him. Nicholas had been fun to antagonize but a man of strong principles.

Mentally he scowled. Damn her. She wasn’t trying to grow his investment with earth. She
wanted him vested in them. He was truly, truly regretting creating her today. It certainly explained why she’d departed for Helheim with all haste this morning. Growling softly, unable to keep his irritation with Hela at bay. “You will change your plans concerning the Avengers.”

“Thoroughly undisciplined-…”

Interrupting the hidden woman, ticking each adjective off on his fingers. “Don’t forget arrogant, willful, and opinionated. Oh, wait, that’s just Stark.” He smirked a second later.

“We have decided to invest our interests in a more malleable direction.”

Loki nodded slowly, as if in agreement. “I see, and you believe it prudent to dispose of an abandoned project.”

“Exactly. It’s wonderful you see matters as clearly.”

His green eyes flashed. “Oh, my vision is clear. Allow me to clear your own.” His smile grew as the four mortals now had time to look around the room they had been transported to before cowering from him, no longer hiding behind anonymity and distant communication. It was so pleasing to see these mortals truly respect their betters. *Meh. Respect. Fear. Either would do.* He was going to pay for that bit of spell work later but for now he focused on the task at hand. “Now that I have your attention…I appreciate a certain ruthless resolve in achieving your end. But then you have already been shown my nature.”

The oldest male in an expensive business suit seemed to be the bravest…or the most foolish. “You were being controlled.”

They knew this, yet they were more than willing to make him a patsy to their schemes. *Arrogant fools.* Were he in a better mood he might find a certain appreciation for such tactics. Right now he was just irritated. Baring his teeth in the mockery of a smile, eyes unamused. “I am the God of Chaos, mortal, no one controls me.” Body leaning back, a settee appearing behind him and smirking at them as if he were about to divulge his ‘secret’ plan. “I allowed you to utilize my presence to assemble your Avengers to give you humans, as you say, a sporting chance. My defeat allowed for my return to Asgard on my terms…and for the AEsir to fall into my control so I do thank you for that. True evil will come here and I eagerly await the destruction your two sides will reap since I have arranged for Thor to be indisposed during that time.” Put a bit of panic in them. It will make them much more eager to any solution presented.

“And what makes you believe we will do your bidding?”

Loki didn’t bother to look amused now. No longer was the trickster before them, now he was a prince and a son of Odin and they all felt the difference. “Because you are hopefully intelligent enough to know you have no choice.”

“The decision concerning the Avengers is no longer in our hands.”

Loki heard a hint of nervousness and fear, frowning ever so slightly as he asked, “Meaning?”

The woman glanced at the suited man before explaining, her voice without inflection or care. “We found a more agreeable solution for our world’s defense. They must prove themselves, of course, and the Avengers are an ideal test. They are committed to their task and will not communicate with us until the assignment is complete.”

*Mercenaries, as Tony had said.* Loki nodded and stood again, the lounge vanishing. “You
will inform Nicholas of this threat, then you will remove your control from this project and gift it to himself and Stark."

“Will we?”

Loki nodded once slowly, his eyes dark. The same kind of darkness that Jane’s influence kept at bay. A darkness that would tear his enemies apart and feast on their terror. “Yes, you will. And for each Avenger you kill... I will kill one of you.” Smiling evilly as he caught the scent of terror. “Since you have already attempted to kill the spider, perhaps I should maim one of you in warning.” A very real dagger, unlike the illusion of his form and the sofa, embedded in the ground at their feet. All four of them jumped back. He was fairly confident with warning the problem would resolve itself but best to motivate them to warn Nicholas quickly. Still, having himself named as the Avenger’s savior wouldn’t do his reputation any good at all. “Oh, yes, and you will not mention my involvement, to anyone, or you will find your intelligence quotient reduced to that of a carrot.” He disappeared in a swirl of mist, his voice whispering in their ears and his cool breath caressing their skin. “Best hurry before someone has to die.”

Tony knew it was a bad idea as soon as he offered it. You can’t put this many people with his ego in one place for this long without somebody losing it. By the end of the first day they were all getting on each other’s nerves and Pepper was still annoyed with him about something.

But he would gladly take her avoidance over the quite frankly scary looks Natasha was giving him. Then she and Clint would whisper something to each other and she’d go right back to staring. It was creeping him out. Bruce had done the smart thing and retreated to a lab. But then nobody wanted to stress him out, because that led to green and mean. At least he had his downstairs workshop where he could tinker with his suit and hide. It was the perfect escape from Steve’s well-intentioned-but-badly-timed lecture on team consideration and personal responsibility. There was nothing worse than an adult boy scout who liked to gloat.

They had retreated from New York, knowing that the X-Men had promised to look after things in their stead. He was actually surprised it had taken as long as it had for everything to go to hell. JARVIS’s voice pulled everyone’s attention, all of them running to the living room as television screens snapped on.

“Sir, SHIELD has reports of wide spread devastation effecting the southeast region of the United States.”

Tony frowned to himself before asking, watching as maps and pictures of news casters screaming into their cameras appeared. “Flood?”

“Earthquake, sir.”

The Avengers all exchanged looks since the phenomenon there was almost unheard of. Tony spoke with pause, thinking out loud. “Well that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Miami seems particularly effected, sir.”

Steve had his arms crossed, focused on the problem at hand instead of the improbability of it happening. He asked commandingly, “Where are the X-Men?”

“New York, Captain Rogers, currently engaged with Doctor Doom.”

Tony’s face twisted. “Timing is everything.”
The two assassins shared a significant look. Steve looked at the others, his own face resolved. “We have to help them.”

Natasha didn’t move, glancing at Clint who seemed to be in agreement with her before she even spoke. “This would be the perfect opportunity to assassinate us. How do we know this wasn’t manufactured just to flush us out of hiding?”

Steve took a moment before responding. “We don’t.”

Tony sniffed. “I think it’s safe to say this is a trap.” Bruce slowly nodded in agreement.

The captain looked each of them in the eye. “Agent Romanoff. Agent Barton. I understand your position and I’m certainly not eager to jump out there and be shot down but we’re the Avengers. They’re the ones who should be running and hiding, not us. I can’t just stay here and watch innocent people die when there was something I could do about it. Can you?”

Tony and Bruce shared a look, the inventor turning on his heels. “My suit takes 32 seconds to put on, bet I beat you there, bird brain.”

Clint grinned and turned to run for the Twin jet. It wasn’t the smartest decision but it was the right one. “You’re on.” The others looked at one another before nodding in agreement.

Loki had a certain appreciation for chaos. It inevitably led to a few deaths but from a natural perspective that was just separating the strong from the weak. He was feeling rather proud of himself since this was his first true venture to a planet of the nine realms and he was only a little nervous about being discovered. He used the golden passages so Thanos wouldn’t be aware of his little journey. Baby steps, after all.

He’d already picked up what he had come here for, but he lingered to watch. Buildings were crumpling all around him, car alarms wailing and people running around, screaming. He rolled his eyes, invisibly observing. Such sheep. It was pathetic. He looked up to see Tony whiz by overhead and knew there would be many herd animals spared today. Unknown to him, the golden eyes from Asgard were upon him, silently watching and hoping.

The shaking had gone on for too long over too wide spread of an area for this to be a natural phenomenon. He shook his head mournfully. This would be the perfect platform for him. Reveal himself as the culprit and make them all bow down before him. It was a lie of course, but he was capable of this. But it wasn’t even a possibility. Jane’s disapproval was beside the point. It was one thing to one day have to explain that he may have made a few mistakes in the distant past that shall not happen again. It was quite another to show that not only had he made mistakes, that he kept making the same ones. He didn’t want to have to explain himself to two very specific people, nor to get into the hopeless argument that they weren’t allowed to make the same ones.

The sound of a child crying pulled his attention away from the destruction. It was a small, mortal girl somewhere between 6 and 7. The world shook, a fissure opening in the ground and she just stood there. Thank the Norns Indel and Talia have more intelligence than that. Loki huffed as he approached the child, tisking to himself. “Oh dear.” Large tears in her dark eyes, she looked up to hear a voice but not seeing him. And then suddenly he was there, arms crossed over his chest. “I do believe I’ve become too attached to your species.” A bitter smirk crossed his face. “And that never ends well for me.”
He wasn’t wearing his I’m-taking-over-the-world armor from New York but his more casual armor. Still, he was by no means dressed like a human. It didn’t seem to even phase her. Her arms lifted in unspoken demand and Loki picked her up, a well-trained father who didn’t keep little ones waiting. He whipped around and held out his hand an instant later. The sizeable crack that had been snaking up the length of the street towards them paused. There was a large gap in the fissure, more than a dozen feet in width from one side to the other and deep enough that the bottom couldn’t be seen.

Loki narrowed his eyes in consideration. He would almost think he had been a target. He heard a thud but didn’t turn as Stark landed just a few feet from him. “JARVIS, external audio off.”

“Yes, sir.”

Walking up to the mage and surprised he had shown up, Tony asked lightly, “Here to save the day, Locks?”

Loki ignored him. If he thought about it, he’d leave because he wasn’t a hero and he wasn’t about to pretend to be. Instead, he focused on the problem. “This tectonic shift is manufactured.”

Tony grimaced, glancing at the different video monitors. The others were doing their best to help who needed rescuing but it was so much easier to stop a foe you could take on one on one instead of battling with a force of nature. “Yeah, we kinda figured that out. Machine or mutant, we’re not sure which.”

Glancing at the human curiously, Loki asked, “And yet you came to such an obvious trap anyway?”

“It’s what we do. Besides, you showed up.”

Sighing softly, adjusting the child in his arms who was holding onto his armor tightly. “I was merely curious.” He paused, sensing something and tracking it.

“Ri-ight.” Loki made a slicing gesture with his hand, then smirked. Tony lifted an eyebrow, mouth quirking and amusement in his voice. “Okay. What’s with the naughty little boy expression?”

Loki’s lip twitched before the smirk smoothed. “If any of your intrepid band find a mortal rolling on the ground, screaming, that would be your instigator.”

“Ah. Cool.”

“Naomi!” The obvious mother sprinted the distance, uncaring of who was holding her child. Loki handed the girl over easily, ignoring her hasty yet sincere thanks before she ran away.

Loki raised an eyebrow at Tony when the Avenger nudged his shoulder with a gloved finger, asking in amusement, “Yes?”

“You’re really here.”

Winking at the mortal. “Maybe. I’m not remaining long.” A strange look crossed Loki’s face, sensing something in the distance. Perhaps the masterminds behind this little demonstration. “I shall be a moment. 11 o’clock.” Loki disappeared suddenly, a brick wall of a man running through the space where he was and slamming into Tony.
The Avenger had his lips pursed to ask but had no time to react. Tony was picked up and hurled down the street, landing on his back with a grunt. “Whoa! JARVIS, external audio on! Guys, we’ve got—…”

Hands impossibly strong and too fast clamped down on his armor, the metal creaking as he was picked up and slammed back down into the ground. Tony felt all the air knock out of his body, his spine on fire. His mouth opened but nothing more than a weak groan escaped. He couldn’t pull in the air to breathe, let alone give JARVIS a command. He was in too much pain to think. The weight of his armor and the force of his impact drove him further into the pavement but whoever it was wasn’t satisfied and whipped him around again.

“Stark?”
“Widow, where is Stark?”
“Hulk, find Tony!”

The third impact, this time across his attacker’s knee, caused Tony’s eyes to widen as he heard a cracking sound and his legs went numb. No.

The brute grinned nastily, hearing that very distinct crack. Holding a hand to his ear. “One neutralized…Stark…Nope, the alien disappeared…No problem.” Glancing at the fissure, he picked the Avenger up by his neck and threw him in.

Tony’s thoughts were a million miles away, not even aware of what was happening. He didn’t hear JARVIS’s worried tones about the suit being inoperable, he didn’t hear his comrades in arms screaming at one another. He only heard silky words whispered in his ear. “You are fortunate you amuse me.” Tony’s descent was stopped suddenly. The brute looked up, seeing green eyes glaring at him from a figure shrouded in darkness. Stark’s body was halted, hovering above the mile long drop. “If anyone is going to kill this annoying half whit it is going to be me.”

Wheezing through gritted teeth, Tony’s voice barely a whisper. “Not…cool…”
“Didn’t think you’re with them.”

Loki rolled his eyes slightly, annoyed that he had to come back before he could take care of the source behind this problem. He consoled himself he would do so another time. “I’m not. To be one of them would imply I consider a small band of foolishly heroic mortals to be my equal.”

“You defend ‘em and we’ll just add you to the list.” Loki mentally cringed. This mortal made Volstagg look like a mental giant.

Loki tilted his head slightly, hearing something approaching fast. Unable to resist smirking, distracting the human just a little bit longer. “Such an amusing warning. Now allow me to offer one of my own.” His smirk slipped, meaning what he said. “I don’t share my toys.” A roar from a very ticked off rage monster sounded and both Tony and Loki disappeared an instant before the Hulk appeared and slammed into Stark’s attacker.

Tony groaned and opened his eyes, realizing time had passed without his being aware of it. He noticed that his suit had been peeled off and was in a useless pile. He was stretched out on the roof, his legs numb. He could come back from then. He built himself a glorified pacemaker out of spare parts, he would build himself a pair of legs.

Closing his eyes again, shakily he moved his hand with a wince before Loki’s firm tone
froze him. “Be still, Anthony.” Tony opened a single eye, watching Loki frown in concentration, hands splayed over his chest. “The metal of your armor sliced rather neatly through your spinal column, I am attempting to heal that.” A green glow and the pain along his back and side faded, able to properly take in a deep breath as feeling rushed back to his legs. He was bruised all over but he could wiggle his toes. He’d take it.

Asking the mage jokingly, “Will I live, doc?”

“Unfortunately your presence on this planet will continue to annoy me.” Something flickered in Loki’s green eyes. As if he didn’t mean what he’d just said.

_Huh. Who’d of believed it. Locks really does like me._ Not that Tony was suicidal enough to point it out. It would just be one of those unspoken things between them. Throwing out a question to vanish the tension, “Where’d you go?”

Loki was looking at something in the distance with a strangely amused look on his face. “I was curious if your attackers were truly a threat.”

Tony felt his eyebrows hike up in surprise. Until it occurred to him Loki wasn’t talking about the brick wall trying to pass as a human being. He was talking about the brains behind this little stunt. Asking curiously, “And?”

“I’m unimpressed. I doubt they will prove much of a challenge.”

That was a relief to Tony. Sort of. Exhaling slowly, speaking softly. “Some first date, sweetheart.”

Loki quirked an eyebrow and stood back up. “Then I suppose this is good night.”

A thought to thank the trickster came and went. Loki wasn’t the sort who would take that sort of thanks well. He’d consider it a favor for later. Asking cheekily, “No goodbye kiss?”

Loki’s head tilted slightly before glancing up. Turning to the left, disappearing along the golden passages back to Alfheim. “I don’t kiss on the first date.”

The other Avengers were there within seconds, SHIELD agents not far behind. From Asgard Heimdall continued to watch over the universe but now there was the tiniest of smiles on his face. The question that had long plagued him had been answered. Not just one worthy prince of Asgard, now there would be two.

In Miami, a few blocks away several figures dressed in black continued to study their prey. It was an interesting test and it yielded more results than they had counted on. The two mutants were an expected loss, the goal to see the extent of the Avenger’s capabilities and SHIELD’s response time. Overall this was a success while uncovering a surprise. Contingencies had been put into place in the small probability that Thor would appear. A second plan would have to be developed to eliminate his brother as well, it would seem.

_“We need to talk.”_

When it involved Fury that was never a promising start to a conversation. What made it worse was all the Avengers had been invited so a possible unpleasant encounter had become something far more sinister. Tony had remained tight lipped when it came to Loki and over-exaggerated his soreness to keep away suspicion, knowing the trickster wouldn’t show up again if he was thrown out there before he was ready. It hadn’t taken the inventor long to figure out the trickster
was skittish about his living status and would only officially appear when he was damn well well good and ready.

So Fury tried to stand tall and foreboding but he was Tony Stark and he didn’t frighten easily. Tony batted his eyelashes as he took a seat at the familiar table, asking woefully, “You’re not breaking up with us, are you Nick?”

Fury didn’t move. He didn’t even twitch. “Do I look like I’m smiling?” No. But then Tony couldn’t imagine the dour-always-angry-or-serious director smiling anyway. The director waited until everyone was seated before staring at each of them in turn. “It has been brought to my attention a kill order was placed on your heads.”

Clint and Natasha shared a look. Steve remained focused, expression tight as he asked stiffly, “What is SHIELD doing about it?”

Nick tilted his head slightly, asking with annoyance coloring his tone, “Since we just found out because some assholes decided to keep that kind of information to themselves? Nothing. At least not yet.”

Tony was bruised, tired, and he wasn’t in the mood to be scolded like a little kid. “Because?”

Fury turned his full glare at the inventor. “Since this is largely your fault, Stark, I suggest you sit back and shut the fuck up.”

Tony scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. First chance he got he was begging Loki to prank Fury. Hell, maybe he would just do it himself. He was pretty sure he could get JARVIS to superimpose Fury’s head over all the female SHIELD operative bodies in the database. Okay, not Nat because she was too scary to piss off.

Natasha, oblivious to Tony’s thoughts, was direct with her boss. “Sir, considering their impressive response time I believe Stark is more of an excuse to justify their intended course.” Tony actually felt a little touched that she was coming to his defense. He was totally making her some super cool bullets.

Fury grunted. “Perhaps.”

Steve frowned, asking Natasha for clarification, “Impressive?”

She looked grim but easily explained her logic. “An unofficial operation that would need more than a dozen people takes weeks to assemble the correct staff and even longer to organize.”

Bruce watched everyone calmly, wanting to make sure they were all on the same page. “Does anyone else suspect that earthquake was a setup or is it just me?” Natasha slowly nodded, not saying anything.

“To the reason I was going to haul you all in here to begin with.” Fury didn’t answer the scientist, tossing a folder at each of them. He suspected it just as much as they did, another reason he wanted to tuck them under SHIELD protection. “I received word that the Avenger Initiative has been officially moved under sole SHIELD purview.”

Stark breezed through the folder with a frown. “Meaning?”

“Meaning you work for me.”
Steve was still frowning, now in confusion. “Excuse me, director, but I was under the impression we already did.”

Fury stood up a little taller, folding his arms behind his back. He kept his personal feelings off his face. He suspected someone was behind this. He just couldn’t get a feel for the motivation. But whoever they were had managed to scare them. Badly. Bad enough that he really wanted to get this individual as a SHIELD ally. “The council has turned over full control to me.”

“No more nukes is good.” But then Tony thought about the note Loki had left on his worktable. No real clue except for a few scrawled words. You Owe Me. It suddenly occurred to him that Loki may have done more than saved his life. “Just you?”

Fury scowled at the mouthy inventor. He knew Stark was going to question that. “The Avengers are now a joint venture between you and I—…we will discuss that nightmare later.” Tony grinned widely. “In the meantime, consider yourselves grounded to the base. Any outside excursions and I’ll arrange a SHIELD escort to make our position clear.”

Clint blinked slowly, asking hopefully, “Can you call them off, sir?”

Nick nodded slowly, hoping he’d be able to track down their commander. “I have some ideas about who is in charge. Dismissed.”

Author's Notes:

A little Tony and the Avenger attention. Now he can stop whining. Although now Loki will be jealous so we'll have to focus back on him. Such children.

Next:

Jane meets Sigyn; Byleistr meets Loki
The winter, as long as it seemed to last, was finally drawing to an end. There was still ice but the snow had slowly dried, clinging stubbornly to the tops of the trees and in small clumps around the base. But the winter had been a productive one now that Jane could benefit from magic lessons as well as defense lessons. Now Indel had company when he was doing his runes.

Jane bounced to a chair, grinning with excitement as Loki cleared the table and put down a sheet of paper in front of her, standing on the other side of the table. “So what am I learning today? Fire control?” She lifted a palm, grinning as a small flame flickered to life. She’d seen Indel working on turning the fire into shapes and was really interested in learning that.

His lip twitched. “Nothing quite so elemental.”

“Ooh, nice pun.”

Loki tipped his head slightly to her with a grin. “I do try.” He lightly took her wrist, blowing on her palm and they both watched the flame shift into a golden current of air and float away. She giggled and he smirked before his face grew a little more serious. “One personal shielding spell. Then when it’s perfect, one mass enhancing spell.”

Frowning and thinking about that combination, not to mention the fact that Indel didn’t know either. “Is this the way the order normally goes?”

Loki paused to give her a serious expression. “No. I’m not rushing you through your training, I’m simply making the more practical aspects a priority since you wish to be my shield maiden.”

“And you think I’ll need these?”

No warrior wanted these skills taught to their partner to ever be necessary but they were a warrior culture. It was inevitable that war would call them away to fight. The young had to be protected at all cost. Indel and Talia were the future, his legacy to the nine realms. They mattered more than his own life. He sighed softly. “I hope not, but if the need arises I want you capable of defense against an AEsir.”

Both of Jane’s eyebrows shot upward. “Why would I need to fight someone from Asgard?”

“Most creatures in the universe are either weaker than or as strong as an AEsir. If you can attack one from Asgard successfully you will be safe from most.”

“Ah.” Jane shrugged after a moment of thought. “Makes sense.”

He drew out a few runes for her to see. Her rune work was much stronger than her Allspeak but it was a work in progress. “This shield spell is modified. Most are a personal bubble like a balloon or encompass an area.”

Jane glanced up. “Like around the house.”

“Hm. Yes. Instead, this shield forms a layer less than a finger width above the skin and
encompasses from head to toe. It will not stop the penetration of a full assault but it will protect from glancing blows.”

She knew enough now to know the difference. “So if someone is lunging get out of the way.”

He smirked as he nodded. “The second spell increases density.”

Now she was confused, asking, “Why would I want to be heavier, wouldn’t that slow me down?”

He smiled almost kindly at Jane. “Because you are human you are already slow, my beauty.” Jane blushed silently at the rarely earned but always coveted compliment from Loki. “This puts power behind your attacks and makes it harder for you to be picked up.”

Frowning to herself. “I get the power aspect, couldn’t you do something to the shield so it’s harder for me to be grabbed?”

Loki blinked to himself, then frowned in thought. Very slowly. “I…might…” Blinking again. “I will have to do a little research but that is an inspired idea.”

She felt a flare of his emotions and gave him a wicked look. She loved that he was attracted to her intellect. Jane squealed as he dragged her from the chair and across the table to him, devouring her with a soft purring growl. She loved when he did that. Giggling against his lips, she ran her fingers through his hair.

“Loki. Jane.” Both of them froze before glancing to the door as it opened, Azni standing with Indel on her left and Talia on her right.

Indel made a face. “Icky!”

Loki felt his lip twitch, his temple resting against Jane’s. “I fail to see why you are complaining when you were the one who requested a brother.”

Indel gave his father a confused look while Jane gasped in horror and elbowed him in the ribs. “Loki!”


“I was told recently you needed to see something.” Loki stiffened and stood, his face going blank, at the new voice as a breathtaking light elf in Vanir clothing stepped behind Azni and nodded slightly to him.

Azni didn’t look to the other elf, watching Loki closely and introducing her. “This is Lady Sigyn of Vanaheim.” Jane felt a jolt of fear rush through her.

**ASGARD**

“Oh dear.” Reluctantly Fandral’s eyes lifted from their contemplation of his ale. Anya sat down across from him, a knowing look in her eyes. The most skilled warrior with a rapier in Asgard, making mistakes on the training yard he’d not made since he’d been a boy. The most notorious flirt of the nine realms, who seemed to barely acknowledge the fairer sex in recent weeks. “The great Fandral the Dashing…in love.”
Fandral slowly frowned. “Don’t propose absurdities, Anya.”

Anya glanced to the left, watching the server lean down to place a fresh ale in front of a warrior, her cleavage on impressive display. Fandral didn’t even twitch a glance subtly in her direction. “You have yet to flirt with even one woman here, and here you sit for over an hour without touching your ale.”

He pulled the mug just a hair closer but still didn’t move it closer to his mouth as he asked, “How does this depict a man in love?”

“It appears you have just lost that love.”

Mustache twitching before he grimaced and took a drink. “Aye.”

“Why are you not trying to win her back?”

He rubbed his thumb on the rim, frowning. “Matters are hopeless.”

Anya folded her hands together in a joined fist, propping them up while planting her elbows on the table before lightly resting her chin. “You have my ear, Fandral, explain the matter for me.” He just sat and stared. “Describe her to me.”

His face instantly turned wistful, enraptured. “She is glorious. As beautiful as a Valkyrie and twice as fierce. A mind and a wit that would challenge King Odin. But she is not of this world, lost to me to another realm.”

“Why would another of the nine realms be an issue? If she were a Jötunn I might see…oh.” Fandral’s face painted the picture eloquently and Anya trailed off awkwardly. But then she thought about it and felt her own confusion grow. She was a commoner without distinction, leaving Asgard was all but impossible so it was possible the other realms had opened their borders to frost giants but she was doubtful. “How did you encounter a giantess?”

He pushed the ale away, pride and shame warring in his expression. “What does it matter? I have dishonored myself as an AEsir warrior. I have cavorted with Asgard’s enemy and am no longer fit to serve.”

Anya leaned in closer. “It matters. Save the king and prince, none have ventured to Jötunheim in a millennia…where would you have encountered such a woman?”

“Vanaheim.”

Drinking in the instant softening in his eyes. “I gather she wore a disguise.”

He nodded reluctantly. “Aye.”

She pursed her lips before reaching for his ale and taking a drink, asking. “And how does this impugn your honor?”

Slamming his closed fist into the table, grabbing back his drink. “It is a betrayal!”

Anya stiffened and retorted. “A betrayal against Asgard or you have been betrayed?” He paused to process what she was saying so she continued before he could think of how to respond. “With the exception of Lady Sif there are no female warriors of Asgard. My understanding is that of the Jötunn this is the same. How is your courting a denizen of Jötunheim betraying Asgard?”
“If any were to know they would say as much.” He muttered this lowly.

Anya suddenly felt insulted as a female on behalf of this other woman. “Perhaps the lady hid her appearance so that you would not judge her before you knew her.”

His hand ran through his hair without consent, disturbing the normally immaculately arranged golden strands. “That is what I do not understand. I would almost think this a trick except she has nothing to gain from this.”

*Trick?* A sudden feeling of butterflies filled Anya’s stomach. There were two who were known for their ‘tricks’. “Who is she?” A strange, nervous apprehension filled Anya when he froze, silently begging it hadn’t been Loki in disguise. “Fandral.”

Eyes darting around quickly, voice lowering. “Lady Death.”

The tension melted out of her and she suddenly felt like laughing. She restrained herself and instead gave him a questioning look. “You do recall where the lady comes from, do you not?”

His nod was reluctant. “Aye.”

Tone not quite leading. “If Lady Death in her natural state is a petite Jötunn…what did that make Prince Loki?”

Fandral’s eyes widened, the connection finally made in his mind. It would make sense if Hela was Jötunn, so was Loki. *That was what Hela had meant.*

Anya glanced down at the pendant that until recent memory he never wore and realized what should have been obvious: Fandral knew Loki was alive. Any lingering tension melted away completely. “The prince has been in Asgard since infancy, there is no possibility the late queen didn’t know where her second son came from. Even by some small chance she was unaware, Lord Odin returned from Jötunheim after the war…a war victoriously won by Asgard 1049 years ago.”

Voice filled with wonder, less to do with the revelation that the royal family held knowledge of Loki’s heritage and more so that she knew Loki was alive. “They know.”

Anya tilted her head slightly in acknowledgement. “Perhaps Prince Thor did not…but I know as fact that Prince Loki was unaware.”

And then he’d changed within the span of a few days. It was Jötunheim, Fandral was suddenly positive. Volstagg had been touched and injured by the Frost Giants, he could easily see Loki hiding such an event from them if he were also touched and unaffected…and being devastated by it. “Is he-…”

Warning him with one sentence. “Our prince is gone, Fandral.”

“Oh course.” Fandral nodded once sharply and pushed away his ale.

She looked out the un-shuttered window, thoughtful. “Our king and queen welcomed to their bosom our prince, and his daughter by extension. There is nothing wrong with falling in love with her, and it is certainly not a betrayal.” Raising an eyebrow at him. “If anything, those that hate them merely for their origins are the ones without honor.”

Hunching down towards her, voice soft. “But what do I do?”

Fandral started grinning as soon as Anya’s words processed in his mind. “Since when
For one brief, terrifying moment, Jane feared all that she’d read about Sigyn (Loki’s supposed wife according to the myths) had been true and there was about to be a truly horrifying Jerry Springer moment. She’d never even asked him if he was or ever had been married. Because she’d certainly never planned on ever being the ‘other’ woman. And as embarrassing as it was to contemplate, she wasn’t entirely sure she wouldn’t have stepped into the other woman’s personal space and told her to back away from her man. But then, thank God, reason asserted itself.

Loki was a red-blooded male after all, she might be concerned something was wrong if his eyes didn’t move enough to assess that yes, Sigyn was very beautiful. But there was no recognition there and his expression was carved in ice, an arm wrapped around Jane protectively. The only familiarity in Sigyn seemed to be that she knew him by reputation alone.

Sigyn nodded her head towards him in acknowledgement. “Prince Loki.”

His eyes flashed green as he glared between her and Azni. Jane felt more than saw him tense, instinctively moving to his right and casually looping her arm through his. She knew what was racing through his head. He perceived Sigyn’s presence as a betrayal by Azni. He was also calculating just how difficult or how easy it would be to kill the light elf.

Sigyn’s eyes, so hauntingly blue, moved to Jane, “Lady Jane.” Then she moved and they were both rendered speechless. She was in a full dress, yet she moved as if the fabric wasn’t even there. Loki’s feet seemed to take him outside without his conscious permission, all of them standing on the porch to watch. Spins and twirls, her hands formed as if holding an invisible weapon. Then she flipped through the air and Jane’s jaw dropped. Loki’s arms crossed, a finger to his lips as his eyes studied her movements. His style of fighting was quite different from any AEsir and he was never opposed to learning something new.

She ended suddenly, on the balls of her feet, before slowly resting her weight on the ground. Talia and Jane both started clapping but Indel started trying to copy her. Still no expression on Loki’s face, he looked at Azni for an explanation. He did not like being ousted, particularly without his permission.

“Let’s go inside, dear.”

After a pause of silent rebuke Loki nodded slowly to Azni. “Indel.”

The little boy whipped around, looking from Sigyn to Loki before running back up to his father and taking his hand. Loki lead and the others followed, the adults sitting in comfort while Indel and Talia whispered quietly to one another before running upstairs.

Loki remained tense, his arm wrapped protectively around Jane’s waist. At the top of the stairs, Mischief swirled into existence to remain hidden but capable of hiding the children if needed. There were no hidden passages in the house like there were in Asgard’s palace but there was more than one way to escape the second story.

Azni seemed to understand Loki’s apprehension without an explanation needed. “Your daughter thought you could benefit from learning light elf fighting styles and…Lady Sigyn is discrete.”

The elf nodded her head slightly, not oblivious to the tension but unconcerned. “I would
be quite foolish to defy Queen Hela. She has requested that knowledge of your existence here goes no further until you announce yourself. A request I will obey.”

Eyes calculating as he asked softly, “In exchange for what?”

Sigyn was quite aware of the tension. She guessed that the prince’s tension was wariness to her trustworthiness. The mortal at his side was also tense, but she too was a woman so that guess wasn’t hard to make. He was quite beautiful. If she had met him sooner she might have approached him, but she was a light elf and no self-respecting light elf approached a mated pair.

She didn’t even flinch at his question, blunt in her goals. “I sought citizenship on Vanaheim centuries ago in the hopes of one day ascending. With Queen Larnvidia indisposed the territory will be hosting an election. Queen Hela has offered to make her acceptance of myself in that position known, political backing that I will of course accept.”

He shoved thoughts of Larnvidia away as soon as she was mentioned. It was timed in such a way that he suspected Hela had something to do with it. He wondered just what the little harpy had done to finally break Hela’s control on her temper. A curiosity he would sate later.

It seemed a great deal of trouble to him. All of that just to teach him a new fighting style. And then Loki thought about it. Hela had a gift for subtly sometimes. She was hinting that he needed to know this, even if he didn’t have a clue why he needed to know. But then he exchanged a look with Jane who looked curious and realized he might not be the one to benefit. Jane didn’t have speed or strength, but the elf way of fighting was about agility and flexibility. After a considered moment he nodded in acceptance.

JÖTUNHEIM

Byleistr nudged Helblindi, nodding towards the awning where a now familiar figure stood. The Asgardian style of armor really did stand out against the ice backdrop. Helblindi smirked at his younger brother, who was clearly wary of their AEísir raised brother. “Come say hello.”

Expression mulish at his older brother. “I will not bow to him.”

Helblindi’s smirk grew. “I doubt he expects it.”

Byleistr frowned in confusion but reluctantly followed. “He was raised AEísir, isn’t he arrogantly demanding his right to the throne?”

Helblindi shrugged. “It never came up. I think he’s curious…in fact, he rather reminds me of you.”

Byleistr scowled at the very thought that he was in any way like a race who flaunted arrogance and stupidity. “I hate you.”

Loki looked warily between the two of them as they stopped in front of him, knowing Helblindi because of the crown that he wore but not familiar enough with Jötunn to tell them apart otherwise. “Loki, this is Byleistr, Laufey’s youngest son.” Loki had caught the way Helblindi was letting him retain his distance from being called a Jötunn, and he wasn’t sure anymore whether he was thankful for that distance or not.

They aren’t monsters. I’m not a monster. He hadn’t gained the courage yet to show Jane what he truly looked like but he was starting to think about it. Considering he never thought he’d ever be able to freely show that side of himself to anyone he considered it a step towards acceptance.
Nodding his head in greeting. “Byleistr.”

The smaller and obviously younger Jötunn scowled at him and Loki fought to keep a smile off his face. He also fought the strange impulse to pat the taller but younger man on top of his head. With his illusion he couldn’t, obviously, but it was tempting. Helblindi didn’t hold back, laughing and shaking his head. “Brother, he is but a visual trick of his magic…you look ridiculous.”

Byleistr shot his brother a poisonous glare and stalked back into the city. Loki felt himself freeze. He knew that look. By Hel, he’d taught himself that look. A look that he threw at Thor every time the great lummox pissed him off. Loki’s jaw dropped. “By the Norns…I don’t act like that, do I??”

The focus of Helblindi’s laughter traded from one brother to the other. Now it was Loki’s turn to scowl, crossing his arms. White teeth smiled from a blue face. “Come, Loki, there is much you need to see.”

Loki huffed but didn’t move just yet. “A question first.” The tall Jötunn tilted his head slightly in curiosity. “Is this all the Jötunn that are left?”

Helblindi’s face sobered a little. “No, not all of them. But this is the largest gathering. Those that are born small are taken into the caverns until they are stronger. Some never grow strong enough to leave but many in the village now were taken there as infants.”

Loki shook his head. “It doesn’t sound practical…generations of…weaklings to produce weaker stock…”

Helblindi nodded slightly. “And that is how our father thought. He thought to make an example of you, of what should be done and sacrificed to make our race stronger. He was a fool. From what I know you are without question in the nine realms, the strongest mage ever conceived. If more knew of your origins, it would make us more feared than we are now, not weaker. As it is, the other realms believe you are AEsir and that is why Odin’s hold remains fierce and strong.”

Saying it without thinking. “The other realms think I’m dead.”

Helblindi nodded slightly, already aware of this. “Then I am certain Odin is finding the other realms increasingly difficult to manage.” Gesturing dismissively with his hand, reading the sudden fear hidden in Loki’s green eyes. “We cannot leave our realm, Loki, who could I tell if I were so inclined?” Helblindi wasn’t going to mention the conversation he held with Odin. Reluctantly Loki nodded, reminding himself to mind his tongue more firmly. “Come, I thought to show you what little of our history has been preserved.”

They walked side by side down the main thoroughfare; heads turning in curiosity as the Jötunn king and the image of an AEsir passed. Some watched with fear but after seeing Helblindi walking next to the AEsir in their midst, unafraid, the fear faded even if the wariness remained. Loki couldn’t feel the chill in the air, but it seemed that way to him. “Would this be considered a cold time here?”

Helblindi made a scoffing noise. “This is as warm as Jötunheim has been in centuries.” A look of horror quickly crossed Loki’s face, there and hidden, but Helblindi saw it and sighed. “I told you, Loki, our planet dies. We will not last another 1000 years, yet another reason I wish to show you this.” Loki’s brow furrowed. “Long after we have perished in the past, you will remember us and pass it on to your children.”

These were as much his people as they were Indel’s. Part of the reason he had been so
mad at his father had been the complete loss of identity. If he allowed their end, he would be permanently ripping away that identity. Even if he didn’t want to acknowledge it, at least not yet.

Chewing on the inside of his lower lip thoughtfully before asking, “And the Casket can heal the planet?”

“Laufey-king abused it as a weapon but it is the heart of Jötunheim. What the rest of the realms mistake as cold death is warm life to us. I cannot say what it would do, if it would heal the scars or simply bring relief of the winters that grow worse with time, but I know it is what would allow us to thrive. Few survive who remember what that Jötunheim is like anymore.”

Regardless of how this conversation ended, Loki decided she would be returned at the earliest opportunity. Stopping, turning to Helblindi and not seeing Byleistr skulking in the shadows behind him. “Is that what you would do if you had the Casket back?”

Helblindi regarded him seriously. “I pledged to make myself a better king than my father, I will always do what is best for my people.”

Loki pressed for a specific answer. “But would you use it as a weapon once more, once your planet was healed.”

“No.” Loki raised a questioning eyebrow and Helblindi continued passionately. “Laufey-king sacrificed our future for a temporary solution that yielded our defeat, I will never allow such a price to be paid again.”

Words were so pretty, but they were words that he believed and he wasn’t easily fooled. Slowly Loki nodded. “I may visit you in the future, then.”

“Your father has, recently.”

Loki blinked in surprise. That was…unexpected. How many centuries had he heard about the evil that were Jötunn? Not directly from his father, but it was a state of beliefs that he allowed. Considering how much of Odin is in Thor, he almost would have expected his father to welcome war. “To set the terms of battle?”

“To negotiate peace.” But then his father had banished Thor because he’d tried to start a war. Odin had no idea how confusing that was. To spend millennia fighting and glorifying the art of war, but to punish a son for inciting a battle. “You visit us now, are you setting the date for when you intend to return?”

Smirking a little at the young king. “I mean to truly visit you. I would wish my son to meet his kin.” Helblindi had no idea how much trust Loki had just offered in that one sentence. But then as Loki studied those crimson eyes he thought that perhaps the younger Jötunn might. That eyebrow quirking again. “Although I warn you…he will never look like any of you.”

Helblindi smiled. “You will find, Loki, that to us kin is kin, no matter the appearance. On that day we will welcome you both.” Gesturing to a set of caverns that held all the old texts, wanting Loki to know where it was all kept for when the inevitable occurred. “Through the passage there are the histories of our people. The stories of Ymir. Others that you are probably unaware. Songs. Literature. Before the war with Asgard we possessed a great library…this is all that remains…” He had hope that this may not be necessary but he was practical enough to prepare in case Odin never convinced Loki to return as Asgard’s representative.

Loki felt the tension along his spine leave him. At least he hadn’t been the one to destroy
the library. He wouldn’t offer a date since he had other matters to plan at the moment. Wrinkling his nose a little, indecisive. “I may even come in Jötunn blue.”

Helblindi regarded Loki before nodding, amusement in his tone. “Then I will ensure Byleistr restrains his teasing to a minimum.”

Byleistr appeared at his brother’s side, asking Loki curiously, “You can change your appearance?”

“He is a mage, brother.”

Loki shrugged loosely, long ago deciding as soon as he knew the truth he would keep his changeling status a secret to all. A shapeshifter was accepted easily enough. Changelings held a stigma of being weak and it was the last thing he needed. He would reveal it to Jane, but not until he was ready to tell her about Indel. “I’m a shape shifter, actually, it was why Odin brought me back to Asgard.” Smirking. “And yes, I’m also a mage.”

Author's Notes:

Happy belated turkey day! I know, not quite what you were expecting when I mentioned Sigyn but I didn't want to go for the expected response. ;)

Next:

Hela and Loki chat; Loki asks Pepper an important question
Chapter 53

ALFHEIM

Hela liked to think that she had impeccable timing. Not always planned, she had a way of sometimes appearing in the right place at the right time. However, even she can have her off days. Amora had been moved, yet again, and the trail was now cold. This was getting annoying. And distressing. The latter more had to do with the worry of why they still needed the AEsir alive than Hela’s actual concern for the Enchantress. She was Lady Death, after all, few people held the honor of her concern.

This summons by Loki was a welcome distraction and she threw herself to his roof, pausing as several winged creatures stretched from their perch. “Um…”

Loki appeared behind her, crouching on the roof, and explaining their presence without prompting. “They imprinted on Jane. As soon as their hibernation cycle concluded they flew here.”

Hela gave Loki a strange look. “Cute pets.”

He sighed and rolled his eyes. “Indel has been hounding me incessantly for a canine now that Jane has said pets.” He even used air quotes when saying ‘pets’ and Hela fought to keep from laughing, knowing he’d picked up that mannerism from Jane and probably unaware of it.

A grin tugged at her lips, her expression knowing even as she asked, “You’re going to bow to his demands, aren’t you?”

He almost pouted. “I used to be frightening.” Hela lifted an unimpressed eyebrow. “Intimidating?” He sighed again when her expression didn’t change. “Perhaps as an early name day gift.”

Wagging her finger at him. “Don’t play that game.” He sent her a questioning look and she elaborated. “Give him the dog now or wait. I remember hating getting an ‘early’ gift.”

He could remember that as well and nodded to himself. She nudged one of the creatures aside before sitting down across from him. His thoughtful expression shifted to annoyance. “You sent Sigyn.”

Her eyebrow rose, asking softly, “And the question is?”

His expression was a cross between cunning and curious as he asked, “Did you specifically ask Azni for her just to distress Jane or was that an unexpected bonus?”

She toyed with looking offended for the barest of seconds before shrugging. “I plan to assist her in ascending to Queen of Vanaheim…Jane’s reaction was a pleasant surprise.”

Now his expression was only curious, head tilting slightly. “I thought you liked Jane.” Neither of them threw around ‘like’ or ‘friend’ freely, but they knew the other well enough to be able to spot it.

Hela shrugged slightly. “I do. But people I like have all been guilty of taking you for granted. I wanted to remind her that she isn’t the only one in the universe to desire you.”

It wasn’t even a contest to him. The most beautiful aspect of Jane was her mind and Sigyn
wasn’t even a close second. Sigyn was a beautiful elf, there was no question, but she certainly harbored no desires for him. Or perhaps she was just making her position clear that she would never approach him. “Sigyn isn’t interested in me.”

Hela’s eyes became distant for a moment. Her unique position as queen of the underworld and the current keeper of the gem of reality left her with knowledge of their past selves. “This Sigyn isn’t, no. But some before her have. Anything that happened before could happen again.”

Feeling that familiar chill up his spine every time he said the word. “Ragnarok.”

Her features set in resolve and stubbornness. “Not if I can help it. I’ve worked too hard to lose to fate now.” It wasn’t just about letting the cycle start over again. In this life she was so close in achieving her goal she could almost taste it.

Loki nodded slowly to himself before deciding to address the reason he’d asked her here in the first place. “I want to cash in the favor you owe me. What is your plan?”

Tipping her head back to laugh. As if she would tell him something that had taken so many years to develop. “Not for a hundred favors owed would I give you a plan of such…detail.”

Which meant she would tell him a specific aspect and nothing more. That would do. He narrowed his eyes, asking specifically, “Why are you trying to coral me to Midgard?”

“Am I?”

He nodded slowly in reply. “You are. Why?”

He green eyes flicked in his direction before turning her head to the left as if she could see the approaching instrument of destruction. “You know what’s coming here.”

Grimness tightened his jaw. He would need to warn the elves here. Soon. “The Chitauri world eater.” She nodded slowly. “It can’t generate enough power to consume a planet of Alfheim’s size, just this moon. Why should I not just go there?”

“But Midgard is tiny in comparison, only a third larger than this moon.”

His green eyes watched her closely as he asked, “Your point?”

Hela posed the question that had probably occurred to him. “Why come this way? What would be the point?” Two reasons that they both knew of. One would be obvious to even a layman, that the dark passage here would give them passage to Midgard. The second was less obvious. “Even with the moon gone, the dark passage that lingers above your front lawn remains. A nearly instant transport to Midgard.” Which would mean that not just the occupants of the device but the world eater itself would be able to move from here to Midgard.

After his supposed death he’d hopped through quite a few dark passages with Indel, deciding where he was going to hide. His last had been from Midgard to this moon. “It is not my concern.”

“I thought you liked Tony.”

Damn. She just had to bring that up.

She gave him a knowing look. “What kind of friend stands idly by and allows that friend to die?” He was not going to mention Miami. And if he had his way she was never going to find out.
“The God of Chaos befriends no mortals.” She just smirked at him knowingly but his thoughts had already started turning. She had a timetable in mind, and it wasn’t just because of the world eater. It was because his remaining hidden had become a moot point. Thanos knew he was alive. He didn’t know the circumstances yet, but he suspected she would tell him soon. “Does he know where I am?”

Hela regarded him for a moment, a thought to deny Thanos’ knowledge quickly abandoned. There was no point, not when the thought of that reality wasn’t sending Loki into a blind panic. “No.”

“But he knows I live.” She just stared at him silently and he slowly exhaled, surprised that his first instinct wasn’t to flee the nine realms. Was there some fear there? Yes. But then only a fool wouldn’t be afraid of Thanos and he wasn’t a fool. “Then why should I go somewhere obvious?”

Her amusement had teeth. “To kill the Other.”

“Save him for me, did you?” He purred the question, already turning over in his mind delicious scenarios of how to end the Other’s existence. “Tempting.”

“No yet.”

He stiffened a little. No. Not yet. He wanted to have Indel and Talia as old as possible and Jane as well trained as possible. “When?”

“When they arrive.”

He knew it was less than a year before the Chitauri weapon arrived, but he was curious if Hela knew an actual time table. Asking softly, “How long?”

“Soon.” Hela didn’t have an exact fix on the Chitauri craft. But even if she did and had the means of intercepting them; that would be one act of finality she wouldn’t make. Loki had to go to Midgard, but only when the timing was right. The humans needed to see him as she saw him. Loki pulled in a breath slowly. “Why the Avengers?”

Hela glanced at him, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully before shrugging. “I thought you would find them relatable.” He tilted his head slightly, curious and she elaborated. “They are not what a mutton-headed AEsir would define as warriors but you find their strength intriguing.”

He blinked twice before glancing away and crossing his arms over his chest. He wasn’t going to admit it out loud but she was right. Then he glanced in the direction of the village, thinking of Azni, G’dath, and Trax. The God of Mischief and Chaos may have no friends but he did. They would need to leave soon, for their own protection. “Are you going to tell them?”

Smiling at him slightly and retorted with a question of her own, “Are you?”

He ignored her question and instead decided to satisfy another curiosity. “Does everyone know I’m alive?”

Hela shook her head slightly. “Thor doesn’t.”

“Obviously.” Or else the thunderer would be here, dogging his every step. He rolled his eyes. Until Thor saw him alive his brother wouldn’t believe it even if he were told it was true.

“But he wishes you were.”
Loki rolled his eyes again. “Soft headed idiot.” But the insult was soft, almost affectionate.

Hela smiled knowingly. “You miss him.”

He shook his head slightly, all expression disappearing from his face. “I do not.”

“Yes, you do.”

Loki glared at her lightly. “If he had his way I would still be in Asgard’s dungeons, tucked away and forgotten.”

Now it was her turn to roll her eyes at him. “Frigga told him not to visit you.”

He froze for several seconds at the mention of his mother. Tone demanding, burying the hint of a plea as he asked, “You know this as fact?”

“Yes.”

It was one of the reasons he’d stayed so stubbornly angry with Thor for this long. He didn’t have to ask how she knew, and it was the one reason he envied her. That she could slip between the boundaries of life and death to visit the fallen in Valhalla at her leisure. “Why would she do that?”

Hela sighed softly and he was unsure if she agreed with Frigga’s request or not. “She didn’t want to confuse the issue since you were so determined to disavow them as family.”

His rage suddenly spiked. It was the one reason that he was still angry with his mother. Her, he would have acknowledged. It was that she lumped herself and Odin together as a package that made him deny her. He didn’t move, barking at her. “You know why!”

Hela didn’t even react to his raised tone. “Yes. I do. But you asked for a why that was true at the time.”

He knew without asking what she really wanted of him. The Other’s death was something they both wanted, but she wanted him to do more than that. He was not altruistic and he was certainly not going to turn into his brother. Saving Stark had been on a whim because the man amused him so his reason had been selfish. Protecting Midgard was another matter entirely. He needed a reason. Jane was good for providing them when he wasn’t quite sure what to do and that Midgard was her former home might be reason enough. Still, perhaps someone who would directly benefit would be better. Centering himself. “Go say hello, I need to talk to someone.”

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ASGARD

Thor stared darkly at the side table and paused to consider turning it over in his irritation. He didn’t, just because he could picture Loki rolling his eyes at him. His brother had never been very impressed with his temper. He turned away before he could give into the temptation and sat down on the steps adjacent to it.

He sat down slowly, carefully breathing as Loki had often instructed him through his temper. In and out. Nice and slow. Stop grinding your teeth. His lip twitched in amusement a second later. Or, if Loki was trying to use his temper to his advantage, the trickster would rile him up.

He supposed if he thought about it, he wasn’t necessarily angry that every lady in court and outside of it was giving him a wide berth. It was that his father seemed to be aware of the reason...
behind it and had decided to do nothing about it. It reminded him of Loki, being honest. Even during the years when the pair of them were at odds with one another. If a particularly predatory lady set her sights on him, Loki would set aside animosity to run them off before going back to hating him.

“Thor?”

Thor sent Sif an unhappy look but didn’t rise to his feet. “Sif.”

She shot him a perplexed glance as she approached. “Something troubles you.”

After a moment Thor sighed in a huff. “What troubles me you have little interest in hearing.”

She moved the sword at her side so she could sit near him. She didn’t say anything, she just stared at him. It wasn’t the same, talking to her like he would his brother but he was willing to try anything once.

“I feel as if I were a pariah.” She slowly lifted an eyebrow. It was eerily reminiscent of one of Hela’s unimpressed looks. “You remember the feast last night?” He asked her quietly, his words ground out.

He noticed her lips stretch into a grin and growled softly at her. She remembered. A few nobles from Asgard, Vanaheim and Alfheim had all gathered for a feast to discuss politics. Yet not a single female would sit next to him. They were polite yet it felt as if they were wary. Not to mention the light elves were looking at him almost strangely. As if they were measuring him against someone.

“I might remember some of it.” It had made her curious enough to investigate. It wasn’t his imagination. They were wary of approaching him. It didn’t take long to uncover the real reason started with one of the noble ladies of Vanaheim. Sif didn’t even bother to find out her name. An insignificant woman who had persuaded her way into Thor’s arms and his bed a few weeks ago. The rumor was she had been trying to trap him into marriage with a child.

Sif didn’t know if it was true or not but she did know that their night together had ended abruptly with a bottle of massage oil that warmed with body heat. It was safe to use in all sorts of creative ways, but the bottle had somehow been switched with a balm used for treating inflamed joints. Used in certain places, friction will turn a pleasant heat into unbearable pain.

It could have been an accident. The other ladies interpreted it as a warning. Actually, it wasn’t all too dissimilar from the antics Loki would get up to. For years she had interpreted his actions as jealousy. A tiny niggle of doubt settled in her mind that what she had thought was wrong.

Thor thought about saying something further, but decided against it. It was too embarrassing to speak of and he was in no mood to be mocked. Perhaps to Loki in a good mood but there was no one else to confide in. He focused instead on his breathing until he was certain his fit of temper had passed.

Sif decided to spare him and focused on something else she noted that night. “The elves seemed to be acting strangely.”

He was in agreement, but father seemed unconcerned with their behavior. “Father has dismissed it as typical elven strangeness.”

Sif felt like her skin was itching. She couldn’t stand all this idleness and they had all indulged it for far too long. She slapped her knee and threw herself to her feet. “I think it is high time for an adventure.” With practice she kept the grimace off her face as she proposed the destination as
a question, “Perhaps on Midgard?”

He was reluctant to venture to Midgard for more than one reason. He was not a coward, he knew that of himself. He was simply not looking forward to a conversation with Jane that could be painful for both of them. But it was more than that. He in no way wanted to address his brother’s death with the mortals, nor have to restrain his temper around those that would likely celebrate Loki’s passing.

He tilted his head slightly before a reluctant grin bloomed. “Perhaps we should investigate why the elves acted so strangely.” A warrior’s smile curled her own lips as she nodded in agreement.

MIDGARD

As soon as Fury had ordered the Avengers to the base, she’d been picked up by helicopter and taken here as well. It was a nice gesture but it was just a reminder that she felt more like an accessory in Tony’s life than a partner. Pepper sighed softly and slouched in her chair. Passive aggressive wasn’t her style, but Tony confronting her about why she was upset with him wasn’t his either. She loved Tony, but being a true partner wasn’t his strength.

“Confront him.” Slowly Pepper lifted her eyes, seeing Loki sitting on her desk and watching her intently. SHIELD had been quite generous, gifting her with office space and arranging things so that the area reminded her rather strongly of her office in Stark Towers. She could accomplish her tasks so the company stayed running while being where it was deemed safe. “It is the only way he will learn.”

Pepper felt her hackles raise, asking boldly, “How do I know you’re not just trying to cause trouble?”

He grinned at her in amusement, pleased that she was clever enough for critical thinking. “That’s a given, Virginia. I’m a trickster, after all.” He soundlessly hopped off her desk and walked around the office casually, looking at the pieces of art. He’d taken the liberty of creating magical interference with the cameras in the room. He might even make that little gift permanent since he doubted Pepper was aware of them. He debated telling her about them since her reaction would no doubt be entertaining. Pausing to stare at an abstract art piece. “I will never understand your concept of art.”

“Why do you think he never bothered to tell me?” She asked with more hurt in her voice than she wanted to reveal.

“About Jane’s good health?” He shrugged after a moment of thought. “Most probably, because it didn’t even occur to him to do so.”

“Why not??”

Turning around slowly, eyebrow partially raised as he studied her. Sarcasm was rich in his voice as he asked, “Because what kind of reassurance could he offer?” His voice changed suddenly, sounded strangely like Tony. “Not to worry, Pepper, Loki is looking after Jane….” Loki’s own smooth, rich tones returned. “I’m certain that would have been very reassuring to hear.”

What did it say about the life that she was living that that wasn’t a truly disturbing moment for her? Instead she slouched further. “I’m being ridiculously female.”

He tilted his head slightly towards her. “As a male, far be it from me to point that out.”
Slowly standing as it occurred to Pepper that Loki didn’t make casual visits, asking in alarm, “Why are you here? Is Jane alright??”

“Why are humans worth protecting?”

Pepper froze for several seconds before she was able to label what it was she was seeing in his eyes. He was curious. Searching. She couldn’t figure out if he wanted her to give him a good reason or was hoping she couldn’t but she’d give it a try.

“Because morally it’s the right thing to do.” The look that crossed his face made it clear that wasn’t a high priority on his list so she tried again. “Because it gives you meaning.”

Watching her curiously. “Explain.”

“There have to be two sides to everything. Light to dark. Good to evil. Mortal to immortal. If you got rid of mortals, all that would be left would be a bunch of immortals.”

Loki slowly nodded to himself. Or considering that Alfheim and Vanaheim were the true immortals of the universe, the AEsir would become the new class of mortals. What a depressingly awful thought. But then he had a better thought. If the AEsir were the representation of order in the nine realms, the mortals were the epidemic of chaos…and he was their God. How delicious.

Pepper’s voice pulled him from his introspection. “Is Jane alright?”

He studied her for far too long for the perusal to be comfortable but Pepper held still and waited. He seemed to come to some kind of decision before he spoke. “It depends, my naive little mortal, on how accepting you are to change.”

Her chin lifted just a little. “I consider myself adaptable.”

A bitter twist of his lip. “Most do…until I prove them wrong.” He slinked up to her, his gaze turning predatory. “Are you truly Jane’s friend?”

She could see it now. His humor and tricks were a disguise for something that was so undeniably otherworldly about him it made the wise cautious and the cowardly cower. If there wasn’t anything more to it she might scream for help. But there was more and it made her curious. An animal’s cunning combined with Tony’s intellect…but something else. She just couldn’t place it.

Gathering her courage, Pepper answered truthfully. “Of course I am.”

His eyes flashed green, pushing harder with his next questions and listening intently for even a half lie, “Even if she weren’t like you anymore? Even if she suddenly had five thousand years ahead of her and more magic than you ever shall?”

It hit her suddenly. A little boy with a stick, just as Jane had said. Perhaps her friend was completely oblivious to the danger she could sense on an instinctive level but she had a feeling if she stayed true to who she was, she had nothing to fear from him.

Keeping her tone even and her eyes sincere. “I like Jane for who she is.”

A hint of weariness crept into his voice as he faded. “We will see.”
Author's Notes:

The part in Asgard I added just because someone asked. Enjoy ;) 

Next:

A vacation on Alfheim
Just as promised, as soon as the snow started to melt and a hint of spring filled the air, Loki bundled up his family to take them to Alfheim proper to see dragons. Jane was so thrilled excitement was beaming from her every pore as she babbled nonstop. They all climbed into a vessel that reminded her of a long sail boat, but with a glass dome.

Yes, Loki could have attempted the golden passages but he wasn’t quite confident yet in Jane’s ability to cope with that form of travel, even with his protection. Besides, this way was more fun. Loki got comfortable in his seat, watching and enjoying the wonder passing over her face, the excited squeals from Indel and Talia. There were two other elves sitting calmly, almost bored.

After a few minutes the craft lifted smoothly, skimming over the tree line in the direction of the under-forest. The whole craft started to shimmer, rising higher and higher before passing through the blackness in the roots. The curtain of space moved, suddenly stars were visible and Jane gasped, watching as metallic sails lifted.

“Solar sails?”

Loki smirked. “Just to give us a little shove towards Alfheim.”

The stars were beautiful but there was nothing quite like the view. Jane felt her excitement bubble over, her hand finding Loki’s. She was in space. Actual space. A dream fulfilled that she’d had since she was a little girl that she’d never, ever thought would come true. Loki’s hand lightly squeezed hers and the two of them shared a smile.

The ride itself was relatively short, soon all of them disembarking. Within half an hour they were on their way out of the city. Each of them rode a horse, the pace a little bit more than casual but nothing she couldn’t handle. The supplies were distributed amongst the horses, Jane’s ride perhaps a little more burdened since she was far lighter than Loki. Mischief looked back with a grin, sharing a horse with Indel.

His son looked back at him. “Dada?”

Loki kept an eye on the trail but turned the rest of his focus to his son. “Yes?”

“Where are we going?”

Loki pointed in front of him. “This way.”

Indel giggled, as did Talia who was sharing the saddle with Loki. But even amused, his son was full of questions. “But to where?”

The trickster glanced at Jane who was watching him just as curiously. “There are lots of different kinds of dragons on Alfheim. We’re traveling to a meadow that traffics three of them.”

“What kind?”

Thinking about the location for a moment, Loki responded with his best guess. “There are mountains next to the meadow on one side and an old forest on the other. Half a day to the north is the Enosk River. With that level of diversity we might encounter an air dragon. There will be grass
pixies, which will attract small snap dragons. This early in the year the crystal dragons might still be awake.”

Jane wobbled in her seat as she jerked around. “Did you say pixies?”

Frowning. “Indel.” Mischief grinned guiltily and tugged the little boy back into the saddle, who had been doing a handstand on the horse’s shoulders. Grinning at her. “Yes, I said pixies.”

Indel turned around, standing up and trusting Mischief not to let him fall. “Do they grant wishes?”

Blinking at his son in confusion. “What?”

“Jane read me a bedtime story and you have to believe pixies and fairies are real or they die and they grant wishes.”

Loki slowly lifted an eyebrow at Jane who blushed. “After I read this book we’ll all sit down to discuss fiction…particularly if the author was a mortal.”

They rode for most of the day, Loki choosing a spot next to a pond to set up camp for the night. He sent Jane and the children down to fish while setting up the tent, choosing to put together one large one rather than several small ones, mostly for safety but also because neither child slept by themselves anyway so why waste his time.

By the time he’d built a fire the quartet returned with an impressive number. Mischief was rolling his eyes at Indel who was pouting heavily. The little boy pointed sulkily. “Tali cheated.”

Loki gave the she-elf a knowing glance, who shrugged at Indel. Turning his attention to his other offspring. “It isn’t cheating.”

Flashing Loki his climbing claws as he argued. “But you said my growing claws to climb is cheating so her singing to the fish is cheating.”

“You have a point. Very well, your claws are not cheating.” The two stuck their tongues out at one another. Loki sighed at Jane and sounded serious as he asked her, “Why did I agree to have children?”

A wicked glimmer in her eyes that was all tease as she replied. “A question I’m sure your own father has asked.”

He smirked as he replied. “Most assuredly. Especially considering he has a special sigh just for me.”

Sitting down and watching him spear the fish, setting them up to cook over the fire. Asking curiously, “He does?”

“Undeniably. I can’t remember exactly how old I was…before Hela. I think I was 250 years old or so…at least almost that old. For once I couldn’t even blame this on Mischief.” Mischief just smirked and listened as Loki spun a very old tale. “It was a delegate from Vanir, my mother’s people. From the time he arrived one of them was constantly complaining that the heat wasn’t humid enough. I wanted to be helpful so I pulled out some of the advanced spell books on altering weather. I was a little too focused on his personal space because I created a little black rain cloud that followed him everywhere. Everywhere.” They all started to laugh, picturing that little rain cloud following the poor man to dinner. To the bathroom. To his bed. “It didn’t take long for me to get dragged before father. After I explained he just sighed and sent me to my room. It didn’t help that mother couldn’t
stop giggling. For years after that he’d have that sigh waiting for me. Sometimes he didn’t even wait for an explanation. He would just sigh and point and I would go to my room.”

The kids continued giggling at the story but Jane caught something underneath it. A sadness. A longing. Getting up and dusting off her hands, she moved to the log Loki was sitting on and sat next to him, threading her fingers through his and squeezing the palm in support.

He sent her a quick smile of gratitude before pulling some seasoning out of storage. Plates and glasses were passed out, soon they were all carefully eating around the bones. The meat was so light and delicate, reminding her a little of a tender white fish.

After dinner, they were all leaning against the logs silently, looking around and listening to nature. Jane leaned a little closer, asking softly, “How much further?”

Loki glanced up at the clear skies, the sun slowly setting. “Weather permitting, by midday tomorrow.”

The fire popped and crackled, Loki grinning at her gasp in delight as he produced marshmallows. He’d had a purpose in visiting Midgard, after all. “Are we going to camp in the meadow?”

He shook his head at her as he responded. “No, it’s safer at the edge of the forest. As cute as pixies are, not only do they bite but they’re poisonous.”

Jane blinked at him slowly before sighing, pulling back a cooked marshmallow and humming in delight as she bit into the gooey treat. Soon the children were copying her. “You’re going to ruin every fairytale I’ve ever read, aren’t you?”

Grinning wickedly and biting into an apple, knowing if he indulged he’d be bouncing around for hours. “That depends on how inept your authors are.”

Sighing again almost in resignation but asking anyway, “Trolls?”

“Real.” Loki gave a little shrug.

Raising an eyebrow curiously at him as she probed further, “But?”

Since he wasn’t familiar with Midgardian tales about them he just shrugged again. “They are real, living in small villages with the dwarves.”

“Unicorns?”

Ah. Now those tales he did know. Such silly humans. His smirk was a little wicked as he replied. “Horse-like creatures, more aggressive than a Bilgesnipe.”

“They’re not magical, are they?”

Considering they were on Vanaheim they didn’t have to be. He tilted his head slightly in consideration. “They have been known to encourage plants to grow but largely…no.”

“Are dragons just on Alfheim?”

Loki noticed all of them were listening attentively for his answer. “No. Every realm has at least one kind of dragon.”

She blinked at him with wide eyes, her voice going high as she squeaked, “Even earth?”
“Yes, even Midgard.” Talia tugged on his tunic, diverting his attention to the little elf and asking her softly, “Yes?”

Talia whispered her question softly but didn’t cover her mouth, “Why do you say Midgard and Jane says earth?”

Jane smiled at the little girl. “Because we humans call it earth.” She thought about all the possible places where dragons could hide, and somehow remain a secret from humans this entire time. “Where on earth?”

Loki could remember tales of dragons that once were as numerous as the stars on Midgard. But then as the human population grew, so did their boldness. They hunted most of them to extinction quite a long time ago and reduced those majestic creatures to fairytales. It was little wonder he held such contempt for their species for so long since he absolutely adored dragons.

He was almost hesitant to answer before giving himself a mental slap that this was his Jane and she had a right to any of his knowledge she desired. His eyes still flashed as he answered. “Once they were numerous, spanning your lands from coast to coast until some brave fools started eradicating entire species. The water dragons adapted invisibility and live in the depths of the ocean.”

“Tell us a story, dada!”

Talia nodded excitedly in echo of Indel’s demand and Jane grinned. “Yeah, Loki, tell us a story.”

Loki thought about the tales that he knew, most of them gruesome battles that Indel would enjoy but neither Jane nor Talia would. Then he thought about the stories that his mother read to him as a child. In fact…

He reached into his dimensional storage and retrieved one of those precious books, opening to the first page as everyone gathered around.

The sun had barely crested the horizon for a new day and already the world was awake. The tall grasses of the meadow bent and swayed under a gentle breeze. Small insects buzzed and darted from point to point. A dragonfly paused on a blade of grass.

*snap*

A small creature with the body of a green lizard and colorful, translucent wings settled where the insect had been, enjoying his meal. Its mouth and jaw curved like a beak, opening and closing in a series of jerked movements.

“And that is why it’s called a snap dragon.”

Loki was perched on the balls of his feet on a tree branch, Jane next to him and using him for balance. Mischief was curled up at the base of the branch, Indel and Talia dozing on him. It was early so he understood. Besides, they had seen pictures of snap dragons and were much more interested in seeing a crystal dragon.

Jane leaned forward slightly, staring intently as she probed, “Wow…and they just eat insects?”

His expression turned mischievous. “And pixies.”
She stuck her tongue out at him playfully before going back to watching and sated her curiosity. She frowned after another moment of thought, asking, “Then what distinguishes them as a dragon instead of a lizard?” The little dragon answered for him, spitting a small fireball at a hawk that had swooped down too close. “Oh.”

Loki grinned and hopped to the ground. “Most dragons have some sort of defense mechanism like that.”

Grinning excitedly, leaning forward and giggling when he caught her. “Like water dragons.”

Putting Jane gently on her feet, smirking when her hand fisted his tunic and tugged at him. Who was he not to indulge in such a delightful request? His ducked his head enough to capture her lips, her eyes closing as she sighed happily. Their kiss was slow and gentle, parting languidly. “Precisely. Mischief, come on.”

The elder boy roused himself with a yawn since he didn’t actually sleep, stretching out his arms as he did so before he nudged the kids. Indel frowned and burrowed into Mischief’s shoulder. “Don’t wanna.” Loki sighed softly. This is what he got for skipping their nap yesterday and letting them stay up far too late. Loki rolled his eyes and lifted Indel into his arms. With a yawn his boy stretched for Jane. “Want mama.”

Jane’s eyes widened in surprise, happily holding the little boy but watching Loki closely for a hint of an objection. Indel was his son first and foremost and she had worked too hard in building him up to be careless now.

Loki was of course pleased that Indel had moved on to open acceptance of Jane. It’s what he wanted. So why was he jealous as hell that his son wanted her to hold him? Thankfully, or perhaps just perfectly timed, Talia wiggled far enough in Mischief’s arms to make it clear who she wanted to carry her and the crisis was averted.

They walked carefully through the meadow, Loki stopping to point things out as they went. By midmorning the children were awake and excited, trailing after an adult or in their arms to see things. Jane froze as she spied a pixie and it was just like a fairytale. Tiny and humanoid shaped with clear wings that fluttered rapidly.

*snap*

Jane grimaced and turned her head, scowling at Loki who started laughing at her. She shoved him with both hands and he let her, staggering his steps a little before his arm came around her shoulders. His head cocked slightly and with a wicked twinkle in his eyes he pointed. “Look up.”

A cry filled the air and **whoosh**; a long pale blue creature shrouded in clouds passed by overhead. Indel looked up in surprise while Talia clapped with a laugh.

Jane’s jaw dropped, glancing at Loki who nodded in confirmation. “Air dragon?”

“Air dragon.”

Indel’s green eyes just got bigger and bigger. “WOW!” He scrambled excitedly to Loki’s side and hastily lifted his arms. “UP. UP. UP.” Loki obliged him, Talia a close second in excited begging and soon both of them were on his hips so they could see better, pointing and gasping.

Jane sighed. “Wish I had a camera.”
Smirking, Loki tossed her something that appeared in his hand. “Wish and it shall be granted.” She fumbled for it, stared, then jerked her head back up to look at him in surprise. His smirk turned wicked. “I borrowed it from Anthony.” She blinked blankly for a second before realizing he meant Stark. Grinning, she started snapping pictures with the digital camera as fast as she could. The dragon turned languidly, weaving amongst the cloud banks or creating its own. Loki was shaking his head mournfully. “One of the laziest dragon species ever created. They hibernate nine months out of the year and scoop up birds mid-flight.”

The dragon stayed in the pattern of turns for half an hour before flying far enough away that it disappeared in the cloud backs over the mountain. Both kids hugged his neck before indicating they wanted down but they didn’t venture far, taking one another’s hands.

Indel hopped from foot to foot excitedly as he asked, “Are we going to see a crystal dragon?”

Loki grinned and pointed in lieu of an answer to a trail that fed out of the meadow and into the mountains. It wasn’t a well-worn path, but now that it was pointed out it was easily seen.

**MIDGARD**

Tony narrowed his eyes at her, demanding harshly, “Where the hell have you been?”

Hela took a look around at the new space the Avengers were currently occupying and all she could think was perfect. Lifting an eyebrow at the mortal, crossing her arms loosely. “Interesting choice of words. In spite of popular opinion I do have other obligations.” Gesturing to the lab he was in. “And you have been busy. As fun as it is to be at your mortal beck and call, duty first.”

He blinked in confusion at her choice of words then sighed in aggravation. “This is another of your riddles, isn’t it?”

She merely smirked and answered vaguely. “Maybe.”

He was privately pleased to see that whatever bout of depression she’d been wrestling with had apparently been averted. Still, even that pleasure wasn’t as important as the lives they were trying to save. “In case it escaped your notice we’re trying to save the world.”

*Ah, yes, lovely Midgard.* It was tiring at times, to remain in the company of mortals. So completely unaware of the other realms. She had plans she was implementing with Vanahem, Loki and Alfheim itself required her presence, not to mention she had duties to oversee the transitioning dead. “Hmm…well, my focus is on the nine realms so you will forgive me if I find your concerns petty in comparison.”

Tony frowned, asking suddenly, “Where are you from?” She raised an eyebrow but it wasn’t even close to an answer so he elaborated. “I’ve only ever heard Thor talk about this nine realms crap—you’re not human.”

Giving him an indulgent smirk but deciding to be honest. “I never pretended to be.” With one finger she pushed aside the suit Loki had dismantled and Tony was attempting to reconstruct. Sitting in the space she provided herself. “Stop being naïve, Tony. You are not and it does not become you.” Sighing when he just continued to stare at her silently with his dark eyes, trying to puzzle her out. “How long ago did you hear of me? I am much too powerful to suddenly appear on this planet and not even your sources can identify who I am.”

He studied her for another minute. He wasn’t worried. He’d never been in spite of how
much he didn’t know about her, which was strange unto itself. He wasn’t blindly trusting. Certainly not after Obie. Asking curiously, “Who are you?”

She waved a hand in his face. “Unimportant. I am here for something else.”

Tony was too curious as plans appeared out of the ether, furling out on a small table beside them already covered with his tools. Plans that he realized with dread were designed for a very specific purpose. He pushed himself back and away. “Forget it. I told you, I don’t make weapons.”

Hela flicked his suit with a finger. “Your armor says otherwise.”

Stiffly crossing his arms over his chest and glaring as he repeated himself. “I don’t make weapons.”

She grinned evilly. “The arrows and specialty projectiles made for your teammates says differently.”

His expression closed off completely as he shrugged. “That’s different.”

Hela sighed almost tiredly. Why did this stubborn mortal have to be so aggravating? She was going to have to explain herself and it was exhausting. “You’re a small, limited people bursting with potential to be so much more. But as you are right now, Thanos will utterly annihilate you. Your world needs a powerful ally if you hope to survive.”

Tony had no idea who she was talking about but he wasn’t about to budge an inch. He was never going back to who he used to be. “It has us…we’ll be fine.”

She tilted her head slightly in curiosity as she asked, “Will you? Your mightiest forces were at odds with one another in less than a year…if I were a trickster, which I am, that would be how I would conquer you.”

Shaking his head quickly, defensive, before forcing his expression to be dismissive. “Loki wasn’t involved. He’s dead, everybody knows that.”

She cocked her head slightly to the side, playing along. “So sure of that?” She hadn’t missed the defensive instinct and it pleased her immeasurably. A true friend was what father had been needing for centuries. Then she hid a frown to realize just how short-lived Tony Stark would be. She just might have to do something about that.

“Yeah…yeah I am.” Then he caught something knowing in her eyes. Just how many people knew the trickster was alive? “And so are you.”

She smiled as she asked, “But it does sound like a plan he might implement, does it not? Perhaps a plan that was stolen and used by someone not as capable in the execution.”

Paling, realizing she was more or less confirming his suspicions of something coming that had sent Loki. He had a feeling it was this ‘Thanos’ character, or someone who worked for him. Asking, ignoring the dread filling his belly, “When?”

Smiling while thinking of the Other and all the wonderful tortures she had in store for him when he truly died. Larnvidia was only a temporary guest in Niflheim since it wasn’t her due time but the Other, dead, would be an entertaining day for her. “This creature is already here and has been for a while, an agent of Thanos. It slipped in quietly and works through the shadows. It brought the Krimminger devices. It wants the scepter…and even if it is defeated, what will follow is worse. Too much for any of you to defeat. You have to get the gem off this planet and I can only think of one
So that was the gem that Chitauri plant had been talking about, the shiny one lodged in the scepter Loki had left behind after Hulk had kicked his butt. He could think of one way, too. “Except we have no way of getting Thor’s attention.”

She smirked slyly. “You may not need to. In the nine realms, timing is everything, and the clock is ticking.”

Groaning at her, but it was playful. “More riddles.”

Hopping off the table, she trailed a finger over the schematics that she would leave with him. It would be the perfect weapon for Loki, and the push he would need to see the humans as his people to protect. After all, it was why father had always been torn about the AEsir. They were his parent’s people, but he’d never been given the symbolic respect he’d deserved as a prince.

“Think about the scepter, Tony. You haven’t even been given a glimpse of what the God of Mischief is capable of.” Tony thought to mention Loki’s recent little parlor tricks before deciding against it. “He is powerful. Dangerous. Unpredictable. It is everything you fear, but it is also everything your enemies fear. You have no idea the kind of ally he can be for the people that choose to believe in him.”

And suddenly the puzzle pieces locked in place for him. She was pushing Loki in their direction. “He’s coming here? Loki, he’s coming here?”

Spinning around, loosely crossing her arms before shrugging with a single shoulder. The unpredictable aspect of Loki’s nature was a double edged sword. No one could make Loki do anything, except Loki. She could hint, plea, and beg but ultimately if he didn’t want to come here, he wouldn’t. “If all goes according to plan. You will not have enough time to make this once he does.”

Tony gave the plans a second look, not looking at her. He liked Loki. He really did. In a fight he would have the trickster’s back and the other man had certainly earned his trust by saving his life. Still, he was curious enough to ask, “Would you put your life in his hands?”

Her expression turned indulgent. “Tony, the end of all things is coming and that is not something that Yggdrasil wishes.” Tony turned with a frown, not familiar with whatever Yggdrasil is or was. He was going to have to see if he could look that up. “We all have a choice and yet some choices are more important than others. War is not won or lost by a single person, yet success will be almost impossible without him. We are already in his hands. The question is whether or not you’re going to give him a reason to fight for you.”

It was just like she said, Loki was unpredictable and he had a feeling the only reason the trickster had gotten involved in Miami had to do with him. He liked the idea that he could be the reason the demi-god turns from saving his own ass to saving everybody else’s. Tony Stark, the reformer of trickster gods. Judging by the way her lip kept twitching he got the feeling she’d picked up that thought from him. “I want your name.”

Hela gave him a careful look. She liked Tony, and she could see why father liked him as well, but knowing her name carried a lot of power for a mortal. Well, her full name. She supposed giving him just her first name would do no harm. Asking him without really answering, “Will you build this if I tell you?”

Slowly nodding, not as reluctant as he probably should be to think of a weapon like this in the trickster’s hands. “Yeah.”
“Hela.”

Giving her a shrewd look, asking curiously, “You would really trust him with something like this?”

“He is my father, Tony, I will always trust him.”

Whistling to himself as his eyes swept over her frame. “Damn, he sure can make ‘em.” Then his eyes widened, vaguely remembering something Bruce had read and tried to tell him about Thor and Loki and Asgard. “Wait-wait. Hela as in Lady Death, Goddess of all things decaying?”

Hela rolled her eyes. She should have known better than to assume he wouldn’t figure it out. It served her right for making assumptions. “Never say that around him if you value your intestines inside your body.” Then she smirked. “And yes.” Purring dangerously, asking him teasingly, “Still want to flirt with me?”

Smirking after a second of thought. “Anytime, gorgeous.” He glanced down at the plans again and frowned. “Wait, what is this core?”

She smirked and disappeared to the right. “You build and I shall provide.”

Tony shook his head, whispering to himself. “…if you build it, they will come…”

ALFHEIM

Jane watched silently, Mischief and the little ones sitting together with her near the mouth of the cave. They were all shrouded in spells to keep their presence a secret. It was several degrees cooler inside the cave, their breath escaping in small clouds. The rocks within the cave shimmered, reflecting light in a way that a pool of water did. It was beautiful.

Not more than thirty feet from them the mammoth cavern was filled with a dragon that looked every bit how she’d envisioned them. Tall and scaly, a majestic head and golden eyes. The long, silver tail extended from the body before sweeping back around in a gentle arc. And laying within that protective sweep was one egg, and one tiny baby dragon.

Tiny in a relative sense.

The little dragon was bigger than Jane was, but not by much. The egg that continued to crack and move was so startlingly beautiful. It looked like a diamond, or an oval crystal. Hence the name crystal dragon was all she could think. She was an astrophysicist, not a biologist, but she always had had an appreciation and fascination for the extraordinary.

Loki was as bold as ever but the dragon didn’t seem disturbed by his presence in the least. There had been a tense moment when he first revealed himself that the creature had turned those golden eyes on him. He just stared back until the head turned to nudge the little dragon that had just hatched.

Loki had nodded slightly, a pleased smirk tugging at his lip as he fished a stone similar to the one Hela had gifted Indel and Talia out of his pocket. Then Jane noticed that the adult dragon already had one of those stones around its neck. Huh.

She wasn’t sure what to make of anything so she just watched. If that were her…actually she wasn’t sure what she would do. If she were all alone, she suspected she’d turn and run. It wasn’t just because the dragon was so big and menacing looking. There was something so dangerous about
it that she could just sense. The strange thing was that even in such a small baby it was that same
sense of danger and…she didn’t know how to describe it.

Then she noticed the way that they moved. Smooth and graceful, the same head dipping
that the little dragon displayed to the adult dragon was done for Loki as well. And there Loki stood,
carefully putting the stone around the baby’s neck, helping the newest one crack through the shell
and allowing the adult to nudge him in the side with its snout. It was like he belonged, not out of
place in the slightest in the company of dragons.

The dragon’s head turned, golden eyes staring at their little spot as if it could see them. Could it?
Deep, growling sounds emanated from the dragon’s massive chest and throat, filling the
large space. Mischief froze, holding onto Talia tightly. Loki turned his head slightly and the growl
that he projected was just as deep but had a touch of menace to it. The baby dragon hunched down
instinctively, relaxing under Loki’s hand when his palm brushed over the top of its head. The adult
dragon turned back, golden eyes locked on green.

One blink and the dragon turned back to its young and Loki turned his focus to helping the
second baby escape the egg. It was like watching an intricate dance without words. Beautiful. Her
beautiful force of nature. A hurricane in its own way is beautiful, but if one isn’t strong enough to
withstand the storm it is best to seek shelter from the rain. And here she was dancing in the eye of his
storm and loving every minute of it. His eye caught hers, able to see her through his spells. He
winked at her and she smiled.

She wrapped an arm around Indel’s waist, who had stood up and was inching forward,
and pulled the little boy into her lap. He pouted up at her, his voice like their presence hidden behind
spells. “I wanna touch him.”

Jane didn’t even glance down. “No.”

He pouted harder. “But-…”

“No.”

Indel sulked and collapsed back in her lap, grumbling softly. “No fair. How come dada
gets to play with ‘em?”

Jane tousled his hair lightly. “Because he’s an adult who can take care of himself.”

He looked up with his green eyes widened for effect as he asked, “If I turn into an adult
can I touch him?”

“No.”

Since she wasn’t looking he started wiggling. “I want up-…”

“Indel.” Indel froze and slowly looked up, sorry he had managed to get Jane’s attention.
She was holding a stern expression she’d seen on Loki’s face a handful of times. The two of them
hadn’t really discussed her ability to hand out punishments but if it was to keep Indel safe she
doubted Loki would be too upset with her. “This is your warning. Unless you want to face the
opposite direction I suggest you settle down and start doing as you’re told.”

Indel visibly considered his options before leaning back against her, thumb wandering into
his mouth.
Author's Notes:

Ah, your typical family vacation...with dragons.

Next:

Hela finds Amora; Thor + Loki + Alfheim
MIDGARD

Charles Xavier held a deeply disturbed look on his face. Through the pane of glass he was silently observing the two mutants that were contained and heavily sedated. From SHIELD reports, they were being held responsible for the destruction in Miami. Ordinarily he was quite defensive of government agents making such claims against mutants but in this instance he believed SHIELD was right.

He was a telepath so the way that he saw with his eyes was the same as anyone else. But because he was a telepath he could sense what no one could. With his eyes he saw two unconscious men. As the leader of the X-men as well as an ally, Fury had requested him for his opinion. What he sensed in one of them, he would have expected a puddle of blood on the floor.

Bruce frowned as he walked up quietly, catching the other man’s expression in the reflection. “Is everything alright, Professor Xavier?”

The professor didn’t veer his gaze, asking gravely, “Who incapacitated Mr. Edwards?” He suspected it was another mutant and he was concerned if it was. It was rare to see this level of viciousness and disturbing.

Bruce sighed as he came up next to the older man. “We don’t know. Captain Rogers found him screaming near the point of origin. SHIELD brought him in for questioning but…”

Nodding slowly and completing the thought. “He won’t stop screaming.”

“He deserves worse.” Both men turned to the new voice, Hela standing next to them, staring coldly through the glass.

Charles looked to her in surprise. “I was not aware you do not believe in due process.”

William Edwards, a man who changes his identity like one changes a shirt. Born Lech Stanislaw, he was a notorious mercenary who cut a path of destruction, sometimes to assassinate a specific target at the cost of hundreds of people with his unique talent. Other times he leveled entire cities in remote locations just because he could. Hela turned slowly before giving Charles an evil smile. “There is no need for me to do anything before his due time…I already know where he’s going.”

“Then you are responsible?”

Hela calmly lifted a single eyebrow at Charles. “Did I rip out his ability like one would rip out an arm? No. Am I capable? Yes.”

Bruce shuddered but wisely refrained from commenting, just listening. Charles was already frowning again as he asked, “Then who did?”

Purring softly. “Wouldn’t you just love to know?” She was going to hold this over Loki’s head from now until the end of time. Smirking and speaking almost to herself. “Get in a fight with a cat when one is a mouse…a most expected outcome.”

A troubled look crossed Charles’ face now. He had hoped that she saw humanity with more significance that this. Asking gravely, “Do you truly view us with so little consequence?”
She huffed at him and crossed her arms defensively. “In the grand scheme I suppose I do. For some of you.” She shook her head to herself. *Some humans were just so sensitive."

<When dealing with someone capable of such acts, is it not prudent that I take everything said seriously?>

Smirking at him in amusement, hearing his voice whisper in her mind and deciding to reply in kind. *I suppose so, but you must understand that a trickster more often than not does not speak literally."

Her mind was rather interesting to Charles. Vibrant and deep, with knowledge kept tucked away in corners he couldn’t get to even if he were to attempt. Yet he could sense a youth to her mind. Almost as if she weren’t more than a couple of decades old. *Then where is the line drawn?>

*A line. Such an adorable idea. How does one temper or control chaos? This she thought to herself, not willing to share. Odin couldn’t, not in a thousand years of missteps and miscommunications. Thor couldn’t, no matter how hard he tried to physically do so. The only person who had any sort of power had been Frigga, and both Hela and Loki loved her because she’d never tried. She’d loved them for who they were and embraced all aspects of them.*

Her smirk growing as she replied. *There is no line. We do not like lines nor conformity.* She would leave him with one thought for now, a perspective he might appreciate later. *If I were to make a comparison, and granted it is a rather strange one, but if I were to do so…I would say that my relative age to Loki would be equal.* Charles slowly turned to stare at her, listening. *Coincidentally your relative age could be perceived as to that of Odin, his father.* She gave him a Cheshire grin now. If Loki found out he would be mortified and she was tempted to tell him. *With that would come the fact that, in this relative sense, he is not much older than some of your students.* She leaned in just a little closer. *Just how much of what your students say do you take at face value?>

Charles’ mind turned as he pondered. A child or even a young adult that was still in the process of maturing was struggling with their own identity as well as defining their place in the world. Their thoughts and feelings had value, but there was always an underlying reason that was sometimes contradictory to the words and actions. Feeling generous, she gifted him with a mental image. That of a young, black haired boy with a stick, poking at a sleeping crystal dragon.

Both of Charles’ eyebrows rose in surprise. “Was that real?”

Hela’s lip twitched, remembering that day. It was Loki’s first encounter with a crystal dragon. An encounter that not even his mother found out about. “Very. And it still applies. Although he has grown, technically he could be described as either being…and be described accurately.”

She gave Bruce a slight nod before disappearing. The scientist blinked in surprise before looking at Professor X who had gone back to staring at the two patients.

ALFHEIM

“Did you see how big he was? He was this big! And he had these huge teeth and the claws…”

Indel was jumping up and down, up and down and he was starting to make Loki queasy. Instead of saying anything to stop him, Loki just stopped watching him. Talia was nodding her head vigorously and hopping right along with him.
Jane looped an arm through Loki’s, asking curiously, “Weren’t you scared?”

He glanced down at her with a curious expression. “I meant him no harm, why should I be?”

She shrugged before answering. “Animals attack.”

Something dark settled in his eyes. “Dragons are not animals.” Jane blinked up at him once in surprise, hearing the menacing edge in his voice. She just tilted her head slightly, unafraid, and he not quite visibly shook out his ruffled feathers with a sigh. Mentor, he reminded himself. Unlike some mortals that he despised, she was eager to learn. “Dragons are natural creatures but they aren’t mindless beasts. They think differently than humans or elves but they have their own self-awareness, their own language. I would describe them as alien but not animals.”

Jane almost stumbled, stopping to stare up at him. “You can talk to dragons?”

Loki kept one eye on the children, Mischief helping them down the trail. “No, but for some reason Hela can.” He squashed the urge to pout about it, jealous she could do something like that and he couldn’t.

With a frown Jane spoke, thinking of how easily the dragon had let Loki near. “I would have thought she wouldn’t want anyone near her babies.”

“He, and we have an understanding.” She slowly lifted an eyebrow, unconsciously mimicking one of his expressions. “It was a long time ago. An old dwarf king desired a special gift for his millennial. A vial of prized dragon’s blood. Ah, but not just any dragon would do.”

Jane grimaced. “Crystal dragon.”

Loki nodded slowly, gravely. “The dwarves lamented endlessly that such a creature was extinct. Now this was all happening in the great feasting hall of Asgard. I can’t remember what the occasion was but Thor was deep in his cups.” Loki rolled his eyes in disgust. “Not that he needed to be drunk to spill my secrets…a worse gossip than mother. Anyway, he stands up and boasts that ‘Loki knows where to find such beasts!’.”

“Oh no.”

“Oh yes. So father stands to announce proudly that the princes of Asgard will journey to obtain it as a gift to the dwarves. Thankfully such a quest could not begin immediately. I sent Hela ahead to speak with the dragons, to explain what was going on.” A gleeful expression crossed Loki’s face. An adventure that took two weeks to orchestrate with a most dramatic conclusion. “In the end, he got his vial of blood. It just happened to be pig’s blood. Fitting.” No one was the wiser that the dragon they killed was an illusion, a quick switch to hide the swine given the injury. The result for all to see was an injury under the scales dripping a small pool of blood before the ‘dragon’ fell over the cliff’s edge to the bottomless lake below. “The dragons understand the concept of a life debt. The stones, among other things, are a reminder. If they cannot pay the debt in their lifetime, it will pass to their offspring.”

Feeling herself frown as she clarified. “That was a male dragon?”

His amusement restored, he lifted an eyebrow at her. “You thought it would be female.”

“It usually is.”

A mixture of sadness and loneliness filled him, even though he couldn’t put into exact
words why he felt so affected. “Crystal dragons have their offspring very late in life. He and his mate were the last two of their kind left.”

Thinking about the reason the stones from Helheim were given to Indel and Talia, she asked, “So that’s why the necklaces, or was that Hela’s idea?”

Loki shook his head slightly. “Mine, but not for an obvious reason.” The Helheim stones were distinct. Both protection and warning wrapped in a pretty package. “Its use is not to warn off hunters, it’s for them. No creature should have to continue on alone. It is a reminder that they are not alone. Dragons do not need protection, they just need a sense that they have a people.” He swallowed quickly, realizing this could apply to him. “A foundation.”

A slight smile curled her lip. “You like dragons as much as Indel does.”

Shrugging almost casually. “I suppose I relate to them.” Because he was as misunderstood as they were. Because for the majority of his life he had felt as alone as they now do.

She tilted her head slightly, inviting him to continue but he just shook his head. The day was too nice and his children much too joyful to allow bitterness of a past that wouldn’t change to creep in. She nodded slightly in understanding, asking instead, “Will he take care of the babies by himself or will she return soon?”

Shaking off his mood, giving her an amused look. “I suppose it depends on her mood. I imagine after being pregnant for so long she wants a little time to herself.” Her eyes widened as his grin deepened. “She carried the eggs for a hundred years, I would say she needed a bit of a break.” Jane’s mouth flopped open in horror.

Indel turned suddenly, walking backwards. “Can I have one for a pet?”

Loki stopped to stare down at his son. “I thought you wanted a dog.”

Grinning brightly. “I do, can I?” Jane giggled and slapped a hand over her mouth while Loki just sighed. Well, he couldn’t say he hadn’t walked right into that one.

Loki’s head turned just enough to spy a small nook just to the left of the trail, ignoring his son. “Mischief.” The boy grabbed for a couple of shirt collars and paused to wink over his shoulder. The trickster smirked in reply and changed in a swirl of green. Winking and grinning up at Jane as much as his fox form allowed. “Wait here a moment.”

She sputtered as he disappeared around a clump of bushes and slipped inside the nook. He paused to sniff the air, a wicked sparkle in his eyes. Just as he suspected. He ventured in further to an abandoned wolf burrow, taking the second passage to a warm den. Shifting from fox to child since his adult form just wouldn’t fit in such a tight space, he produced a pouch and collected what the wolves had left behind. Looping the pouch over his neck, he shifted back into a fox and quickly exited.

He appeared back on the path, yelping as Jane picked him up by his torso before he could shift back. He glanced back at her, his eyes narrowing at her as she started running her fingers over his head and down his neck. Mischief cackled and let go of the kids, following them as they continued down the trail. Jane hummed happily and followed last.

“I’m not really a fox.”

Her lip quirked. “I think I figured that out.”
Huffing and squirming. “You can put me down now.”

She didn’t say anything, just continued trekking through his fur with her fingertips. Instead of teleporting to the ground or struggling he settled in her arms and closed his eyes, tilting his head back just a little. She took the hint and gave his ears a good scratch with her blunt nails.

Murmuring softly, relaxing. “I may keep you.” Jane grinned, leaning down to kiss the back of his furry head.

The trip back they had been all bounce and excitement. The horses were returned and as a group they were wandering the capital in the general direction of the transports that would take them back to Alfheim’s moon. When a very familiar beam of light and sound tore through the skies both Loki and Jane froze while the children paused to make awed noises. Mischief shook himself, realizing what it meant and threw a panicked look in Loki’s direction. Not many traveled to Alfheim from Asgard and the odds were not in their favor that it wasn’t Thor.

Loki blinked several times. He’d entertained the notion of returning but he wasn’t quite ready although he couldn’t explain why. Then he felt Jane slip her hand into his and he realized his hesitation wasn’t just concerning Thor and Odin. He selfishly didn’t want to share his family. Returning to Asgard or at least officially returning to living status would force him to divide his attention. At the time he was seeking refuge but he wasn’t anymore. This had become a long vacation and he was loathe to return.

“You will need to decide, dear, or the decision will be made for you.”

Loki glanced over his shoulder while Jane sagged in relief and greeted the elf. “Azni.”

He could hear the familiar clomping sound of Thor’s heavy boots on the ground. The subtle sounds of metal shifting, which could be from one or more of them as their armor moved. Decisions…decisions. A devilish look crossed his face before he looked Jane’s way. Leaning down, ignoring his preference for secluded moments, he kissed her gently before whispering against her ear. “Run along while I discern why my oaf of a brother is here.”

She sent him a questioning look and in response he vanished. She could still feel his hand wrapped around her so he wasn’t gone, he’d just wrapped himself in shadows so he couldn’t be seen. A spontaneous smile spread across her face as she felt his lips brush her knuckles.

“If you intend to leave I suggest you do so now.”

Jane nodded, reaching up blindly to caress Loki’s cheekbone with her thumb before turning her attention to corralling. They all ducked around a building that would take them to the transports seconds before the visitors from Asgard came into view.

Unlike being treated to the fanfare the commoners of Asgard threw when a prince walked amongst them, the reactions of the elves was lukewarm at best. In actuality, the majority of them had no reaction. They moved fluidly, almost serenely to their destinations.

But Thor noticed one who remained still, watching them. She was focused on Thor with that small little smile elves held. Her eyes didn’t move in a sweeping gesture as those that had been on Asgard had, yet he still felt he was being judged against someone. She tilted her head slightly towards him in greeting. “Prince Thor.” The other warriors all stiffened since it wasn’t a formal address. She ignored their reaction, continuing the greeting. “I am Azni.”
Thor tipped his head in greeting, not offended. “Lady Azni.”

She glanced at his companions before returning her focus to him. “I was not expecting you to come here, child.”

“Child?” Thor looked almost like he’d been slapped, asking in surprise.

“I am 10,000 years old. To me, everyone is a child.” As she spoke three guards came up behind her. They took the position of deferring to her, but it was obvious they were present in case they were needed. Loki silently looked them over as the suspicion that Azni was much more than she presented herself grew.

Thor’s smile of humor returned, but it had a slight edge to it. A warrior’s focus was also in his gaze as he asked, “Have you noticed anything odd concerning your people, Lady Azni?”

Sif tipped her head slightly, her hand on the hilt of her sword as she spoke. “Perhaps a threat that you are in need of smiting but you dare not ask for aid.”

“A threat?” Azni asked this as she felt more than heard Loki huff near her ear.

“The elves that I have met as of late seem to be…measuring myself against someone else.” Azni tilted her head slightly, almost as if she didn’t quite believe what she was hearing and Thor explained further. “I am a warrior, Lady Azni, I know what to look for. You were doing the same.”

If Azni was surprised he noticed she hid it well. Instead her serene little smile remained. “We have heard the legends of your brother. No doubt that is where the comparison stems from.”

“Loki and I were nothing alike.” Thor seemed almost proud of that fact. As if he were now proud of Loki’s individuality.

“Indeed, opposite sides of the same coin.”

Thor nodded once, feeling the muscles along his spine loosen. “Aye.” As a warrior he was usually able to judge his surroundings and nothing here indicated an enemy lurking.

“No offense is intended, I am certain. An AEsir focused on intellectual pursuits is an intriguing thought to an elf.”

Volstagg boasted proudly. “It is quite obvious our prince is an AEsir warrior.” The insult to Loki wasn’t intended, but like always the rotund warrior never thought his words through. The soft growl from Loki’s bared teeth carried just enough that Hogun looked around sharply.

Azni’s smile dimmed as she spoke. “An elf looks beyond the surface.”

Sif could feel the unspoken tension and chose to elaborate. “Physically Loki and Thor were nothing alike.”

“Most elves never knew Prince Loki by sight.” Azni sighed softly, slightly irritated that whichever elves were in Asgard were so unskilled in their observations they drew the notice of the AEsir. “No doubt their poorly hidden assessment was merely to determine if you followed your brother’s path.”

“Thor follows the path of might.”

Fandral frowned at Sif but said nothing. Azni didn’t show it outwardly beyond a flatness
that passed over her eyes as she clarified, “You believe that a mage has no might?”

*<She never has. She never will.>* Azni didn’t make a motion to physically acknowledge the words she heard from Loki.

“I believe magic wielders have their place.” Now Thor was frowning at Sif. It was words he’d heard before, sometimes said to Loki’s face and sometimes whispered behind his back. He would not shame the female warrior now but later he would express himself. Azni refrained from making a surprised noise at the woman. A woman, born in a society who would argue that no female held a place as a warrior. “It cannot be argued that Asgard is the golden glory of the nine because of her warriors.”

“How truly short-sighted of you.”

Thor turned his attention to the elf as he asked, “What do you mean, Lady Azni?”

“A realm that only sees the benefit of one and not the other is a man with arms but no legs. Intellectuals are the innovators as well as the wielders of magic. Would Asgard be even a footnote in the nine realms without the Bi-frost? Who do you believe built it? Your skirmishes, who planned them? Who heals you? Who reinforces your borders?”

Sif was frowning heavily as she spoke, “Are you not the intellectuals of the realm? Where is your army to balance you?”

The soldiers at her back stood at attention. Azni returned to sounding slightly amused. “Ah, you believe that the legions of Alfheim that train, even now, will be laid to waste under your AEsir might.”

“Oh obviously.” Sif’s agreement was almost ferocious.

Thor opened his mouth to speak, but snapped it shut when Loki’s voice whispered in his mind. *<You are a prince of Asgard on foreign soil. Your words can be taken as threat so tread lightly, oaf.>*

Loki had said such things to him before on different adventures. He just assumed he was remembering them and for once he decided to heed the wisdom behind them. Thor nodded once as he spoke. “Alfheim is ally to Asgard so I do not speak as a threat, only as a comparative opinion of strength. You have not the number nor the might to defeat us.”

Fandral made a sound of agreement, yet his eyes said he was of a different opinion.

That small little smile made another appearance. “That is what was being assessed. There is no threat so you are free to wander as you may, but there is nothing for you to find.” She turned her attention to Thor without really addressing their statements. But then again she was a light elf. As a general rule, light elves didn’t start arguments of futility. Instead she addressed Thor with a reassuring tone. “Do not feel shame. It is difficult to live up to such a brother’s legacy.”

Thor blinked at her in surprise as she tilted her head and departed. Though he looked around almost frantically as he heard what had sounded like Loki’s laughter riding on the wind.

NOWHERE

Amora shivered in a pain-filled heap in the corner. She’d stopped understanding their mocking words ages ago. Everything hurt, but it was beyond pain. She felt cold. She wished it
would numb her but it didn’t. She’d given them almost everything she knew, which admittedly
wasn’t much, but they hadn’t been satisfied with her words. Only when her screams had matched her
words, when her throat had torn so she couldn’t scream anymore, then they’d stopped.

And then she’d been handed over to Malekith.

She’d known pain. Anger. Despair. She’d never known such sadism existed.

She was just so tired, the ground beneath her painted in rusted streaks. Tiny droplets of
crimson that had collected in a symphony of suffering. She wished fervently that she could sleep and
never wake again. It had to be better than her current fate.

Weakly she stared at a distant shape, unblinking. It formed out of nothing, the edges
blurred and surrounded in misty darkness. It felt warm. Safe. A figure walked forward and Amora
recognized those dark green eyes. Her lips formed the word, though she couldn’t make a sound.

Amora’s capturer’s may have hidden her well but Hela was the Goddess of the
Underworld. You couldn’t hide those knocking on death’s door from her. With one look Hela knew
there was no saving the Enchantress. Even without the physical damage, the AEsir had given in.
Given up. It would be cruel to force her to continue.

Then Hela smiled. A gentle, welcoming smile unlike any the enchantress had ever seen.

_Are you ready?_

Weakly Amora nodded but couldn’t force her arm to move. Reaching down, Hela claspéd
her hand and pulled her to her feet. The pain, the weakness, the cold was shed from her body and her
memory like an old skin. She’d never felt so free.

There was understanding in those dark green orbs. The trickster queen turned as the tear in
the fabric of the universe carefully widened. A path appeared before them, leading to a land of gentle
twilight and quiet peace. Hela led and she followed.

_Lady Death welcomed Amora to Helheim._

*Author's Notes:*

_If the last scene is confusing not to worry, all will be explained. It's not the last we've heard of
Amora, just the last that the living has heard from her._

*Next:*

_A new queen for Vanaheim; a pet for Indel; a brief peak at Niflheim*
Chapter 56

VANAHEIM

The election had brought out many of the old families, all of them with an eligible son or daughter who could take the throne for the territory. Even though there were three territories ruled over on Vanaheim, this one held the most power and influence. Essentially whoever sat on this throne would rule over Vanaheim with a pair of queens who acted as window dressing.

There may be quite a few old families but only two of them held any influence. However, the male candidate was a whoring fool and the female candidate had barely reached her majority. Neither of them had any skills in diplomacy, nor any experience with the other realms.

The Vanir all stiffened as Hela walked the distance of the throne room. Larnvidia’s uncle had taken an extended leave from court, the official Vanir Viceroy charged with hosting the election. He bowed stiffly, staff in hand. “With all due respect, Lady Hela, the Vanir will never bow to your reign.”

Hela felt like laughing in the man’s face so she did. As if she wanted to rule yet another realm. Were the other races truly so limited they thought that was my ultimate goal? Idiots. Not that she was surprised. Smirking and turning as a figure glided into the room. The embodiment of beauty and sunlight, a light elf draped in an elegant, flowing gown of white, silver, and gold. Her hair was white-gold and eyes a haunting blue.

The Vanir Viceroy stiffened in recognition. “Lady Sigyn.”

Many courtiers backed up in respect. The only light elf to ever seek citizenship of Vanaheim. A well-known elf who had fought with the Vanir during a minor skirmish with the AEsir. The battle had been lost but her skill as a soldier was recognized.

Hela grinned at Sigyn. “I believe this will be a brutally short election, milady.”

Impish smile tugging at her own lips, Sigyn paused to add her name to the ballets. “Indeed.” Hela pivoted to leave, dress flowing behind her but pausing. “Lady Hela? Do alert me should you encounter difficulties concerning your friend.”

Hela could make use of Sigyn once her status as Queen of Vanaheim was secured. The election would be short, the win assured. “I will hold you to that.”

Sigyn turned slightly, ignoring the courtiers fluttering around her. “If Yggdrasil is as invested in his future as we sense you have but to ask.”

The trickster queen gave the elf a more thorough look. “Politically, what are your thoughts?” This was a woman who was well aware of the current political climate amongst the other realms. A woman that Hela had decided to include in the knowledge of what was to come. Hela didn’t give her the name of their adversary, just the knowledge that war was coming with an enemy who would not be beaten by a single realm.

Sigyn gave the matter some thought, picking the realms that had the strongest ties to Loki or to herself. “Hmm...the AEsir, if only because they cannot help involve themselves.” Both women shared a small smirk. “Vanir. Elf-kind obviously. The Jotnar are a distant possibility if blood ties are as close as Et’ana indicated.”
Hela smiled with a nod of her head and walked away. Ah yes. The Et’ana, the queen of the elves. She held but one power now that the light elves were Senate run. Hela would soon need to call the light elves to war so she was a most useful ally indeed. Things were coming together nicely, the pieces being carefully slotted into their necessary places.

The next would be the most difficult. It was almost time for Loki to take his place on the chess board. Either with honesty or with deception, he would need to be convinced to do so. The problem was father could be so uncooperative at times. She wouldn’t tell him all of her plans, mostly because he would object if he knew. Still, it was almost time to give him a firmer nudge in the right direction.

ALFHEIM

Indel tried to peek over the table but it was too tall for him, watching curiously as Loki worked. Jane was sitting a few feet away, legs pulled up and her arms wrapped around them, just as mystified as the boy. Talia was standing right next to Indel, looking just as curious although there was a touch of apprehension on her face.

Loki referenced his grimoire one more time before addressing his full attention to the items he’d laid out. Some items were more recently obtained than others, but he was a mage. It was always good to have a collection of odds and ends in storage in case it was needed. Sand from Earth. Dirt from Svartalfheim. Grass from Asgard. A bowl filled with shallow water from Alfheim. And below the bowl, the pouch of fur that he’d retrieved from the wolf’s den.

“Should we be in here?”

Loki smirked at Jane and whispered under his breath, the sound carrying as it swirled around them. Wind whispered across the rafters and slipped in through the floorboards above them, warm and cool all at once. The ingredients moved by the wind collected into the bowl, swirling and grinding themselves to the finest powder.

With a gesture the pouch fell open and the dull grey fur fell into a disheveled clump. More words fell from his lips, his eyes closed as the sound carried and power could be felt swelling in the room. Indel’s eyes grew bigger and bigger before running back to Jane and taking her hand. Talia ducked under the table, clinging to Loki’s leg and squeezing her eyes shut.

He was curious. He was scared. He was excited.

The dull, frizzy fur straightened and sharpened. The color shifted from grey to a silvery pewter that reflected the light like a snowflake. It multiplied and replicated itself, growing into a shape. A body. A short tail. It started to look like a small wolf pup with four black paws, eyes closed but fur still that strange, sharply pointed condition. The powder exploded from the bowl and showered down over all of them, Jane quick to cover Indel’s head to protect him. It didn’t sting. It didn’t linger. It faded as soon as it touched flesh. A whimper caught both of their attentions and they lifted their heads.

The little wolf picked his head up, making a yipping sound and tail moving in excitement. This was no ordinary wolf and it was easily noticeable at first glance. The golden eyes glowed, an outer ring of bright green containing the dominant gold. The pup made a displeased grunt as Loki picked him up by his torso. As sharp as the fur looked, it was soft to the touch. Raising an eyebrow to himself before snorting and looking at his son. “He has my attitude, I pity you already.”
Jane gaped and sputtered as she exclaimed. “He-…what??”

Sighing, a little pale from such a taxing spell as he sat down with shaky legs on the first available surface, his free hand on Talia’s head to reassure her. There was no point going into the discussion just now that she was dying to have about a creature that was alive but not alive. It would take centuries into her studies before the concepts would make sense. It was a similar concept to Mischief’s existence, except his playmate was purely from his magic and imagination. This little wolf was as independent as Hela and would grow with time, but unlike Hela he would never grow beyond his role of protector and would never produce pups. “I decided that Indel should have a protector and something magical is the most practical solution for a growing mage.”

Indel looked at his father with utter disbelief as he asked, “He is supposed to protect me?”

Loki chuckled to himself. “I meant later. He grows as you do.” He held up the wolf and Indel tentatively took him, grinning to feel the sharp yet soft fur. Talia looked a little more cautious but a gentle nudge from Loki and she reached out to pet him.

“So he’s my pet?”

Loki’s voice was instantly stern, correcting his son firmly. “He is your protector.”

Indel was still grinning widely, not about to be dissuaded. “But you made him from all of us so he’s Jane’s, and Tali’s and yours also, right?”

Jane raised an eyebrow, not sure how she felt about a creature made from her without her knowing it. “You made him from me?”

Loki blinked, realizing she wasn’t pleased or flattered. “Um…”

Indel was jumping with excitement, petting as he talked. Talia giggled as a happy tongue licked her face, tail wagging enthusiastically. “It’s a property spell. It…um, takes things from each of us. So since we’re all smart he’ll be smart.” Giggling as his fingers got nibbled. “And since dada is grumpy he’ll be grumpy.”

Narrowing his eyes at his cheeky son as he asked, “Do you know what I do with clever little boys?”

Indel just kept grinning as he asked, “Love them?”

The boy squeaked as strong arms scooped him up and hugged him, a gentle kiss pressed to his temple. “I only love this clever little boy.”

Jane sighed away her irritation that Loki did it without asking. “Well, I guess that’s one more Norse Mythology got right.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed at her, pointing a finger at the wolf. “That is not my child.”

She just shrugged and countered. “Your creation, same thing to us mere mortals.”

Arching an eyebrow at her. “I see no mortals in this room.” A small smile curled her lip since that was true. She was human, she would always be human, but she was no longer mortal.

Indel giggled when the puppy started licking his chin, ignoring the adults flirting since he was well used to it by now. “What can I call him?”
Sighing in resignation at his son. “Well, since he is your pet you may name him whatever you wish.”

Indel and Talia shared a look before that small little elf smile appeared. Grinning brightly in agreement with his sister after thinking carefully. “Fenris!”

Jane started giggling uncontrollably and Loki groaned low in his throat. If Thor found out he was never living it down. If Odin found out he was as good as strangled. That’s it. He was never going back to Asgard. Putting Indel down, commanding softly. “Go play.” Indel dashed up the stairs, Talia quick to follow and Fenris in his arms. Jane instantly switched to concerned when Loki made to stand and didn’t succeed particularly well.

Chiding him gently, recognizing the signs of magical depletion. “Loki.”

He huffed and sat back down. Snarling softly in irritation. “I used to be able to do spells like this with ease.”

She went to the opposite worktable and retrieved a vial of restorative before handing it over. “On Asgard.”

He gave her a strange look before gufaffing it, asking, “Where else?”

She gave him an unimpressed look at his display of temper and sat down next to him. “You were the one that told me your spells would always be stronger on Asgard because in here and here you are AEsir.” She touched his head and his heart lightly and he made a disgruntled noise. “When did you suddenly become my instructor, Miss Foster?” Tone insistent, ignoring his attitude. “And you told me that the further from home-yes home stop giving me that look-the more draining it is.” Sometimes it was like dealing with a third child when he got into these moods.

He blinked in surprise a few times, eyes showing he was calculating something before understanding surfaced across his face. No matter what Alfheim decreed or what citizenships he accepted, the fact remained that of any realm, Asgard was the mother that had sheltered and strengthened his gift. He was born on Jötunheim. He was accepted on Alfheim, but the heart of a realm cared nothing for the laws and rules their children developed.

Like it or not, he will always be a child of Asgard. “Oh.”

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**NIFLHEIM**

Hela strolled along the stone path of Niflheim. On either side the demons ran in delightful amuck, tormenting the wicked. Physical. Emotional. Psychological. They all had their delights just as their victims all required different punishments for an evil life.

This was the world that was the opposite of peaceful. Filled with fire and ice. The sun was too far away to provide warmth and when it rained it was acid. A world of extreme duress and blood-curdling screams. She couldn’t wait for the Other’s due time.

She stopped to stare at her newest creation. A cage fifteen feet tall, narrow, but long enough that it resembled a dog run. Crisscrossed bars on all six sides, and the only door was on top.
Stepping off the path, she came up to the demon who immediately bowed to her. He had been one of the demons to try to take over Helheim before she and Loki subdued them and returned them to Niflheim. “How is it holding up?”

She actually had no idea where demons came from and she had decided long ago she was better off never asking. It spoke with a rasping voice and the smell was…unpleasant. “It withstands Vanir strength.”

Making a face at him. Demons here didn’t have names, which was just as well because there were far too many here to keep individual track of. “Not very impressive. Pull a few demons. Without using a key see if they can get to her. If they can, reinforce it, uru if you have to.”

“The AEsir hold that metal, your grace.”

Glancing at him, eyes flashing. “Your point?” She had Niflheim sectioned off between the different races. The AEsir she had working tirelessly in creating armor and even a liquefied version of uru. It was what Mjolnir was made from. It would be invaluable to her against a very special titan.

He bowed to her immediately, many of them cowering from her but she ignored them. Scraping a claw against the metal. In fact, uru was useful for more than just its strength. It more than any metal absorbed magical properties. “Inlay the uru with a magical ward. Put Morgana to the task. I don’t want our sneaky telepath being able to convince his way free.” With the magical ward absorbed into the liquefied uru, once hardened it would allow for no penetration of telepathic influence. Essentially the body and the mind would be trapped within.

Orders were barked and followed, more than a dozen demons scrambling in different directions.

“Mistress? Who is this for?”

Smiling cruelly, satisfied at the whimpering wreck Larnvidia had become. The woman had harmed Loki with treachery and cruelty, and Hela would always be certain that those that harmed him settled the debt. “For an eternal guest who will be with us very soon.” The former Vanir queen timidly lifted her head, her clothing in tatters. Wounds healed remarkably quickly in Niflheim, because what would be the point in torment if the victim is in too much pain to feel it? With each sunrise, every wound heals to begin the process all over again. Hela would be unforgiving if the demons killed Larnvidia without her expressed permission…but Larnvidia didn’t have to know that. Addressing the foolish woman whose cruel ambition ultimately led to her downfall. “And I may even return you to Vanaheim when I am satisfied but the spell I will weave upon you will make you as depressingly ugly on the outside as you are within. Soon your people will choose a new queen to replace you.” Her smile growing, since the worst punishment for this vain little queen wasn’t pain or death, it was exiled obscurity. “You will live out the rest of your lonely days on the outskirts of society…known as Angrboda.”

The demon licked its lips greedily, eager to feast on such delicious emotions. “Revenge, my Queen?”

Revenge? No, because the satisfaction wasn’t for herself. “No. Vengeance.”

ALFHEIM

Loki stared up at the skies, watching Jane’s pets soar through the air. He wasn’t sure what
to do about them. They weren’t a threat to himself or his family, his musings were more of a problem for later. Sooner or later the world eater would be destroying this little moon, and any inhabitant left on it. Then he smirked, the answer simple. He would send them to Midgard.

Mischief huffed at him, appearing next to him. Giving his adult self a woeful look. “Do I have to?”

Loki lifted an eyebrow at the boy in surprise. “I thought you enjoyed fun.”

Giving Loki a pointed look. “We like Tony.”

Loki pulled a face to himself. Yes, the chaos wreaked by unleashing her pets on Midgard would be delightful but it would be an inconvenience to Tony. This was why he hated making friends. It always handicapped his fun. Turning his head to the left. “Then there’s only one alternative.”

Mischief slowly lifted an eyebrow. “Only one?”

After a moment of consideration Loki shrugged. “Well, one that I would consider.”

The boy still looked doubtful. “He’s going to figure it out.”

Loki snorted at the very thought. “Thor isn’t clever enough to figure it out.” Not where they came from nor who had sent them.

Mischief gave Loki a look and corrected him. “Odin will.”

Shrugging casually, his mind made up. If he couldn’t send them to Midgard then he would give them to Asgard. Of course it wouldn’t take his father long to figure out where they came from but then he was far from stupid. “Father already knows I’m alive, I risk nothing.” Mischief smiled slowly, prompting Loki to ask, “What?”

“Is he father?”

Slowly Loki sighed to himself but didn’t bother trying to lie. Odin was his father. It had taken a while but he belatedly realized he’d been saying it with frequency lately. “He is as much my father as I am Talia’s. I did not have a hand in creating her but she is my daughter as Indel is my son.” Nodding to himself. “He named me Odinson and it is who I am.”

Mischief sat down next to him, stretching out on his side. “Took you long enough.”

Loki did not consider seven years a long time to come to grips with who he was as a person. Not considering how old he was and the way he had found out. He calmly glared at his playmate. “Do not force me to reimage your hair.”

Mischief scowled at the threat. They were both very particular when it came to their hair and he could only imagine what Loki would turn it into. “Try it and I’ll teach Indel everything.” Loki gave him a soft sneer and moved his gaze back to the sky. Mischief’s tone held warning to it, thinking of how Odin could respond. “He could send Thor.”

Another sigh but he didn’t doubt the truth. Loki was actually surprised his father had left him to his own devices for as long as he had. Even without the differences in the rates of time it had been almost a year. “At some point my brother will be underfoot. At least this will be worth it.” Mischief grinned again, pleased, and disappeared.
Loki turned to the right as Hela sat down next to him. Her question was softly spoken, the topic not needing to be clarified. “Did you finish?”

He’d put up an early warning system, like a magical netting around here and the village. As soon as the world eater started tearing through the atmosphere he’d know about it. “If you are referring to the borders, yes.”

“Good.”

He gave her a thoughtful look. “Why do you ask?”

Hela lifted her right hand, displaying the pendant resting in her palm that had belonged to Amora. There was still specks of dried blood on the metal. That was not a piece the enchantress would ever be without, unless she could never return to Asgard. Being dead would be a very good reason.

Loki nodded as if he already knew and asked the most important question, “What did she tell him?” If Hela was here to give him news about Amora, he knew it would have something to do with Thanos as he wouldn’t truly have cared otherwise.

Shrugging, the pendant vanishing as she replied. “Everything she knew. Admittedly it is not often I pity the living but she well earned it.”

Looking back up at the sky, his tone mildly curious as he inquired as to her fate, “Niflheim?”

Hela let her lips twist into a mildly disapproving frown at him. “So close it was up to me to decide but she squeaked into Helheim.”

His head jerked back around, surprise in his voice, “Helheim??”

Her lip quirked. “She knew.” She tapped the bracelet on his wrist with a finger. An Alfheim library card was unmistakable and the fact that he could wear it making his location among the elves a high probability.

“My status has gone for Thanos from a suspicion to a fact that I’m alive and that is her doing.”

Keeping her tone even, but a hint of steel underneath. “But she didn’t tell them where you are. That counts for something to me.”

He pulled back just a little, realizing he was just going to have to get over it because he wasn’t going to sway her. “They killed her or you put her out of her misery?”

“Not everyone can be as strong as you.” Loki paled at the meaning that wasn’t explicitly said but he understood completely. After Thanos had milked her of anything useful she’d been handed over to Malekith. Hela shrugged a little, not looking at him. “She gave up.”

That sobered him for a moment. Then he nodded slightly. It was done, no reason to continue bitching. “How long before they arrive?”

Hela looked up herself, though neither he nor she could sense them. It was a running calculation in her head alone. They should have been here already, but depending on how many planets and moons they’ve been destroying between there and here would alter the timetable. “Not long. I suggest you make any final preparations now.” He grinned as the circling creatures
disappeared. Slowly she raised an eyebrow at him. “Do I even want to know?” At his devilish look she shuddered. “Nope. I withdraw all hints of wanting to know.”

He chuckled softly, and loosely crossed his arms. After several moments of a comfortable silence he inquired softly, “This is merely idle curiosity but did you have anything to do with Larnvidia stepping down as queen?”

“Maybe.”

His eyebrow quirked in her direction. “Why? I’ve had other lovers betray me but something about her has always angered you.” She just slowly shook her head. He wasn’t ready to hear the truth and would lose all focus if he did. His eyes narrowed before allowing the topic to shift. “Why have you permitted the Other to live so long?”

“You know-…”

Wagging a finger at her. “No.” She had used her ability or inability to kill someone as a convenient excuse but in this instance it was just an excuse. “He is not a cosmic influence in the balance of life and death, he is barely even a footnote. Why is the Other still alive?”

As if the answer weren’t obvious. “I’m saving him for you.”

He snorted at the excuse. “You’re using him as a lure for me.”

“Is it working?”

He hissed softly at her because she wasn’t wrong. “Damn you.”

Hela glanced down at her fingernails, expression blank. “Some would argue I already am.”

“Why have you let Thanos live?” His eyes distant, knowing with her persuasive abilities there were alternatives to doing the deed herself. “You are not afraid of him. You could turn Thanos’ minions against him.”

Hela gave him a long look. No, she wasn’t afraid of Thanos, save that he was a threat to her family. But sometimes killing an enemy wasn’t the best solution and this was one of those times. “But that would destroy his mortal form. I would rather he continue running amuck in the universe than that.” Loki froze in horror, listening fiercely. “Free of the confines of his body, his mind is too powerful for me to contain on Niflheim. Trapped in his physical form is the only means I have of controlling him.”

Jumping onto his feet, not caring that most probably anyone on the second level would hear him. “How-…I’m supposed to let him live??”

Hela didn’t react. “I’ve worked it out, not to worry.”

Taking a step closer. “Which is?”

Holding out a finger, tapping his chest. “Intimidation tactics do not become you, father, knock it off.” He huffed and sat back down. She mirrored him with a smirk. “At the precisely right moment I will lure him to Asgard.”

“Forcing me to go there.”

Giving him a toothy smile. “It is wonderful how these things work out, isn’t it?”
Resting his elbow on his knee, his chin fitting perfectly into his palm. “How is my going to Asgard going to help anything if I can’t kill him and you can’t follow me? Unless—…”

He’d been offering for years to say her name so she could enter Asgard at her leisure. But that would mean he would be breaking AEsir law. He never had a problem with that but he tried not to trip over the line to treason if he could help it. Especially as this particular line would magically cause his permanent exile.

The way Odin had worded that edict was key and she was patient enough to wait. Cutting him off effortlessly. “No. I told you before I don’t want you breaking that edict.” If anyone else had stepped forward she would have accepted centuries ago. They were long past that time now. “All in good time, father. When war comes to Asgard, there will be plenty of death to spread around.”

“And for Thanos?”


“But you still want me to return to Asgard.”

Her smile was warmer now. When she did that he was never sure if she was lying or telling the truth. “I want you free to choose to go home… wherever you wish ‘home’ to be.” She disappeared an instant later.

Again he was reminded of a dream that couldn’t possibly come true, of a renewed life on Asgard. He was comfortable talking to Hela. It was as easy as talking to himself. He also recalled the conversations he’d had with Jane and how her insight was often invaluable. Perhaps it was time to share this with her.

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**ASGARD**

Odin wasn’t precisely sure what day of the week it was, but he would wager it was a Monday. Something always happened on a Monday. As it was the screams and war cries caught his attention along with half of court. Glancing at Thor, his son nodded and hefted Mjolnir as he and his friends quickly went to investigate. Running out into the courtyard, they looked up and just stared.

Four very large reptile-like creatures were flying across the skies, dive bombing random courtiers who had been foolish enough to walk outside. Warriors had taken up positions along the courtyard to keep the flying beasts from entering the palace. Swearing, shrieking courtiers were still running past them, covered in mud or drenched from falling in the fountain. The five friends shared looks, noticing that the creatures dived low but always pulled up short of actual contact.

Sif tilted her head a little, confused. “Are these someone’s pets?”

Predatory eyes shifted to the five AEsir, with high pitched screams they dived, talons out. With yelps and grunts they all hit the ground. Thor reached out to catch one of them by the leg, the creature screeching in protest and rapidly beating its wings.

Thor hissed to find his palm suddenly filled with painful heat and reflexively opened his hand. With a happy cry it joined its brothers and sisters, the four of them deciding to fly over the woods. The AEsir scrambled back to their feet, Thor leading the way. “To the stables!”
With war cries the warriors 3 and Sif swiftly followed. Odin had stepped onto the balcony just in time to see his son’s reactions, and to hear a very familiar giggle as the beasts flew away. Jerking to the left in surprise, he spied a shadow dart down the hallway and before he’d even thought the action through he gave chase. The shadow was quick but this was a game he’d mastered centuries ago, the shadow yelping as his hand closed around a tunic. “Loki?”

A second later a child with Loki’s features came into view and squirmed in his hold. “Um…not exactly.”

The green eyes he remembered from so long ago looked up. His voice gruff and calm. “I am well aware of your ability to alter your form, Loki.”

Huffing a sigh. “I’m Mischief, actually.” Pushing against the fist holding his clothes with a pout. “Let go.”

Odin blinked twice, not certain he believed what he was being told but not so certain it was a lie either. It certainly was an appropriate name and considering all the tricks he’d seen Loki capable of over the years he didn’t instantly dismiss the possibility. Instead of letting go he pulled the boy close enough to firmly hold his bicep. “Prove to me you are not Loki.”

Mischief’s face contorted at something so impossible. Then a look crossed his face that matched his name. “If Loki were to say this, the result would be kind of momentous.” He pulled in a big breath and blurted out the name. “Hela.” Odin jerked in surprise, eye glancing around and frowning when nothing happened. Mischief grinned, glad there was at least one technical advantage to not actually existing. “Hela. Hela, Hela, Hela-…” The old king’s hand was firmly over the make believe boy’s mouth. He didn’t understand the how but he did believe this wasn’t Loki. He couldn’t contemplate that even his clever son would be able to get around an AEsir edict without breaking it. Mischief squirmed and finally succeeded in freeing his mouth, pouting. “You told me to prove it.”

“I did not demand displays of childishness.”

Mischief blinked up at Odin innocently. “I’m a child, it’s what we do.”

Odin ignored the cheek, asking firmly, “Why are you here instead of Loki returning?”

Pout back in place as he asked, “Why would you want him back? Just so you can lock him up again?”

Glancing up, realizing someone was coming this way, he tugged Mischief along to an empty side room and closed the door firmly behind them. Odin could command him to remain, but he knew how well Loki obeyed orders. “Will you remain for a while if I release you?”

Crossing his arms sullenly, deciding he wasn’t going to mention he could have teleported at will at any time. “Fine.”

Odin reluctantly let go, Mischief backing up a step even as his eyes swept over the room and drank in everything. Technically neither of them was in the throne room so this was not an official meeting before a monarch. There was much that could be said that couldn’t be before court. Resisting the urge to pull this boy close again, maintaining control over his tone. “There is much that has happened but it has been established to Asgard that Loki will not be blamed for Midgard.”

Not moving an inch. “Great, so then all that’s left is the whole Thor-Jötunheim-Bi-frost thing.”

“You believe Loki is not to be blamed for that?”
Sneering lightly up at Odin. “Since it was all your fault, I’ll go with yes.”

His tone incredulous. “I forced him to try to destroy Jötunheim…”

Stomping his foot against the marble childishly. “You were going to send him there to be their king! We couldn’t let that happen…”

Sighing tiredly as he interrupted the boy, exasperated. “I told you that was a plan abandoned long ago.”

“How long? Right after Laufey decided to go back to war, right?”

Mischief squeaked to find himself pulled close, a hand on each arm so he couldn’t back away. Odin’s voice deepened in urgency, saying what he’d wished he’d had the strength to say on that terrible day Loki discovered the truth. “It was a plan abandoned over a thousand years ago. The day that I gave you my name was the day I decided you would be the second prince of Asgard and my son.”

Blinking in surprise up at the man who had raised Loki, and him by extension. Not a lie. He knew that for sure. Loki may be terrible in figuring out when Odin lied but he wasn’t. His face turned serious, saying something that he would keep from Loki. “You gave him your name, but you didn’t treat him like your son. You treated him like a mistake that shamed you just by existing.”

Mischief was looking hard enough that he caught the brief flicker of heartache in Odin’s eye. “Loki has at times made mistakes but I was never ashamed he was my son.”

Shrugging. “In spite of popular opinion Loki doesn’t go around reading everyone’s mind. If you don’t tell him, how is he supposed to know?” Deciding he was about done with the conversation, bored, he flashed a few feet away. Mischief gave Odin a lop-sided grin. “As soon as I fade he’ll know you said that…but telling him that to his face wouldn’t hurt.”

Odin straightened again. “If he is absolved of Jötunheim will he return?” He felt a jolt of surprise rush through him. Had I just asked that?

Silently studying the older man for a moment before asking a seeming non sequitur. “Does Loki have children?”

He thought to ask the point of such a strange question. Odin thought to demand a reply to his own question. But then he thought better of it. “Yes.”

Mischief wanted to know if Odin was aware of Indel and Talia’s existence before he said anything else. “More than one?”

“Yes.”

“A vow of their safety will be required.”

Odin nodded firmly. “Done.”

His expression turning to a combination of curious and calculating. “You know what’s coming, don’t you?”

“If you speak of Thanos, then yes.”

Mischief nodded to himself, crossing his arms loosely with a small shrug. “I can’t say
when. I doubt even Loki knows…but we’ll help stop him.”

Odin thought to say something more, but as always was at a loss for what the right thing to say was concerning Loki. “I’m certain his brother would welcome his permanent return.”

Now Mischief shook his head, looking disappointed but unsurprised. “Too bad...if you’d spoken for yourself he would have returned this very night.” He disappeared a second later, not seeing Odin’s face fall.

Author's Notes:

Happy Holiday weekend one and all. This one's a little longer than normal. Enjoy.

Next:

Jane learns the truth
Chapter 57

ALFHEIM

Indel stared down hard at the desk he was sitting in. Loki was not going to be happy. Not one bit. But he also wasn’t sorry, not one bit. He thought Loki might make him wish he was sorry, having heard the other children whisper to one another about how strict their parents could be. He didn’t think Loki was strict, but then his father hadn’t really had to scold him. Just a little bit, when he didn’t want to do his studies, or he left the milk out overnight, or he played with spells he shouldn’t have…like when he accidentally-on-purpose turned Talia’s hair purple.

Lightly he kicked the desk and slumped against the wood, dreading an actual, real scolding. He’d only seen his father mad a handful of times, but it was always directed at other people. Still, his father was scary when he was mad. A shadow filled the doorway and Indel cringed to himself, taking a quick glance to the right to see green eyes locked on him and an angry spark there. *Uh oh.*

“Thank you for coming, Lokhi.”

Loki didn’t even glance at the other elf, his eyes efficiently assessing his son from head to toe. He was not happy but his unhappiness wasn’t with Indel. “Not at all. Your missive spoke of a difficulty with my son.”

Indel squirmed subtly, really wanting to protect his bottom and realizing sitting would do a good job of that. The elven tutor was nodding. “Yes, as you are aware your son excels in his magical studies and…he had taken it upon himself to…to enlarge several of the other boy’s ears.”

Raising an eyebrow, the corner of his lip twitching subtly in amusement as he asked, “Did he?”

The tutor didn’t catch it, nor did she seem to find the situation amusing in the slightest. Elves could be so serious about everything. “Their parents are most incensed. The healers are repairing the damage but…they demand Indel be removed from schooling.”

As if the affliction were permanent and nothing more than a temporary inconvenience. A source of embarrassment to an elf, of course, but Indel had a reason for everything he did. Loki nodded slightly before crossing the room in a few steps, pulling up a chair so that he sat next to his son.

Indel looked at him before quickly looking away. He hoped his father didn’t yell, not in front of the tutor. Looking up woefully as he asked, “Do I really not get to go to school anymore?”

Loki blinked slowly. The expression was woeful but the voice wasn’t. There was suppressed excitement there. He’d never heard Indel mention he was unhappy with schooling. Asking carefully, “Is that what you wish?”

Indel looked at him before quickly looking away. He hoped his father didn’t yell, not in front of the tutor. Looking up woefully as he asked, “Do I really not get to go to school anymore?”

Loki blinked slowly. The expression was woeful but the voice wasn’t. There was suppressed excitement there. He’d never heard Indel mention he was unhappy with schooling. Asking carefully, “Is that what you wish?”

Indel looked down and shrugged a little but the answer in his head was instantaneous. Yes, because the other kids were mean all the time and he’d rather spend the day learning from his parents. He’d tried to be brave and not complain but today they’d been too mean.

Loki’s thumb rubbed his son’s jaw gently and Indel looked back up, eyebrows knitting together. Voice quiet as he asked, too much understanding in his eyes, “Would you rather I teach you from now on?” Blinking a little more rapidly, trying not to cry, Indel nodded quickly. Loki
reached out to gently tuck a few strands of thin, white hair behind his ears. It hadn’t taken him too long to determine that Indel was a very dramatic soul, much like himself. Enough that when an injustice is perceived, he can and will react. “Why did you cover your ears?”

Indel sniffed and looked down, voice a teeny tiny whisper. “They made fun of me.”

A knowing look was already in his eyes. He’d been anticipating this for months now, knowing from experience how quickly children can turn cruel. “How did they make fun of you?”

Indel wailed suddenly. “They said my ears are insignificant and stupid, they called me a mortal!” The glamour on Loki’s ears melted away, not even consciously aware of doing it, as he stood and picked up his son.

It was possible Loki would have been teased more as a child if his mother hadn’t decided he was so far advanced compared to most children that he needed individual instruction. Odin had agreed in the hopes that the extra focus would suppress excess mischief.

In a situation like this, he wasn’t sure what Odin would do. But he wasn’t Odin. He was Loki. And while most would not consider confronting a child or a child’s parents on such a matter he wasn’t like most people. Indel would never grow up wondering if he would be supported and defended.

Indel was almost too big to be carried, legs moving to wrap around his waist and burying his face in his neck as he cried. Loki’s glare was worthy of the prince that he was, freezing the teacher in place as he asked softly, “You said the parents are with their children now?” Hesitantly she nodded and a trickster’s smile grew on his face. “Then if you will excuse us, allow me to have a chat with them.”

Trax could feel a pounding headache pressing behind his eyes. Nothing reduced adults to squabbling children faster than a perceived injustice on their own child. He had been trying, repeatedly, to calm the situation down. But all it took was even one of the boys to wail about his ears and the process would start all over again. G’dath was rapidly losing patience with all of them but even she froze when a shadow crossed the entrance.

Feeling dread curl his stomach, he turned to see Indel and his father in the doorway. Those green eyes flashed emerald green, not coming any further inside as if he didn’t trust himself near any of them. Even the most adamant of the parent’s subsided as Loki’s eyes narrowed and spoke succinctly. “I am not, by nature, a forgiving person. I take every slight to heart and exact a fierce compensation for it. You have no idea who you are dealing with; pray that you never do. Your children have decided to mock a pair of ears. It is a fitting punishment that their own have been distorted but make no mistake…I can and will make their affliction permanent if you do not rein in your Hel spawn and teach them some manners.”

“You cannot…”

Loki’s head jerked to the right like a cobra about to strike, lip curling back as if to reveal fangs. Magic circled around him, green energy danced along his fingertips as he asked, “Cannot? Are you in any position to order me around? Do you think your husband might have interest in where you wander every third day of the month?” Picking out another face in the crowd, he gave them a knowing smile. More eyes he met, more smiles until all were cowering behind their children. “You cannot lie to the Liesmith. You cannot fool a trickster. Continue with your hypocrisy if you will but you will teach your children to respect their betters or you will discover exactly who walks among you…just as you shuffle free of this life.”
He purred the threat that was a promise before turning to leave, the room taking a
collective breath once he was gone. Trax didn’t wait for the bickering to commence again, almost
certain there wouldn’t be any and leaving to walk back to the community center. The name Lokhi he
had been able to ignore as significant. Most of the villagers had dismissed the quiet father but he
hadn’t. Now with that little display, specifically by labeling himself the Liesmith, he knew exactly
who lived just outside of the village. The fallen Prince Loki of Asgard.

Indel continued to idly finger his ears, finishing up breakfast and Loki sighed to himself.
His boy hadn’t wanted to go to school yesterday. Which meant Talia flat out refused to and Loki
hadn’t made them. Today seemed to be off to a bad start as well. Nodding with resignation to himself
that this was a conversation overdue, he stiffened his spine and strangled the voice inside screaming
he was being a fool.

With a grimace he closed his eyes. He forced himself to breathe deeply without flinching
as sapphire blue started to snake up his arms. Indel’s eyes widened further and further, Jane put her
hand over her mouth in surprised fascination and Talia smiled brightly as the color took over every
inch of his skin. No screams. Warily his eyes opened, now changed to ruby red. Indel stood up on
his chair and reached out to touch his father’s face as he asked curiously, “Is this a spell?”

Loki slowly shook his head, refusing to meet Jane’s searching eyes. “No.”

Frowning in thought before asking, “Can I do that?”

Swallowing thickly but forcing himself to meet his son’s gaze. “No.”

Indel tilted his head at his father. “Why not?”

Suddenly realizing the overwhelming panic that Odin must have faced and feeling
unaccountably hesitant. “Because I am a Jötunn, a Frost Giant from Jötunheim…and you are not.”

Indel looked thoughtful again. “So…I am part Jötunn, right? Because you and my mother
made me.”

Opening his arms, a tiny part of him fearful his son would refuse. “Come here.” Indel
didn’t hesitate, curling up in his lap while Loki held him tightly, his skin shifting back to pale peach.
He was not going to delve into the specifics. Indel and Talia were far too young to hear it. “Yes, you
are partially Jötunn. Now I am going to tell you a story, but it has a happy ending so not to worry,
even if some of it is sad.” Talia tugged on Jane and settled into her lap to listen.

Indel curled a hand in his tunic and nodded. “Okay.”

Loki rested his chin lightly on Indel’s head, his eyes distant. “A long time ago, there was a
prince who was born smaller than all the other babes. So small and so sick that his family was certain
he was going to die. But then a great warrior, a king from a conquering land found him and took him
to his home. But there was something that was different about the young prince. He was blue. And
this great warrior knew that to protect him, he would need to make him look different. So he put a
spell on him to make him not blue.”

“Like you.”

Nodding slowly, knowing neither child would see this as much more than a story but
unaware of how fiercely Jane was listening. “Exactly. So years went by and one day the young
prince found out that he was blue, and that he wasn’t born to the king and queen, but found and
raised by them.” Feeling his eyes burning as he spoke. “But even though he was angry that they
hadn’t told him, it didn’t matter to them because he was still their son and they still loved him.”

“They love him right now, right?”

Pressing a gentle kiss to the top of Indel’s head, a tear slipping down his cheek. “Of course they do.” He still wasn’t convinced, but it was just a story after all. What harm did it do to vocalize a hope he didn’t believe in? “But the young prince was foolish and didn’t know that. He was still angry and he made mistakes and ran away from his family. And then one day, on Svartalfheim, the young prince found a gift. A perfect gift that saved the prince’s life and made him happy again.”

Indel squirmed and turned around. “What? What did he find?”

Tapping his nose when Indel looked up. “You. A beautiful little baby just for the young prince.” He consciously changed the pronoun as he continued. “So I took you here and gave you my name because fate found a son just for me.”

Indel’s eyes wide in excitement as he exclaimed, “You’re a prince, dada?”

Nodding slowly, not about to get into the whys and why nots that he wasn’t anymore. “I am.”

“Does that mean I’m a prince?”

Loki smiled just a little at his son. “I suppose it does.”

“Am I a princess?”

Smiling a little more at Talia, reaching out to gently tap her cheek while being careful not to meet Jane’s eyes. “Of course you are.”

Indel had a frown of concentration on his face as he thought back over the story. Asking slowly, “So…I was born on Svartalfheim?”

There was an odd hitch in Loki’s breath, as if he forgot how to breathe for a moment. Nothing that Indel noticed and it didn’t show on his face but Jane silently noted it for later pondering. “I found you there.” Jane frowned delicately at the way Loki worded his answer.

Tilting his head just a little in confusion. “But I’m yours? Really real yours.”

Loki nodded carefully. “You are.” Thinking quickly before explaining at least a fraction of what he believed happened. “You were left there, perhaps for me to find.”

“There was an odd hitch in Loki’s breath, as if he forgot how to breathe for a moment. Nothing that Indel noticed and it didn’t show on his face but Jane silently noted it for later pondering. “I found you there.” Jane frowned delicately at the way Loki worded his answer.

“Did she not want me?”

Mentally Loki groaned, knowing this was going to get out of hand if he didn’t think of something. “How could anyone not want this little boy? If I see them again I will ask but just know that I want you.”

Indel carefully rubbed at his ear. “So why are my ears so small?”

It would be easy to discuss the possible genetic consequences of mingling the species, not that Indel at his age would understand half of it. Instead Loki decided on an easy response for now. “The same reason that I am small for a Jötunn, because we are different.”

“But not bad.”
Smiling sadly at his son. “No, our difference does not make us bad.” Then silently he allowed the thought that he tried not to dwell on. *My actions did.*

His son was still frowning slightly, considering. “Light elves don’t live there, do they?”

Here was the other part that he wasn’t looking forward to, but no point in stopping now. If he did he’d probably never find the courage to bring the topic up again. “No…dark elves do, just as Jötunns live on Jötunheim.”

“But the others say that dark elves are evil.”

He was well aware of that. But he firmed his jaw even if he still had a hard time believing it about himself. “Asgardians say the same of Jötunns…it does not mean they are right.”

After a moment Indel nodded firmly. “Dark elves and Jötunns may do bad things sometimes but it doesn’t mean we are bad.”

Tapping his nose again. “Correct.”

Curling in tightly again against Loki’s chest as he asked, “Who was the brave warrior? The king who saved you?”

A hint of a true smile curled his lip. “His name is Odin. He is the All-Father of Asgard.”

“And he’s your dada just like you’re mine.”

Whispering what had taken him a long time to accept after such a betrayal of his trust. “Yes.”

Indel carefully considered the title before asking his next question. “Can we see grandfather some day?”

He remembered Mischief’s interactions with Odin. The fact that his father even asked what it would take for him to return gave him hope. Mischief had been right. If Odin had said he was eager for his return he would have. Still, his father was not a forgiving king. That he had even hinted to absolving him concerning Jötunheim had him seriously contemplating returning. “I was very, very foolish once, Indel. I think it will be quite some time before I can go home.” Swallowing painfully. “But I hope so…one day.”

“When?”

Loki winced, flinching when Jane stood up. “Indel, Talia, why don’t you read in your room for a little while.”

Indel looked back and forth between the two adults before slipping out of Loki’s lap. “Okay.” He took Talia’s hand and together they silently slipped upstairs.

Jane would be willing to bet everything she owned that this was what had torn him apart. This was the secret Odin didn’t tell him until it was far too late to fix the damage. She hadn’t missed that he’d said ‘conquering land’. And knowing enough about the AEsir, she was fairly certain she knew how he’d been raised. He was raised to hate his own species, so he hated himself. She slipped into his lap, his arms hanging limply at his sides and his head ducked down.

This brilliant, proud man should never look so meek. “Loki…” He didn’t even twitch in response. Running a hand gently over his head, tucking strands of hair behind his ear and voice
gentle. “Trust me.” She coaxed him into slowly lifting his head, still petting and reassuring him. “Trust me?”

A tear slipped from the corner of his eye, knowing she would be disgusted. Knowing she would never love him now and would hate him for not telling her before she was irrevocably bound to him. But he complied, closing his eyes an instant later as if in pain. Not quite sapphire blue, but a beautiful bluish-grey color nonetheless. She traced gentle fingers across the ridges that seemed to be raised birth marks. His skin was perhaps a little cooler, but certainly not as cold as she thought it might be. Circles and lines, almost like a round crown along his forehead and she leaned in to press a gentle kiss there. Still the same scent that was purely Loki, the same skin.

A visual testament to the savagery he was capable of, as well as the beauty. How could anyone dismiss such a beautiful being as a monster? He gasped in surprise, eyes opening to stare at her. She smiled and gently traced along his jaw, thumb smoothing the soft skin under the red of his eyes. “Sapphires and rubies. Beautiful.” He tried to shake his head but she met his eyes with a decisive nod. “Yes. Every time I see you, see you, sapphires and rubies.” She ran a thumb along his lips and she kissed him before he could cringe back.

Every time? He wanted to ask but he didn’t. Couldn’t. How can she look at me, touch me, kiss me, and not see a monster? What am I missing? He tried so hard to convince himself that Jötunn’s weren’t monsters. That he wasn’t, but he hadn’t been able to convince himself. He glanced down at his own skin and flinched but her fingers immediately smoothed along his face, whispering ‘beautiful’ with another soft kiss to the shell of his ear as she threaded her fingers in his hair.

She hummed happily, her warm breath tickling his ear as she held onto him and relished the feel of him. She could happily spend the rest of her life with this man and her heart fluttered. She knew the words were true as soon as she said them. “…god, I love you…” His eyes widened, feeling her warm lips caress his temple before pulling back just enough to stare into his eyes boldly. Smile gentle, knowing he assumed he’d heard incorrectly. “I love you.” Her other hand reached down for his right, interlocking their fingers and slowly bringing up his hand to rest the back of it against her cheek.

Reluctantly his eyes followed his hand, pressed against her own skin. It didn’t look so different. He knew his species could cause frost bite with a touch but he’d never learned how. He looked different, but he didn’t feel all that different. He frowned just a little to himself, hesitantly meeting her eyes to find nothing but acceptance.

“It’s just skin, Loki. Just a part of you. A beautiful, wonderful, magical part of you. Don’t ever be ashamed of who you are. Make your son proud to be who he is by being proud of yourself.” He flicked his fingers outward as the blue of his skin faded before wrapping her up in a strong hug.

Cupping her face, he kissed her strongly and she melted against him. Such a magnificent creature. Beautiful outside and within. His voice was husky and soft. “I thought you’d be disgusted.”

“I’m not.”

Swallowing thickly, brow furrowed and repeating what he’d heard whispered amongst the warriors for most of his life. “Frost Giants are just monsters.”

“Says who?”

Shrugging to himself. He’d never asked his father what he thought about them. He’d always just assumed that Odin felt the same but he wasn’t so sure of that anymore. “Everyone.”
She hated the AEsir just a little bit now. Instead of contradicting him, she asked him softly, “Are mortals all stupid?”

He froze and blinked. “No.”

“Then not all frost giants can be monsters. I’m pretty sure the ones who say so are the same morons who say mortals are all stupid.” She pulled back just a little, even if he didn’t relinquish his hold one bit. Tapping him lightly on the forehead with her index finger. “Don’t you be an idiot and believe them.”

Tone shifting to that of a petulant boy. “Yes, Miss Foster.”

She grinned that his mood was shifting and nodded. “Better.” She settled herself happily into his lap, not expecting him to reciprocate his own feelings. She knew by now he wouldn’t go through placating motions. When he said the words, he would mean them. “How could people abandon such a person?”

He glanced down at her, startled to realize she was watching him as her hand moved to trace his eyebrow. He tried to shrug it off. “I was a runt.”

Anger sparked in her eyes. “That is the—tell me that is not how the universe really works.”

His shrug was more pronounced this time. “Not in Asgard, nor Alfheim…but you cannot tell me it doesn’t happen in Midgard.”

Protesting, almost shouting. “We do not leave children on the streets to die!”

“No, they are thrown away into children’s homes. They are abandoned and they feel the ache of it.” He grimaced to himself and turned his head a little. This was too nice of a moment for anger but he knew as he talked he wasn’t talking about anyone but himself. The words were clawing at his throat to escape and he couldn’t keep them at bay. “They feel hollowed out. As if the ground that was so sure under their feet crumbles to nothing and they are left dangling from a cliff’s edge. I killed the Jötunn who sired me to prove to my father I was AEsir but the hollow ache still remained. I tried to destroy Jötunheim because I thought maybe—…”

Just talking about it always got him so angry and he didn’t want to be angry with her. She didn’t deserve it, so he took measured breaths to control his emotions. Her fingers ran slowly through his hair, gentling and calming him as only she was capable. “Your family loves you, Loki.”

“They’ve never been good at showing it. They love the idea of a perfect, Thor-clone, second prince. They make due with me.” Loki grimaced. He just couldn’t stop now that he’d started. The fact that she seemed to be intentionally saying the right things to make him talk wasn’t helping.

“You might be surprised. Maybe they’ve learned their lesson.”

Loki snorted softly. “You don’t know AEsir stubbornness.” But he was a mage, he had to believe that anything was possible. Sighing once. “Perhaps things would be different if I returned, I have yet to decide on the matter because Indel will not grow up like me. It was…it was why I told him now, so he doesn’t. When he’s older I’ll tell him I took his revenge from him…he might forgive me for that.”

“Revenge?”

He hesitated for a moment. He didn’t regret his actions but he tried to be careful not to
scare her with his rather unforgiving nature. “Before I found him a clan of dark elves on Svartalfheim had him in their keeping. He was left as bait in the elements to feed themselves.”

Her eyes widened in horror at the very thought. “No.”

“I had them slaughtered.” Jane couldn’t decide what emotion rolled through her in that moment. He wasn’t lying, nor did he regret doing it, but when she looked in his eyes she thought there might have been some fear there. Fear that she couldn’t accept a side of himself that he worked very hard to keep from her. He was not human, in spite of his appearance and sometimes she was brutally reminded of that fact. But she did love him and that meant accepting all of him.

“Why?” She wasn’t asking why he’d punished them. She wanted to know why he would do something so final.

“Partly because they angered me. They cast aside someone that I love, someone that is precious and dear to me…but I also did it for Indel. It may never be in his nature, but he is more similar than dissimilar to me. I am already ruined, poisoned by my own bitterness, I would rather take their deaths than for him to carry that burden.”

Jane slowly shook her head, hearing him speak as if he were ruined. The curtains parted to reveal the true nature of the man before her. A mischievous trickster. A warrior. A prince. A man who had seen more than a thousand years. He loved, and he loved deeply, but the price of that love was a fierce protectiveness that bordered on madness. It almost scared her how that truly didn’t phase her. She leaned in and stole another kiss.

“Now tell me the truth…I won’t tell him.” He raised an eyebrow at her. “You said you found him on Svartalfheim.”

“I did.”

Her tone indicating that she knew he was purposefully lying with the truth. “Those were some very specific words you used.” Jane’s eyes widened in alarm as she watched the color leech out of his face and his entire body go rigid. He wasn’t just stiff; he was frozen. He wasn’t even breathing but it was his eyes that scared her the most. If wasn’t fear. It was far beyond fear. A fear that she realized could break him all over again.

It hadn’t taken her long to realize he’d broken before his attack on New York. Who he was now was just too different. He’d been a wounded animal then, wild and searching for an escape. But it was just like Erik had once told her. Once something is broken it never glues back together as strong as it was. She couldn’t imagine what fear could be so devastating to him that he would threaten to splinter but she would do anything in her power to protect him from it.

Loki felt his heart thundering in his chest as fears twisted together in a knot. Unyielding fingers wrapped around his throat, choking him. She couldn’t know. Odin couldn't know. Not yet. Not now. Indel wasn't protected yet. The All-Father could kill his son if he knew the truth of where he came from. It wasn't the fact that he was partially dark elf. It was so much more taboo than that.

Sexual acts among the genders were one matter on Asgard, not talked about but not important. But there was a definite difference in the conceiving of children to them. Then there was Jane, who was human. Creatures who had no concept of changelings. He was a being who could not only look like another creature of his choosing, but could bear children. If he told her he was certain she'd run screaming from him in disgust.

He couldn't gasp. He couldn't move. He trembled, feeling light headed and his chest tight.
“Hey. Hey! Loki-…come here.” She moved, molding her body against him, wiggling up so that he was almost tucked under her chin. He felt her fingers running through his hair and her lips pressing kisses to his forehead. “Breathe, Loki. Just breathe. I love you and it’s okay, you don’t have to tell me yet.” He didn’t know why but he just felt so safe. The fear faded and the invisible bands around his chest loosened, allowing him to breathe. He wrapped his arms tightly around her and just breathed. “Good. In and out, nice and slow. Good, just like that.”

As his body slowly calmed and the fear receded, his face started burning. “…I’m sorry…”

She huffed a laugh but she didn’t move and her tone told him she wasn’t amused. “You’re apologizing to me for a panic attack.” She slowly shook her head to herself, disgusted with every damn AEsir on that planet. “You may not want to hear this but I’m going to say it…if you’re this afraid of the truth your family is a lot more fucked up than I thought.”

He tried to pull back but she wouldn’t let him go, stubbornly clinging to him. “Why would you say that?”

“A simple question like that and you freak out, it makes me think whatever this is will have real, dire, mortal consequences.” He swallowed since it was true. He wanted to tell her everything but he was more than just afraid of her reaction, but of actually giving the truth a voice. “I’m not going to ask again, you’ll tell me when you’re ready. But where and how Indel came into being shouldn’t have such consequences.” Huffing but not about to stop now that she’d started. “Of course, I’m still mad at them on your behalf for letting you grow up hating the very species that you are…fucked up, to put it mildly.”

A reluctant smile spread, the last of the fear gone. He could truly trust her and it was so liberating a feeling. She wouldn’t betray him. She wouldn’t abandon him. “Such vulgarity, Miss Foster.”

Now she pulled back a little, brown eyes flashing amber and expression fierce. “They hurt someone I love, you’d better believe I’ll swear.”

He cupped her face and kissed her gently, feeling his heart swell and throb in a pleasantly painful way that he was becoming hopelessly addicted to. There was no going back. He loved this woman.

Author's Notes:

Happy New Year one and all.

Next:

Jane’s bravery; Alfheim’s mistake
Chapter 58

Alfheim

Jane smiled and dutifully watched Indel and Mischief juggle small magic globes, Talia in her lap as she re-braided the girl’s hair. The day had been quiet, Loki disappearing for a few hours to gather some new books from Alfheim’s library. Since only half of the family could visit the library, he sent them to Azni’s to keep the older elf company. Currently she was outside, setting up her garden for when she could start planting.

The little balls of soft magic in blues, greens, and reds passed back and forth between the two boys. The two of them were giggling at one another, spinning and increasing the difficulty of their tricks. They all froze when Azni burst through the door, slamming it shut behind her. “Come on, the Senate guard is here.”

Jane frowned in confusion as she asked, “The what?”

Mischief’s eyes widened in fear, the balls falling and disintegrating when they hit the floor. His reaction more than anything convinced Jane to move, picking up Indel while tucking Talia close to her. Azni opened a side door leading to a storm cellar. It was dark and dank but Jane ignored that, ducking around a corner.

Holding out his hand, Mischief produced a little globe of green light that he stuck to a wall. His voice was insistent, filled with worry. “They can’t find you.”

“Why?”

His green eyes were darting around in panic as he spoke. “Humans are forbidden on Alfheim.” He shook his head once, a snarl escaping that sounded too much like a whimper. “The Senate guard never comes here. Someone must have told them about you.” She realized with silent clarity what would happen if she was found. “Not that they will react much better to dark elves.” He shivered and pulled Talia close, Jane reaching out to cup the side of his face and offer him a reassuring smile while Indel buried his face in her shoulder.

They all jumped as a hard series of knocks registered. Listening, they heard the door slowly open. “Yes?” Azni gasped, the door swinging wide to hit the opposite side with a bang. “We know you harbor a mortal, Et’ana. You are well aware it is forbidden.”

Her voice firm with denial. “There are no mortals here.”

“I have also heard rumors of a dark elf. A child.”

“Considering over half of the light elves can trace their ancestry to dark elves that is not much of an accusation, Lord Utterow.”

Jane held Indel tighter, the boy shivering so hard his teeth were chattering. She shared a look with Mischief just as her footsteps started to glow. Dread filled his young face while resolved filled hers. Shoving Indel to Mischief. “Hide them.”

“Ja-…”

Snarling and stepping away, effectively ceasing their arguments before they started with a
well-placed look. “Do it.”

Indel whispered ‘mama’ and they disappeared just as the storm door splintered open. Stiffening her spine and setting her jaw, she ignored her instincts to run away and walked towards the approaching elves. She let them lead her upstairs, looking up and not recognizing Utterow but unable to hide her surprise to see Talton.

He stared at her coldly as he asked, “Where is the boy?”

Jane realized Mischief had been quite correct. Not that she would tell this arrogant fool anything. Not flinching. Not veering her gaze. She’d learned how to lie from the best. Keep the answers simple with as few embellishments as possible. “He died.”

Utterow took a step closer as he asked, “And the father?”

Keeping her arms at her side, not about to betray herself by moving them. “How should I know? He left months ago.”

Azni stepped forward but Jane kept her eyes moving. These two elves, plus ten soldiers. She might entertain the possibility of attacking them if Loki were taking on the other nine. Maybe.

“She is not a mortal, Utterow.”

Pointing to the glowing path, a clear indication by the specific way he’d worded the spell to locate a human in the vicinity. “It is quite obvious she is.”

Moving on to an even more important fact, to try to make these fools understand. “She is human but not mortal. She is protected by a blood bond—…”

Utterow smiled maliciously and gestured with both arms. “And yet no one is here to protect her, so that is also a lie.”

Azni drew herself up to her full height. Loki had asked for anonymity and she would honor that request. A request Utterow would pay dearly for. “You will truly regret angering the one who comes to settle the debt.”

He gestured boredly at Jane. “Let the Senate decide. Take her.” Jane squared her shoulders and lifted her head, walking forward silently. She wouldn’t beg. She was above that. Besides, those who mattered more than her own life were safe. It was enough. Utterow gave Azni a vicious glance. “Perhaps it is time for an end to a need for Et'ana on Alfheim.”

Azni just nodded slowly in agreement. Ten thousand years was a long time and she’d been feeling those years for a while now. “Perhaps you are right.”

“You are eager for death?”

Folding her hand in front of her body, watching Jane walk proudly away amongst four soldiers. “I accept the inevitable. Neither death nor change can be ceased and if Alfheim is truly moving in this direction then I welcome it, for who I choose to follow me is precisely who Alfheim needs.”

“And to whom would you intend to give such an honor?”

She smiled just a little. “I would gladly follow a woman as courageous as the one who just walked out that door.”
Talton inclined his head slightly towards Utterow to prompt him. He didn’t care about the mortal or the child. The only reason he had participated had been this result. Harboring a mortal was a serious offense. Finally his mother would be rid of this weak-willed queen’s influence. Then he could focus his mother properly, especially since the Senate would likely choose G’dath as the next Et’ana.

“Perhaps you would care to join her.”

Now Azni glanced at Utterow, looking amused. “I will find my own transportation, but I offer my thanks.”

“You believe you have a choice?”

A small little smile curled her lip. “I am Et’ana, Utterow, I believe I am more aware of the situation than you are.” She glanced knowingly at the guard still present, who all looked uneasy.

Utterow made a scoffing noise. “You have the ability to declare war, a most insignificant power against your own people.”

Something ancient and wise entered her gaze. “The legality of my position does not require the enemy be external.” Utterow froze and Talton blanched. “If I were to declare war on the Senate, the guard and every legion would be beholden to respond…a fact they are well aware of.”

None of the soldier’s veered their gazes from the floor but it was obvious Azni wasn’t lying. Utterow seemed to be at a loss for words but he recovered quickly. He stormed away, the remaining guard following. Talton took a step, freezing when her hand wrapped lightly around his bicep. “I will do your mother the greatest service and suggest you do not accompany them.”

Talton turned with a frown. “Why?”

Azni looked over Talton’s shoulder. “You should be careful who you make enemies with, child.” The elf looked over his shoulder and then paled three shades of white. Hela stood silently, hands folded in front of her body and an arched brow as she looked at the light elf. The trickster grin that spread across her face wasn’t any more comforting. “I have no doubt that Lord Utterow will receive a personal visit from Lady Jane’s protector but you, youngling, are not worth his time.” She swept passed him. “Accompany Utterow and he may simple take your head.”

Talton jerked around to stare at Azni, jumping when he looked back to see the queen of the dead gone. He suddenly had a bad feeling he’d made a horrible mistake.

Jane wrapped her arms tightly over her legs, sitting with her back against the wall. She didn’t regret her decision but she’d be lying if she said she wasn’t scared. They were going to kill her.

“You’re disappointing me, Jane.” Frowning, Jane glanced to the left to stare into dark green eyes, midnight locks, and a pale face. Blinking, glancing at the back of the two elves. “They can’t hear us.”

Instinctively lowering her voice as she asked the trickster queen, “How did you get here?”

Hela waved a hand in Jane’s face. “Ach…no. No, no, no. No asinine questions. No meakness. You’re playing right into their hands.”
The physicist studied those green eyes before asking, “You’re not here to rescue me, are you?”

Hela smirked and lifted an eyebrow. “Do you think I should?”

Grumbling softly. “It would be nice.”

White teeth gleamed as Hela retorted. “But unnecessary. Loki taught you how to fight but it takes more than that to be a shield maiden. You are supposed to be a perfect complement to your warrior.” Folding herself to mimic Jane. “Does this look like something Loki would do?”

Reluctantly Jane unfolded herself. “No.”

Hela relaxed next to Jane and gave her a lopsided grin. “No, exactly. Has he been scared before? Of course. Out maneuvered? Defeated? That is when the show begins. When he’s his most arrogant. Pompous and grandstanding. Lying and deceiving. That is when the game begins and the trickster comes out to play.”

“I’m not-…”

Immediately Hela clapped a hand lightly over Jane’s mouth, correcting her. “Jane…yes you are. You’re brave. Braver than you know. And what you don’t feel, you hide. Brave isn’t fearless…it’s acting in spite of your fear. You saved your children, a truly brave, selfless act. Now, I may not save you, but trust that Loki will raze Alfheim to protect you. Until then, make him proud. Loki gets down on his knees for no one. He’ll collapse when his body gives out, but he doesn’t yield.”

For a moment Jane looked thoughtful before asking curiously, “Why can’t you save me?”

Hela just winked as she answered. “Because it’s about time the Senate learned a little respect.”

Frowning at the trickster queen in confusion. “Loki said he’s a citizen of Alfheim. They wouldn’t accept him if they didn’t respect him, right?”

The trickster reached out a finger to gently touch the top of Jane’s rounded ear. “Elves need to learn to respect others. War is coming, whether they like it or not. They won’t be hiding behind their borders this time.”

Sometimes Hela and Loki made these strange leaps in logic that made no sense to her. She didn’t think they could see the future but she was curious. “How do you know?”

Hela smirked suddenly and answered smoothly. “Because when Thanos makes his run for Asgard, and inevitably he will, Alfheim will be called to aide them.”

Blinking owlishly at the mage. “You can see the future?”

Hela laughed. “Not even close.” Shaking her head in amusement before giving Jane at least an inkling of how she and Loki were able to predict events before they happened. “If Loki is celebrated for anything on Asgard, it is for being a tactician. And not just for planning from moment to moment, but to be able to plan out a battle months in the making. I…may or may not have a similar affinity.” Rubbing her hands together. “So chin up, back straight. You don’t have to say anything, Jane. Sometimes the greatest act of defiance is to say nothing at all.”

She vanished an instant later, but Jane remained strong. A ghost of a touch to her wrist told
Lord Utterow prided himself in his ability to defeat any opponent. Four thousand years without defeat had left him confident...too confident. The journey to Alfheim had been uneventful. The mortal being escorted before the Senate had been silent the entire time. That part was so disappointing. No tears. No begging. Just stoic silence from a creature considered more primitive than Jötunns.

He hadn’t felt what hit him.

He couldn’t remember why he was unconscious or how he’d gotten to wherever he was. All that he knew was that he was slowly opening his eyes to see a clear, blue sky that wasn’t Alfheim. He didn’t know where he was but the sense of foreboding wouldn’t dissipate.

“I was hoping you would wake up soon.”

The deadly purr in the voice of the man he couldn’t see filled him with dread. He tugged at the chains on his wrists that were keeping him pinned on his back but they wouldn’t give. Harder than iron. He attempted a simple disintegration spell. Nothing fancy, and yet his powers were absorbed by the metal, making the chains stronger. There was a field woven into the metal that kept his powers contained. Uru? The magical metal of Asgard? His eyes widened in horror as the pieces fell into place.

“Loki?”

It would have been worse if Azni had not found him in the Alfheim library. Loki would show no mercy to someone like this, but Alfheim would have been reduced to a barren void by now if he’d found out about this later. As it was he still had a very special appearance planned before the Senate. Jane was en route now, followed invisibly by one of his doubles since Hela had been kind enough to point the way. This wouldn’t delay him long.

Loki made a tutting sound. “Such familiarity. As if a Lord holds the same power and influence as a Prince.” The trickster stepped into view, the eyes glowing too green and the smile too wide. “We are magicians, Utterow, surely you know what would happen when you threaten my mate.”

Tugging on the chains as he protested. “She was just a mortal-…”

His voice cold and calm as he effortlessly interrupted. “Do you think that matters to me?”

“You have no right! Asgard does not acknowledge blood vows as-…”

Blue raced across Loki’s face. “I bow to none and it is not my AEsir blood that moves me.” He shifted completely, crimson eyes staring his enemy down, a feral growl in his throat. Utterow knew with sudden clarity there would be no mercy. The AEsir were known as warriors and the elves for their learning. If nothing else, one very old poem had forever immortalized the Jötunn.

A star tucked safely in Valhalla, immortalized, celebrated

Who did you defeat? Who did you kill?
Beware honored soul for the life you took.

A sinner bound and buried in Hel


Not even Death can protect you.

To fear death: nay. To fear pain: nay.

Fear the Jötunn, whose mate you slayed.

Arrogance aside, Utterow knew which of the two of them was the more skilled and the more powerful. Even if that wasn’t the case, the feral anger of the Jötnar was known across the nine realms to cross all boundaries and limitations. The most well-known tale, which he knew to be true, was of a Jötunn female with no magical ability, yet had somehow appeared on Svartalfheim from Jötunheim and completely wiped out a legion of dark elves up to and including the commander responsible for her mate’s death. She’d carried no weapon, killing them with her bare hands, and then had simply died in grief.

No color on his face. “I didn’t know—…”

Snarling, insanity lurking in those burning red depths. “I don’t care. Azni warned you she was protected with a blood oath, you should have respected that. And I can only imagine what you would have done to my son. There are penalties for bringing war to my house.” Some people he had no problem in killing, usually when he was feeling generous. But others deserved much worse. “The debt will be paid to my satisfaction…perhaps in a century or two I will release you.” Utterow struggled again in the chains as Loki gestured and a serpent, an immortal viper, curled over the dead tree hanging above the bound spell caster. “Do you like it? Midgardians have such creative ideas about the punishments I’ve suffered. Some of them were hysterical but this one I found particularly appealing.” Loki extended his hand, the viper tucking down its head to be petted. He always had gotten along with the creatures, even the natural ones. “I have no idea why they would think I could be subjected to such a fate…snakes are such agreeable creatures when they are respected.” Looking down and smiling cruelly as he continued to taunt. “I decided not to gut your children and bind you in their intestines, humans can be a tad gruesome sometimes. Not to worry, you will have plenty of time to reflect and be thankful for that small mercy. Enjoy.”

Loki ignored the pleas as he turned to leave, but then paused without turning back. “As I said, fool, I will be satisfied. However, if you prefer for your two sons to take your place…beg for your life in exchange for theirs.” He waited a full minute, but nothing was offered except horrified silence. Nodding, satisfied and walking forward, he allowed his icy blood to warm and reassumed his Æsir form before he crossed the magical field. No longer looking at illusioned blue skies but the fiery volcanic landscape of Muspelheim.

Even if someone were to look, no one would find Utterow here. He smirked and disappeared to follow the golden path back to Alfheim, the abandoned surroundings swallowing the pained screams from Utterow as the serpent’s fangs slowly dripped venom into his eyes.

Jane kept her head held high, refusing to be cowed by the severe stares and glares of the
panel of elves in front of her. If she was going to die, she was going to make Loki proud. There were rows of benches filled with elves behind her, a gentle murmur in the air.

An elf sitting at the center of the panel held up a hand and there was instant silence. “We will not delay for Lord Utterow any longer. It is quite obvious as to this female’s origins.”

From the left a question to Jane immediately followed, “How did you journey from your world to ours?” Jane pressed her lips together a little more firmly.

The elf at the center narrowed his eyes slightly as he spoke. “Refusal to answer is only a surety of our final decision.”

From the right side another elf appeared almost thoughtful. “There is Asgard to consider.” Heads turned in her direction as she continued, “Midgard is under their protection. Perhaps a return of her to their soil is a suitable alternative.”

“I can only imagine King Odin’s reaction to a mortal on his realm.”

She nodded slightly before her tone turned careful. “But we have the…means for her transport.” Jane’s heart leapt, knowing they were talking about Loki. But her confirming she knew him could put him as well as the children in danger all over again. She had to bite into her lower lip hard to keep from speaking.

Azni opened the doors and stepped inside, G’dath following behind her. It was several seconds before Talton reluctantly trailed behind. “Before the Senate makes a grievous mistake, there is one more person to speak on Jane Foster’s behalf.”

Azni took another step forward and there were gasps from those in the senate seat as well as in the audience of peers. “Ma-…”

She held up a halting hand, authority in her normally gentle tone. “This will be discussed in a closed seating.”

The light elves in the audience stood and left, not needing to be dismissed. Azni halted Talton with a look while G’dath refused to even look at her son. She’d never been so ashamed in all her long life. She didn’t know the why, but she suspected it. Her son always had been too ambitious for his own good.

The Senate stayed mute, the doors closing as the last elf not in the Senate left. Azni nodded to G’dath who made three very precise gestures, a feeling of pressure filling the room before fading. G’dath spoke without inflection in her voice. “The senate is now in closed session.”

From the shadows a figure shaped and stepped forward. He was in full golden armor, a flowing cape of emerald green and horned helmet on his head. Talton’s eyes widened in horrified understanding. Not many beyond AEsir knew the fallen prince of Asgard by sight, but his helmet was unmistakable. Loki strode down the aisle with all the confidence of a prince and the lethal assurity of the predator he is.

He wasn’t thrilled with the idea of leaving Indel and Talia in Trax’s care but there was no one else and at least with Mischief there, there was an extra layer of mage protection. He consoled himself with the fact that one way or another this wouldn’t take long. He stopped next to Jane’s side and stared, looking each and every elf in the eye. He made sure they felt the weight of his stare, memorizing their faces and assessing them with a warrior’s efficiency.

He looked to her, green meeting brown, and looking her over quickly. She smiled just
His voice flowed and scraped steel shredding talons up their spines as his head turned to address them. “I am Loki, a recognized citizen of Alfheim, as I am certain some or most of you are aware. I am also certain the rumors of my past exploits have reached infamous proportions by now.” Moving slowly, walking in front of them from right to left in measured steps. “So much in such a short span of years. A disgraced prince…an escaped prisoner of Asgard…a defeated, blood-soaked tyrant…I am all of those things.” Turning to return to Jane’s side, his jaw ticking and betraying the slippery hold he had on his civility. “But I am and always will be the God of Mischief. The God of Chaos. The Liesmith. The trickster…and a mage. And it is my last identifier that should make you wary.” Holding out his hand to show them his palm, panning from left to right to display the scar that would never fade as long as Jane lived. “Sorceress Jane Foster is under my protection, a vow I made in blood.” Surprise traveled across the faces in front of him. “If anyone decrees her death please raise your hand…” His smile was too wide with too many teeth, his eyes almost as dark as death. “…at your own peril.”

The spell to test such an oath was simple enough. If Utterow had informed them of the possibility they would have done so before even starting the proceedings. Not a single elf made a move and Loki slowly narrowed his eyes. The Senate was not run with war cries and hot tempers like in Asgard, but with practicality and cold efficiency. The threat was very real and they were all aware of it. A blood vow was not to be dismissed, and that it was made between an AEIsir and a mortal made the necessity of her death moot. The speaker could feel Jane’s power now, moving in grace to sync with the trickster’s. The two were magic bound, her mortality no more. The speaker folded his hands on the table in front of him. “Lord Utterow posed a falsity before us and he will be brought forward-…”

“There’s no need.” All the elves looked to the man quietly speaking. “He will not reappear until I am fully satisfied. A few centuries from now, perhaps.”

A shiver spread through all of them. “A motion to dismiss all discussion concerning the mortal-…”


The elf blinked but hurried to correct himself. “Sorceress Jane Foster.”

“Motioned.”

“Seconded.”

Not even bothering to look around him as he asked the question, “Any opposition?”

No one moved and the speaker nodded slightly towards Jane. Loki winked at her as he turned so that only she saw it as shadow swirled around him and swallowed him. She nodded slightly to the Senate elves since it was polite and walked towards G’dath and Azni.

Talton yelled an instant before the floor opened and swallowed him and G’dath just pressed her lips together tightly. She blinked quickly as Loki whispered against her ear, having simply appeared at her back. But the hope he offered was what brought her to tears. “Hela will be gentle as a kindness to you for I am certain I was spared much as a child for my mother’s sake, and you will have him back.” A kindness for all she had done for him, but also so he would not feel in any way beholden to the elf who had reluctantly assisted Jane in saving his life. “It will be the last time I spare him, G’dath, so make it the last time he and I cross paths.”
G’dath turned her head to gaze into his eyes, hard and unforgiving, and nodded. He nodded in return and vanished along the golden passages back home, knowing Azni would see Jane returned to him. He had some reading to do and he’d put it off long enough.

His trip to Alfheim’s library hadn’t been just for pleasure. Reluctantly he’d gathered a few tomes. Maybe it was Jane’s encouragement or his conversations with Helblindi and Byleistr or for finally telling Jane the truth but he found himself increasingly curious about Jötunns. Not just his own physical limits but their history. He wanted to know about their culture. And why shouldn’t he explore? He was right next to Alfheim, the planet of the light elves with the most extensive library in the nine realms.

He found himself reading through the pages hungrily, gleaning information about a Jötunn’s true strength and what would fuel it. Learning how to control the frost touch and how to produce it. How to produce ice weapons and even more fascinating, ice magic. After that he was hooked.

But it was more than just knowledge. As he read and learned to embrace this side of himself, he felt as if a part of him that had been stifled and hidden for so long broke free. He accepted himself. His heart was Asgardian. He had been raised to be a son of Asgard…who also happened to be a Jötunn.

His daily exercises were no longer just filled with the skills he’d picked up from the elves, but of shifting forms. His moving from AEsir to Jötunn became fluid and he worked through the spells. It was what he was doing now, not so focused that he didn’t see Jane sitting on the porch with a small smile curling her lips. Her chin rested on her interlaced fingers and her elbows rested on her knees as she watched him.

He gestured and a double of himself appeared, her sword at her side and pulling her into a sparring session. She still struggled within the confines of her own mortal frame but she moved with grace and she tried so hard. His double smirked, spinning around her like a hawk playing in the air with its prey. Still, even if she could never match him in this particular game, she was still a good deal better than half the guards at the palace and that was something to be proud of.

The woman who had given him back more than himself; she’d given him a Loki who wasn’t afraid of who he was. She’d not just healed him, she’d helped make him better. The double paused, and he moved to take his spot. He disarmed her in one quick motion but it was to put a hold on the session, not to teach her anything. He owed her everything and he wanted to give her everything in return.

He cupped her face in both hands, enjoying her breath catching. “You are a beautiful, special woman, Jane Foster.”

Her eyes sparkled and her mouth opened, most probably to refute his words or perhaps to reciprocate them. He pressed a finger gently to her lips and she subsided. He smiled, kissing her sweetly. She leaned towards him, gasping as their lips parted to pull in a breath. His whispered words washed over her before he stole another kiss.

“…it must be why I love you…”
Author's Notes:

Whew, a close one but the trickster and the physicist prevailed!!

Next:

The Avengers go on alert; The World Eater arrives
Chapter 59

ALFHEIM

At Jane’s request Loki had built a swing attached to one of the branches. They were still in the front yard, more so because the last time Loki had gone hunting before Talia had woken up she had absolutely freaked out. It was becoming painfully obvious they couldn’t stay here. But what anger and annoyance he felt, was directed at the Senate. Jane hadn’t even had to ask, knowing their actions in taking both of Talia’s parents and now Jane had made the girl feel completely vulnerable unless Loki was there to protect them.

He’d had a stern talk with Fenris. The little wolf was growing at a steady rate so that he was now as tall as a medium sized dog, but with the playful nature of a puppy. Not that the pup could have done much, but he’d created the little fur ball to be a protector and next time the mutt was going to be there. Anytime he went to hunt Fenris was glued to Indel’s side, lest his son accompanied him and then the little wolf had become Talia’s shadow. Currently said mutt was under the swing, teeth lightly clamped on his breeches and tugging with mock growls.

“What are you thinking about?”

Loki sighed softly at her softly spoken question, Jane leaning back against his chest as the swing moved. “Viable places we can live.”

Jane didn’t ask why they couldn’t continue living here, knowing between Talia’s fear and the world eater there wasn’t much time left. “Is there a place on Alfheim not Senate run?”

Shaking his head in the negative. “No.” Huffing to himself, speaking softly. “Which is what makes this beyond frustrating. I am one of the few beings capable of traveling to all nine realms and I have fewer options than most.” She stayed silent and just continued listening. “Temperature for my biology and everyone else’s makes two inhospitable. The trolls consider elven ears a delicacy.”

Jane grimaced at that thought. That nixed one more. “Niflheim and Helheim aren’t bad places to visit but raising children there is less than desirable. Now with the difficulties involving the Senate, only three choices remain.”

“Earth. Asgard…and Vanaheim?”

Nodding slowly to her. “All three fit on a biological level, although Midgard is the least welcoming to myself…but that was all my own doing.”

She squeezed his side with her fingers. “Not all of it.”

Leaning his head down to kiss the top of her head. “No, I suppose not. But humans will hardly forgive my actions on my word alone.”

Shrugging a little to herself, stretching like a relaxed cat. “I don’t know. You convinced me.”

Raising an eyebrow at her in doubt as he asked, “I did or you were trapped in my presence long enough to sway you?”

Grimacing and mumbling under her breath. “No comment.”

He smirked in amusement, continuing to think out loud. “Vanaheim would be a lovely
alternative, were it not for the fact that they have issues with non-immortals joining their society. Visiting is quite different to them than settling down in a home on their soil.”

“Couldn’t you just explain I’m not mortal anymore?”

He huffed. “The Vanir follow that definition even more strictly than the elves do. I fit in the category of mortal, because eventually old age will catch up to me. The elves and Vanir stop aging after a certain point.”

“So they’ll love Talia and turn their noses up at the rest of us.”

His lip curling in displeasure. “Essentially.”

“Asgard?”

Nodding reluctantly. “I am…considering it.” He was still reluctant and until he saw change with his own eyes he always would be. Still, the fact that Odin in his own way seemed eager for his return bolstered his courage in making it a strong possibility.

“Would-…” Jane frowned to herself. She wasn’t sure how to explain it in a way Loki wouldn’t instantly rebel from. She turned around enough to tilt her head in just the right away that told him exactly what she wanted.

He didn’t make a habit of reading her thoughts without her permission, as an act of respect. With her silent gesture he did so now. As the image and conversation she’d had with Odin came to him he blinked at her in surprise. He was privately stunned that his father had been here but left him be. It made him feel nervous and restless that Odin would be-spell him and visit while he was vulnerable, but it was only concerning possibilities that could have been since Odin had made no contact since then.

Narrowing his eyes at her in irritation, speaking slowly. “Why would you keep that from me?”

She licked her bottom lick nervously, hearing a hint of something darker in his tone. “Your first reaction would have been to balk.”

All expression from his face disappeared completely and she felt him stiffen under her as he asked, “And your point?”

“He didn’t mean any harm-…”

He cut her off with a snappish tone, but still that blank expression. “I think I know Odin just a little better than you do.”

“Your father.” Her correction was almost automatic.

“What?” She shivered as his tone turned icy.

Now Jane really wished she’d kept quiet. Yet she couldn’t seem to help herself. “Not Odin-…”

“I will damn well call him as I wish and right now I would speak of you both in less than flattering terms.” He may have roared the response but he was gentle when he put her on her feet, getting up himself so he could pace.
Jane bit into her lip to keep from retorting, knowing he was reacting from hurt that he was entitled to feel. “I wanted to help you.”

He whipped around and instantly snapped at her. “I am not a child and I will not abide such treachery.”

“Loki…” She reached up and held his face between both of her palms. She was very much aware he remained still only because he chose to. But she was suddenly at a loss in what to say.

There were a swirl of emotions in his green eyes as he looked at her, his hands lightly on her wrists and summing up his feelings on the matter succinctly. “You took his side over my own.”

She shook her head quickly. “I’m on your side. You were still hurting so much and I wanted to make it better. I—…you would have left Alfheim if you’d known.” Not quite throwing Hela under the bus but desperately wanting him to not be angry with her anymore. “Hela knew. She was here, too. I think she was curious what he had to say and I know she would have stepped in if she was needed.”

His eyes narrowed just a little as if measuring the truthfulness of her words and that hurt her more than if he’d continued roaring at her. Finally his shoulders relaxed as he pulled her hands away from his face and folded them in his own. His voice was low, serious. “Do not keep something like that from me again. In spite of her opinion, my daughter doesn’t always know what is best. As to the rest, Odin played his own part in creating what is, all from a flawed attempt to protect me.”

She nodded her head rapidly and as soon as he let her she hugged him tightly. She felt the worried knot in her stomach release only when he hugged her in return. Jane he forgave because he loved her enough to do so. Hela deserved to have her nose tweaked but he wasn’t angry with her. She was a trickster, a nature she shared with him. How could he fault her for that? His father was a different matter entirely. After a thousand years the old king should know better by now. The man was an AEsir who took pride in honest, straight forward tactics. It made him furious every time Odin proved to be even more slippery than himself. What angered him the most wasn’t the spell, but that the All-father had dragged Jane into it. There was no way he was going to let Odin get away with it. He would consider what an appropriate irritation would be for sufficient punishment.

But it did give him the information he needed to make the decision easy. Without his permission his hand came up to touch his forehead as if to recapture that touch. “Why show me this now, to sway me?”

Jane shook her head slightly before replying, her cheek resting on his chest. “I wanted you to make an informed choice. You’ll always know the other planets better than me, except maybe earth. I wanted you to know why I’m not worried about Asgard.”

She was still leaving it up to him but having those sorts of facts helped a great deal. There were still reasons Asgard was dangerous, but it was a controllable amount of danger and that made the difference. “We will have to go to Midgard first, mortal fear of me be damned.”

“The Other?”

“The Other. There are a few matters with the Skrull that need to be tidied up and those that I have issue with are all there.” Growling and muttering to himself. “Most convenient of her.” But he could appreciate the game Hela was playing with his life. He smirked and shook his head ruefully. “I can see why my brother gets irritated with me.” Jane sent him a questioning look. “On many occasions I have implemented plans without his consent, making him a pawn in my schemes. Hela is now doing so with me and I find it very irritating.”
“You could foil her game by just not playing.”

Nodding slowly to her. “I could, this is true. But…” He gave her a thoughtful look. “I want to show you something, but please refrain from speaking of it.” Jane nodded, closing her eyes as his fingers brushed her temple and settled the dream of an impossible future into her mind.

She smiled softly after a long moment and opened her eyes before asking, “Why shouldn’t I talk about it?”

Even his tone was hushed, as if saying this much out loud could ruin the outcome. “It can lead to it not coming true.”

Without asking she knew part of the reason. He was illustrating trust. But it was more than that. Jane slowly frowned. Gestures of trust aside, Loki never did anything without a reason. “Why did you show me that?” He didn’t say it, but understanding settled into her eyes and she nodded. He wanted her help in making sure it came true, since sometimes she saw the world and his actions differently than he did. Leaning up to kiss the corner of his mouth. “I promise.”

“Azni?” Azni didn’t even look up from her garden, digging trenches and planting seeds. Hela huffed loudly since she didn’t appreciate being ignored and nudged the gate open, following the gravel path to the edge of her garden. Scowling and swatting at a lazy bee that neatly evaded her and flew slowly away. “…I hate bugs…” Raising her voice a little as she asked the elf, “Why are you even bothering? There isn’t going to be a planet much longer.” Slowly Hela’s face went blank when Azni didn’t even seem to react. Her voice a vicious snarl. “No.”

The older woman didn’t even have to say it, her plan obvious. Azni continued to dig, her voice soft. “This is a small world filled with elves that don’t quite fit on Alfheim.” The elven queen glanced at Hela. “It is almost unheard of for mates to be unfaithful to one another…except for some here. In most instances when one mate dies the other departs within a short span.”

Hela narrowed her eyes. “Yggdrasil interfered to keep G’dath alive.”

Nodding slowly. “I believe so, yes. I never asked.”

Blinking in surprise, tone outraged, “G’dath is an outcast for having the strength to survive?”

Azni paused in her gardening. “I believe some might question her devotion to her mate but there are few who care about such things.” Leaning on the hoe in her hands. “Trax, while an efficient elder is at a level of intelligence that sets him apart from most of Alfheim. There are soldiers here, some with their families and some without, who cannot go back to Alfheim because of the wars that they fought on elven soil. Those that remain have nowhere to go, lady.”

“How many?”

“Thirty-three.”

Hela looked away for a moment, considering the matter. But then she smiled wickedly. If Alfheim wasn’t a possibility for them…and she would make sure that Loki knew that…it would cut down on the options he could travel. If they came to him in need, he wouldn’t leave them behind.

Azni turned back to her work and Hela studied her for a moment before asking quietly, “How politically sound a candidate is G’dath?”
Smiling softly to herself. “If I were to choose no one to replace me once my due time arrives, the Senate would give her the honor. Needless to say G’dath wishes me to announce a successor.” Hela raised an eyebrow at that. “G’dath has argued that she is a healer...she isn’t meant to assist in creating death, only in striving to preserve life.”

Hela nodded to herself, murmuring. “And if the Senate chooses her there will be no choice.” Giving her a coy look, purring softly. “I will make sure Loki assists them when the time comes and the Chitauri arrive, if you vow to go with them.”

Azni slowly turned, her face showing nothing but her eyes showing a hint of anger. “I vow it.”

Smirking. “Be certain to run to him when the planet starts to collapse. Father sometimes becomes too focused on the moment to worry about others.” Hela disappeared to the right, stopping to visit Loki just long enough to make it clear if he left them behind their deaths were on his head.

MIDGARD

Tony walked into Fury’s office, taking a look around to see the computer just sitting there so innocently. All alone. Helpless. He sat down in the chair across from the desk, his Stark phone uploaded with JARVIS, and started tapping rapidly.

Let’s see how he likes reading everything in Portuguese.

Fury came in ten minutes later and it was his own fault in Tony’s opinion his intimidation tactic backfired. “Stark.”

Tony was already sprawled casually, legs propped up on one side of Fury’s desk. “Where’s my new office?” He was going to enjoy every moment of this. Not one day had gone by where Tony hadn’t been pestering Fury now that they had equal ownership of the Avenger’s Initiative. And he’d put forward some of his best material: a dress codes because everyone needed a suit, to loosen the restrictions on alcohol because 9am was not too early for a little relaxation juice. Not to mention his personal favorite involved a few hookers, some alcohol, and the captain. The man needed to get laid, in Tony’s humble opinion. The inventor had to admit he was impressed with the Nick’s restraint.

The director didn’t say anything at first, closing the door forcefully before walking around. Not sitting down, he planted his knuckles on the table and leaned forward. “I have no idea how you arranged this-…”

“No. No way. Completely not my fault. I had nothing to do with it.” Grinning and sending silent praise Loki’s way, wherever the demi-god had disappeared to. “Just enjoying the results.”

Nick tilted his head slightly. “Which results are you enjoying more, Stark? I’ve got witches appearing and disappearing at will, mercenaries endangering SHIELD agents, the Avengers, and civilians…now I’m stuck dealing with you until I die unless I shoot myself in the head.”

Pressing his lips together and grinning. “So then it’s still until you die. Hmm...just think of me as your heart’s daily exercise routine. I thought you were working on the merc situation.” Fury had said he’d hoped he’d be able to handle the brains behind that little earthquake in Florida. Tony had the sinking feeling Nick still didn’t know who they were.

“I am.” Rising back up. “We have more pressing matters.” Picking up a remote, turning on the display behind him. “There is some major underwater activity. I need to know if you’re
Tony gave Nick an incredulous look. “Do I look like Aquaman? By the way, the lamest superhero ever created.”

“What do you have a way to investigate?”

Speaking slowly, as if he were actually thinking about the answer when in fact he was being exaggeratedly sarcastic. “You know, I left my submarine in my other suitcase.”

Shaking his head with a sigh, Nick glanced back at the monitor before turning it off again. Still turned away before speaking. “Intel says you’re working on something involving adamantium.”

Tony shrugged. “I like shiny things. It’s not Poseidon’s staff if that’s your subtle way of asking.”

“You’re also keeping it off SHIELD’s mainframe.”

Crossing his arms so his hands fit snugly under his arm pits before shrugging. “I don’t work for SHIELD since we’re in this together nor do I get paid by you so what I do on my dime is my business.” The expression on Tony’s face grew stubborn. It was a constant battle that Fury was determined to win. The SHIELD director wasn’t a spy or a soldier anymore. But he was a man who liked to be prepared for all contingencies and Stark was still the best weapons maker in the world.

“Director! We have major activity in Oklahoma!”

Nick glanced up at the ceiling where the voice was coming from. “Define activity.”

“We don’t know, sir.”

His brow furrowed slightly, sounding incredulous, “You don’t know—…”

“It has similar readings to the Foster wormhole, but… it’s off the charts. I would almost risk saying a singularity is developing above the surface.”

Tony blinked rapidly before asking almost to himself, “A black hole in the sky?” Then he thought about it and realized Jane’s bi-frost would look similar. And since he knew who she was with he asked a second later, “Is there video?”

Nick barked when the response wasn’t immediate. “You heard the man, is there an image?”

“N-no, sir.”

Tony stood and pocketed his phone, rapidly heading for the lab where his suit was. “Feed me the location, I’m on my way.”

“We’re going with you, Stark.”

Shrugging and calling to Fury over his shoulder. “They can come if they can catch me.”

Two minutes later and Tony was airborne, making impressive time for tornado alley. Tearing across the skies, all of his monitors up and running. It was a giant, black hole forming in the sky, just like the tech had said, except there didn’t seem to be any gravitational pull to it so that was a relief. “Talk to me JARVIS, what am I looking at?”
“Unknown, sir, there are signs of activity but no conventional readings. I am detecting exotic matter, sir.”

“Huh.” He landed in a barren patch of short, dry grass and little else. Tony sniffed, not even turning as he monitored JARVIS. Eventually the Twin jet landed and the other Avengers exited. They all walked up behind him…and just stared.

Clint got bored pretty quickly and frowned. Shifting before asking the inventor, “Stark, what is it?”

Tony would have shrugged if his suit allowed it. His tone dry. “So far, it’s a big black hole in the sky.”

Natasha held a hand to her ear. “Fury is on his way, 45 minute eta.”

The inventor pursed his lips slightly. “That’s nice. Five bucks he doesn’t miss anything.”

Silence descended once more. The two assassins shared a look, Clint sighing before going back towards the jet. Natasha kept her focus on their surroundings. Right on time helicopters landed, depositing SHIELD agents. Fury was with them.

Steve took the comm out of his ear, a signal that he didn’t want SHIELD to overhear. Tony lifted his visor to listen. “Do you think this is Loki?”

Tony twisted his mouth, considering the possibilities. More power than his own power cells could generate in ten years, and steadily increasing. Lowering his visor again. “At this point, Cap, I hope it is. Because the alternative is that we’re all dead.” If this really was a black hole they’d all die in a matter of seconds.

The hole rippled, a feel of static electricity in the air. There was a loud tearing sound accompanied by the sound of screaming and a bright flash of green light…and more than thirty people fell out of the sky.

ALFHEIM

Loki jerked awake, grabbing at his temple as his wards started screaming ‘danger’. Fenris was outside, howling loud enough to wake up everyone else. Throwing a tunic over his head, he rushed out the door and looked up.

He could feel it in the air now. His magical senses were more than just tingling, they were on fire. “What is it, what’s happening?” Loki looked back to see Jane stumbling through the doorway, wearing a long undershirt and hair disheveled. She saw his grim expression and matched it as she asked for confirmation, “They’re here, aren’t they?” He nodded slowly and she rushed back inside. “Indel! Talia!”

He looked up again as the skies crackled and rumbled, the clouds disintegrating. It was as if the sky peeked back to reveal the stars, and to the massive metallic rock that rippled with energy and lightening. It moved, snakelike arms appearing like smoke and spreading like a disease, blocking the moon and bringing an instant chill to the air.

On Asgard he could invoke a source spell against such a threat. Anywhere else it was risky, not just to those around him but for his own life. He now had the data he needed to calculate exactly when and how long it would take the world eater to follow him.
Loki heard the shouting and the screaming before he saw them. The villagers were running through the forest, Trax at the front of the group and all of them halted by the shielding Loki had meticulously created around his home. They were very fortunate he’d put a travel tunnel down the path months ago, cutting their travel time in half. If not by the time they’d reached him, he and his family would already be gone.

Indel ran to him and hid behind his legs, Jane coming out to the porch and the elf shooting into her arms as Talia scrambled at his tunic. Loki picked her up, Talia immediately hiding against his neck. “D-dada?”

Jane rubbed Indel’s back as Loki waved his hand and the villagers stumbled inside, the bubble snapping into place an instant later. The planet under their feet groaned, the air crackling with static. Loki snapped at Trax. “Why are all of you still here?”

Lightning flashed in the distance, a strange wind in the air. “I-…we have to get out of here.” Loki raised both eyebrows expectantly. That was a painfully obvious statement, even from Trax. “Whatever has destroyed those other planets is here for us-…please, prince, save us.”

Loki recoiled as if punched, staring at Trax in horror before his eyes swept over the others. He hadn’t fooled anyone, yet they’d willingly let him live here, let his children go to school with their children, treated him exactly as he’d wished to be treated.

He’d known it would come to this. But as his eyes swept over all of them he mentally groaned. He hadn’t known he’d have to transport this many people. Nodding slowly, turning to stare at Jane as the green and gold Asgardian armor he hadn’t worn in what felt like centuries molded to his body, his stance that of the prince he used to be. “Pack only what you can carry, I’ll take care of the rest.” Jane’s eyes wide for a fraction of a second before sprinting back into the cottage, Indel still in her arms.

“Loki.”

Loki closed his eyes to shiver at that hated voice. The Chitauri may control the world eater but that didn’t mean the mad titan didn’t augment it in some way. He wanted to cringe and curl into a ball, or to run away but he didn’t have time.

Opening his eyes again, forcing himself not to stumble back to see the titan as Thanos turned to grin evilly. It wasn’t like the dreams but a waking nightmare, he and Thanos standing on an abandoned rock. Logically he knew he couldn’t physically be here but he’d underestimated this creature’s powers over the mind once. It was a mistake he was never repeating. “At long last, little prince…”

Clenching his jaw, strangling his own fear to keep his tone insolent. “Not quite yet.”

“You have nowhere to run, Jötunn runt. Alfheim will not shelter you. Jötunheim will kill you. Asgard will banish you.” He took a step closer and Loki froze, then silently cursed himself for being a coward. After a silent moment Thanos flashed a victorious smile Loki’s way. “I wondered what became of the boy.” Loki resisted the urge to move, to somehow protect his thoughts from this evil being. Instead he did what he’d learned and forced his mind blank of everything but the mantra he’d taught himself.

_I am Loki, of Asgard._
Thanos moved at an impressive speed, whipping out his gloved hand and sent Loki sprawling.

I am Loki, of Asgard. I am Loki, of Asga--

The gloved hand grabbed him, lifted him harshly to his feet by the chin. Loki grunted in pain, his mantra evaporating. Thanos’ smile brightened. “I left that waste of life on the planet that partially spawned him…” Loki felt everything in him still, fear gone, as a deep growl rumbled in his throat that started from the soles of his feet. Thanos just continued smiling. “I will kill the both of you as a fitting tribute, and at long last have her favor. You belong to me…”

Pale golden energy crackled around him protectively and Thanos let go of him abruptly. A pair of small hands grabbed the back of his armor and Loki smirked, loving how possessive Jane’s magic was of him. “Send my apologies, I am already spoken for.”

The hands yanked him away from Thanos’ psychic control, the Titan’s roar distant.

Loki opened his eyes, firmly back in his own skin and giving Jane a small smile of thanks who looked him over worriedly, a small bag over her shoulder and Indel still in her arm. His son now clutched his stuffed dog tightly with one hand and Jane with the other. That was going to be a problem he had to address. Thanos had no defense against magic but he was helpless against the titan’s superior telepathic abilities.

A problem for later.

Loki turned and snapped his fingers, his own grimoire hovering in front of him. A sweep of his hand and the pages moved of their own accord, finally stopping on a page. He looked over the spell quickly, grimacing as he did. He hadn’t attempted this in centuries and never with so many passengers. Usually it was a last resort to save himself, Thor, and his brother’s friends when an adventure took a turn for the deadly. Two of his doubles came out of the cottage, the contents now in dimensional storage, many of the elves blinking in surprise as another four corralled them all into a cluster.

Hela was going to be insufferable for centuries after this.

Closing his grimoire, it vanished just as Jane and Indel shifted clothing to the armor he had made them. Jane was certain to press Talia’s doll into her arms who was holding him tightly. Taking Indel into his arms so the frightened boy was on his other hip, he took Jane’s hand and moved into the crowd until he was at the center. “Everyone either touch me or one another, make the connection as tight as possible.” It was stifling have so many bodies so close, but strangely it was also comforting. Looking into Indel’s and Talia’s frightened eyes, speaking firmly to reassure them. “Hold onto me tightly, little ones, I need both arms free for this.”

Unlike most dark passages, this one was parallel to the ground. To travel through it, one had to go up…or do what he was about to do which would pull them through just as the Tesseract pulled him through to Midgard. Only this time he would be supplying the power for the exotic matter, which would drain him rather severely. Jane moved closer, her arms moving to hug herself close to him while also using her limbs to wrap around the children. Whispering under his breath, the sounds of the sky crashing around them faded as the dark passage became visible above them.

There were gasps as the wind started to pick up. Then it started to pick them up. The elves held on tightly to one another a moment before a vortex exploded around them…and suddenly they
were falling.

Author's Notes:

Dum, dum, DUM!!! What happened? Where are they going? I'll give you a few moments but you won't have to guess hard ;)

Next:

SHIELD gets some unwelcome company; Odin receives a surprise
Chapter 60

MIDGARD

The free fall slowed, the screams quieted as their descent turned calm and continued in a whole other setting. A dry heat was in the air, wind still circling around them from the dark passage above them. It wasn’t the most comfortable environment for light elves but at least they could survive. Slowly they approached the arid ground, tufts of grasses beneath their feet.

The group as a collective collapsed as soon as they landed, just as the hole above them disappeared, many of the SHIELD agents backing up warily. Weapons were drawn but Fury didn’t give the order, watching them with narrowed eyes as men, women, and children collected themselves. The clothing was simple and homespun cloth, the only true distinction in their appearance from humans were the pointed ears.

Tony grunted. “Huh. Renaissance Fair or Star Trek convention?”

Bruce calmly brought up two fingers to rub the bridge of his nose while Steve frowned in confusion, glancing at Tony. “What?”

The inventor waved him off slightly. “Never mind, Spangles. So, do we introduce ourselves or open fire?”

Steve gaped. “We-you are not firing on women and children!” Tony’s lip twitched at Steve, not serious.

Loki took a few seconds to look around, determining that the mortals present were no danger to them. In fact, if anything it was the elves that were the true danger. He had to do this now. If he waited, Heimdall would surely tattle on him and then Thor would be here and it would be a mess.

Jane closed her eyes and pulled in a slow breath. Being on earth after so long felt almost surreal. But it was the planet's magic reaching out to embrace her that threatened to overwhelm her. Like an old friend truly welcoming her home. Loki leaned in and kissed Jane on the cheek, she catching a wink as she opened her eyes. She gaped at him. “Seriously??” For a moment she thought he was off to prank his father.

He raised an eyebrow. “If I wait until Thor arrives it will be New York all over again… and I avoid repeating myself.” He hesitated for just a moment, well aware of how many people could hear him. “Either arrangements will be made so that all of us may step on Asgardian soil…or Asgard will never be home.”

After a moment she nodded in understanding.

He smiled that wide smile she was used to seeing when he was hiding what he was feeling as a magical shield snapped around them. He stepped to the left, disappearing to walk amongst the branches of Yggdrasil. Jane couldn’t follow but this wouldn’t take long and Fenris was still with her. Indel was holding onto him and looking over his shoulder in curiosity while Talia’s face stayed buried in his neck as he walked amongst the stars up to Asgard. With their move away from Alfheim, there was no conceivable way that Heimdall wasn’t aware since he wasn’t bothering to hide himself from the gatekeeper’s sight. He reappeared in the palace corridor of Asgard, taking the servant wing to the throne room. “WOW.”
Loki winced and froze as his son’s voice echoed through the vast room and tall ceiling. “Shh…Indel, we’re being sneaky.”

“Oh.”

A parchment appeared in his hand and he carefully placed it on Odin’s throne. He paused for a moment to look at it thoughtfully, wondering so many things in that moment. Would father even bother to read it or just dismiss it? Would he alter it? A hope he had always viciously suppressed welled up again. That this time trusting Odin wouldn’t lead to his ruin. His hand paused, wanting to snatch the parchment back but he mentally kicked his own ass. He wasn’t a coward and he would keep telling himself that until he believed it.

So focused on that piece of paper that would determine if he had a future here, he didn’t notice Odin pause in his steps as he was about to enter through the main corridor for court, blue eye widening in surprise. Indel spotted him and grinned, wiggling his fingers in greeting before pressing one of his fingers to his lips.

Indel didn’t know who the man was but he liked him right away. Gruff and growly on the outside, but so was his father at times. He wondered if the old man was as nice as his father on the inside.

Odin was unable to stop a small smile before he ducked out of sight just as Loki turned to retreat back down the side corridor. Loki paused and turned back around with a wicked smirk, gesturing to the red runner and turning it emerald green. Then the banners. He contemplated doing something to the golden throne before changing his mind and concentrated on their exit. The banners were an irritation. Defacing the throne, temporary or not, would get Odin roaring at him. He was well aware of Odin’s invisible lines, even if he didn’t always adhere to them.

They passed a pair of servants, Anya being one of them. “Prince??”

He grinned wickedly and spun around outside the door, almost jumping to see someone rushing up behind her. “Loki!” He could have just vanished. He could have stayed and said something. But he was the God of Mischief, after all. Winking at his father, he stepped to the left and took the golden pathway back down to Midgard. Odin was going to kill him and he cackled to himself. Anya and Odin exchanged a look before his gaze moved to the other servant. “You saw nothing, now go about your duties.”

The other servant scurried away and Anya held herself in a respectful pose of obedience. “Shall I be readying the prince’s room, sire?”

Her voice held a hint of laughter, as did his. “My commanding you to do so would indicate that I witnessed what clearly did not occur…not yet.”

Lip twitching, eyes on the floor. “Then I suppose I will do so simply because it pleases me to do so. Would his lordship have any other recommendations for how I might spend my day?”

Tone casual and seeing why Loki had always been so insistent that he would only allow Anya to enter his rooms. He personally liked to rotate the servants every century or so but the resulting tantrum from suggesting his son do so as well knocked down a pair of columns. Odin never made the suggestion again. “Preparing the rooms adjacent to his own would not be remiss…and a casual request for preparing a wardrobe to fit a young prince and princess of about five would do no harm.”

A bright smile crossed her face. “Forgive my forwardness but I always did feel his highness
would make for a good father.” She looked up suddenly. “You should perhaps investigate the throne room he just departed from.”

Odin nodded firmly. It was an excellent suggestion and since Loki did nothing without reason there was most probably something important waiting for him…and some form of mischief he had little doubt. “Indeed.”

Curtseying. “Sire.” The two of them passed one another, Anya pausing after a moment. “Milord?” Odin turned and raised an eyebrow. “The cook has been baking all this week. Sweet rolls. A few cakes…she really outdid herself.” Another quick curtsey before Anya swiftly departed, Odin frowning to himself as she left. Now that she mentioned it that would be an odd occurrence for the cooks. They hadn’t dared bake anything with sugar in it since Loki had turned 4…

It took Odin a long moment to realize with horror exactly what she was hinting. He turned swiftly to the direction of the kitchens, knowing he was going to have to have a talk with the cooks.

On Midgard it had barely been two minutes from the time Loki walked to Asgard and returned, not that anyone other than Jane noticed. She sighed in relief as soon as he returned and ruffled Indel’s hair. Loki raised an eyebrow as he looked around. “No one moved?”

Her lip twitched. “Trax tried but he bounced off the shield.”

Loki’s own lip followed. “Well, elven instincts around mortals would be hel for negotiations. None of the humans approached?”

Her eyes looked over the humans surrounding them. “I think they’re waiting for you to make the first move.”

Hawkeye narrowed his eyes a second before he let an arrow fly. Tony’s eyes widened as the elves scattered or dived out of the way with screams as the arrow shattered the shield. “Whoa, I was kidding about the shooting thing, Tweety!”

The arrow stopped, being caught by a gauntleted hand before the owner of that hand walked forward with narrow eyes. His children were still in his arms, Jane clinging to his side with both surprise and anger warring on her face. Clint noted them and lowered his bow.

Fury barked at the assassin. “Agent Barton!”

Clint didn’t veer his gaze away from Loki as he replied to his superior. “Sir, that’s enemy one with a child in his arms.”

Both Tony and Steve yelped ‘what’ at the same time but Fury took in the collective situation instead of just the person. The elves weren’t hostages, that much he was certain. Talking louder so that his voice would carry, wanting to see how the demi-god would react. “Seems a bit outside of your style, the God of Mischief hiding behind children.”

The arrow in Loki’s hand melted to ash, turning to touch Jane’s cheek lightly before walking forward. He paused when she held his hand lightly and spoke softly to him. “Do you want me to take them?”

He nudged Talia gently and she went readily enough to Jane but Indel didn’t budge, now hiding. Loki glanced down at the mutt, tone nothing short of a command. “Stay with Jane, Fenris.”

The wolf growled but took a step back. Loki glance at G’dath and Azni, both of the ladies
nodding to him. With a slight gesture the protective bubble reappeared with a ripple to allow for him to slip beyond it. He reinforced it to allow for nothing to enter, either. He’d never convince Indel to stay behind so he walked forward with his son still clinging to him.

Indel’s face was buried in his neck, whispering over and over again not to let the ‘monsters’ get him.

Loki froze when it registered what his son was saying and closed his eyes for a moment before immediately sitting in a chair that appeared behind him with his son in his lap. Reputation be damned, this boy was more important. Indel had been going through a ‘monster’ phase, many of his dreams haunted by them. The books assured him he’d grow out of it soon enough and he vaguely remembered a period of his own nightmares filled with empty corridors and ice. He made a mental reminder to hide Barton’s quiver and arrows in Brazil for needlessly upsetting his boy. Gently he worked to pry loose Indel’s grip, shushing him whenever he made a distressed noise.

Natasha had been watching all of this closely through narrow eyes. She may have been ordered not to share her profile of Loki when she’d encountered him before but it didn’t mean she forgot it. And the man she was examining now no longer fit that profile. He was strong, formidable, and whole. Whatever traumas had been lurking in his half crazed mind were no longer tormenting him. This was a new adversary that needed to be studied and understood. She made her decision before holstering her gun and walking towards the sitting pair.

“Romanoff.”

She held up a hand to wave Fury off, hearing Loki’s soft voice as she ventured slowly closer. “They are not monsters, Indel. Do you remember what we talked about? About people?”

Indel’s thumb was dangerously close to his mouth but his expression was scrunched up in concentration. “A people may do bad things but it doesn’t mean they are bad.”

Loki nodded, encouragement in his eyes. “Precisely. You like Jane and she is human, remember?” Indel was quick to shake his head and Loki’s voice filled with confusion. “No?”

“She’s mama.”

A pleased grin spread across Loki’s face, startling Natasha by how it transformed him. It changed him from the evil megalomaniac that she’d encountered before to nothing more menacing than a young man holding his son. “Yes, she is. Now these are just mortals, humans that are protecting their own, like guards. We have come to their home without an invitation and they are protecting themselves.”

“But we needed help!”

Green eyes flicked to Natasha for just a second before focusing back on his son. Silently she noted the change in his eye color, a color that suited him in her opinion. “But they are not aware of that yet. Now, remember how I said once I was very foolish.”

Indel nodded slowly. “Uh huh.”

Loki held in the sigh, his lip betraying only a hint of a grimace. “This is one of the places I came to when I was very, very foolish so now they are afraid of me.”

His son’s protest was immediate and gratifying to hear. “But…but you’re not scary. Well, when I’m in trouble you are scary but not *scary*.”
Smirking, kissing his forehead and sounding amused. “You have no idea.” And he was glad for it. He didn’t want his children or Jane afraid of him. Tucking a loose strand of white hair behind his ear. “I need to talk to some of these m-humans so they will not be afraid, which means I need you to be brave for me.”

Nodding and whispering. “Okay.”

Standing and situating Indel back on his hip, turning his full attention to the assassin not more than half a dozen feet away. He’d been fully aware of her approach, but allowed it. It would have been a shame but if she’d attempted to harm his son he would have stopped her heart in an instant. His tone instructive. “Indel, this is a very special human soldier. Her name is Natasha…a better liar than I am.” He was being very generous saying that, but a half-truth would do no harm. She was a liar, but she was centuries away from being at his caliber. She did have promise and that was surprising for a mortal. Still, he knew what would impress his son.

Indel’s eyes widened, impressed as predicted, and his fear fading. “Wow.” His head moved around as he looked at her red hair before whispering. “Are her ears pointed?”

Loki smirked and walked again, Natasha keeping pace but not venturing too close. It didn’t escape her notice the protective aura around him. He wouldn’t hesitate to rip through her and any other obstacle to protect this boy and she knew it. The boy was his weakness, but he was also more dangerous for it.

“No, humans have ears like I do.”

Indel’s green eyes looked around curiously as he asked, “Blue ears?”

Chuckling softly at his son. “No, my ears are special.”

Loki stopped a little distance from Fury, not that he would need to draw nearer to eviscerate every single one of them with a snap of his fingers if they made any move against his son. Indel’s eyes threatened to pop out as Tony took a step in his ironman suit. “Metal…man?”

“Alright Rudolph, hand over the kid.” Indel yelped in fright and buried his face back in Loki’s neck when Tony raised his hand to point a pulsar, crying softly and nearly strangling Loki in a death grip.

Snapping in irritation, mildly tempted to turn his iron underwear inside out. “Nicely done, Stark, I just got him convinced humans weren’t monsters! Lower your arm and stop scaring my son.” He may like the man but that sort of conduct he wouldn’t put up with.

Natasha was frowning at Tony in irritation who slowly lowered his arm in confusion. “Your son…uh… sorry?”

Fury looked back and forth between the three of them. “What the hell is going on?”

Ignoring Nick, turning his attention to Indel. “Indel.” Loki felt his boy shift just a little, grip easing just the tiniest bit so he knew his boy was paying attention. “Do you trust me?” Indel nodded against his neck and his tone turned soothing. “You don’t have to be afraid. I will see them all dead before I allow harm to come to you. Do you believe me?”

Nodding and whispering. “You’ll protect me.”

Emerald flashed in his eyes. “Of course I will.” Patting Indel’s back, Loki glanced back at Fury who had stiffened. No point in addressing what hadn’t been a threat but a promise. Not
bothering to gesture behind him, knowing the human should be smart enough to figure it out. “They are light elves from a moon of Alfheim. The realm is peaceful and on good standing with Asgard. The moon was…under duress.” Loki leaned his head slightly as he said it, Nick catching on quickly and nodding. “I have been living there for some time when they came to me to…leave.” Another tilt, another hidden meaning that hopefully Indel wasn’t understanding. “I decided Midgard was a temporary recourse until I can make other arrangements. They are but farmers and civilians from a small village, the most danger you are in would be from me and…I have other priorities.” Not the complete truth considering the almost inaudible growls he could hear from the elves contained behind him but Fury didn’t have to know that.

The director was direct in his question, “Why the hell are you their spokesman?”

A slight smirk curled his lip, the words were the truth even if he was leading them to a false conclusion. “Midgard is under Asgardian protection. It is only fitting they defer to me.” His tone had an edge now as he addressed Fury. “You cannot force them to leave. I certainly will not allow you to manhandle me as you previously did. I suggest a truce. Without Thor you are rather powerless so make the necessary decisions and make room until Asgard responds.”

Fury may not like or trust the trickster but he knew a bluff when he heard one and that hadn’t been it. He may hate playing diplomat but if that little display had been all Loki the demi-god was quite correct. “Wait here.”

Loki nodded slightly, focusing back on his son who had calmed down enough to just lean into his neck tiredly, small hand clutching the back of his armor while his thumb had wandered back into his mouth. They’d been woken up in the middle of the night, Indel and Talia were going to be tired and irritable all day.

Bruce approached hesitantly and Loki forced himself not to back up protectively. He could admit if only to himself at the time he had deserved the man’s green alter ego tossing him around like a rag doll but he would not allow Indel to come to harm for his past. The scientist looked curious but almost passive. “How old is he?”

Loki kept his left hand free, his head turned towards the mortal but his back not to the Avengers. He was very much aware of the archer’s current position. “He turned five not long ago.”

Indel smiled hesitantly, whispering shyly and moving his fist slowly away from his mouth. “Hi.”

Bruce smiled in return, finding this little boy absolutely enchanting. “Hi. I’m Bruce.”

Nodding his head in a slight bow, white hair falling into his face. “Indel. Do you turn blue?”

Loki shook his head almost mournfully, absentmindedly tucking the hair behind his son’s ear. “You are fixated on turning blue.”

Indel’s reply was prompt and matter of fact, punctuated with a short nod. “Because you turn blue, do you?”

Bruce looked between the two of them in surprise, now very curious but he didn’t want to push the trickster who had been remarkably civil so far. “No, but I turn green.”

Jumping excitedly in his father’s arms, shyness forgotten. “Can I see??”

Tony snorted and Steve held up his hands. “That’s a bad idea, I’m afraid.”
Indel frowned at Steve. “Why? Are you afraid of green things?” Then the boy made a face. “You don’t turn into broccoli, do you?”

Loki’s voice firm, speaking before Bruce or Steve could even think to respond. “No, you may not see, no matter what size, shape, or color he becomes.”

“But-…”

Pulling in the authoritative ‘father’ tone he’d labeled Odin using on him as a child when there would be no option to disagree. A pity Odin seemed to have forgotten that tone because it still worked on him. “Indel, you may not see him turn green and if you use any spell to make him turn green I will be very cross. Understood?” All of the Avengers took a couple of steps back. They could handle Loki being there. They could even deal with him having full use of his magic abilities but a pint-sized Loki with magic of his own was a scary, scary thought.

Wilting into a pout. “Yes, sir.” Yawning, whispering into his neck. “I’m tired, dada.”

Rubbing his back soothingly. “Then sleep. I will wake you if Bruce turns green.” Indel giggled softly but quickly drifted off to sleep.

ASGARD

Odin read through the letter slowly, savoring the familiar script that had been too long since he’d last seen it. He could clearly remember Loki leaving him little notes in odd places, but it had been centuries since his son had last done so. This was not a note at all, but a rather formal demand for what was an acceptable vow.

A guarantee of safety and protection, broken on pain of death, for Indel Lokison, Talia Lokisdóttir, and Sorceress Jane Foster. There were no loopholes, the wording eloquent and yet blunt. He had already signed it. Had Loki added his own name he would still have signed it. Idly he wondered what Loki could do to the established edicts if he were given the freedom to do so.

A thought for later. Right now it was a question of locating his son. He had no wish to harm either of Loki’s children, and would gladly acknowledge them in court when Loki could finally be convinced to present them.

Odin was frowning slightly to himself, eye distant. The throne was more than just a seat with which to perch himself. The spells in place over it amplified what he considered his modest talents, allowing him to do what Heimdall could not. Yet even from here he was having difficulty finding Loki and it worried him, certain his son wouldn’t leave that moon until he was resolved he wouldn’t be coming back.

“My lord.” Looking up, he was startled to see Heimdall. The Gatekeeper never left his post. “The fog has vanished, sire.”

Slowly rising, asking a different question. If Heimdall was here, he knew where Loki was. “Where?”

Nodding before answering more specifically. “Midgard, sire.”

Then they truly were out of time. He suspected as much when Loki slipped into the throne room earlier but he was hoping that perhaps his youngest had simply healed enough to brave Asgard without being forced to. Apparently not. He could send a missive to order his son to return, which Loki would probably ignore. He could go himself, but that would probably spook him into running.
Then he rethought that last conclusion. Loki was on Midgard for a reason.

He nodded slowly to himself. Loki had a plan, as he always did. It was simply his task to discover what part his youngest wished him to play. Sitting back down, ordering firmly. “Remain here, Heimdall.” Turning to the right to address a page. “Summon Thor, Lady Sif, and the Warriors 3.” He rolled the parchment tightly and had another page bring his seal, which he used to bind it closed. The two warriors stayed silent and waited, each of them pondering old dreams.

It wasn’t too long before Thor arrived first, his war hammer on his belt. As this was a formal summons Thor knew this to be a serious matter. Kneeling before the throne. “All-Father.”

*How would Thor react*, Odin wondered. Well, he knew an obvious reaction but it was a matter between brothers so he wouldn’t interfere. Just as his father had never interfered in the fights he and his brothers used to indulge in for one reason or another. He’d act displeased later. Odin nodded. “Thor, I have a difficult task for you.”

There was surprise in Thor’s eyes but instead of questioning why Odin doubted he could accomplish it he kept his voice firm. “You need but ask, father.”

Odin nodded grimly, speaking softly. “I know.” They both turned as the other four entered, each kneeling, and the All-father affected his gruff tone of authority. “But the question must be asked of each of you. There is an ancient evil stirring, a creeping taint of death that must be stopped. Asgard will answer the call to battle, but a task must be performed first…and I wonder if you are strong enough to undertake it.”

Sif was the first on her feet, hand on the hilt of her sword. “I am ready for anything, my king.”

The warrior’s three were quick to follow. “Aye!”

Thor was frowning thoughtfully, which was a different stance of his son from just a few years ago but he also rose. “What must we do father?”

There was much to plan. The warriors must be prepared and depending on when Thanos would attack, there were allies to call to the drums of war. “Asgard must stand, which means calling home all of our most powerful warriors. Your task is simple for all of its complexity. If you are able to follow my command to the letter, you will travel to Midgard.”

Thor nodded slightly, his shoulders back. “It will be done. Are we in need of the Midgardian Avengers?”

Odin refrained from smiling in amusement. They may be what Midgard considered powerful warriors but he was unimpressed. Still, that they had survived the Chitauri made them worthy enough of a second look. “If they wish to travel to Asgard, Heimdall will provide them passage.” Knowing there was no way to put this gently, and also knowing if he’d told Thor sooner of Loki’s status among the living Thor wouldn’t have left his brother alone. “You are to travel to Midgard to retrieve Loki.”

Pain and loss warred in Thor’s eyes as he asked hoarsely, “Loki is alive?”

He started walking away but Odin’s voice halted him. “Thor, I have not given you leave.” Fandral ducked his head slightly to keep anyone from seeing the lack of surprise in his eyes. He was relieved with the news that he could finally set things right between himself and the prince.

Thor froze and slowly turned back around. “Father?” Oh the questions he could see in
Thor’s expressive blue eyes. And one that was almost audible. ‘How long have you known?’

In private he might explain himself but this was the wrong setting for it and he set his jaw. The other warriors had their jaws hanging open in shock. Odin reaffirmed his control over the situation, the voice of calm authority. “As his innocence was proven he is not a prisoner. He will not be harmed nor confined. But it is time for him to come back home and that is all that you are to do.” He could now see anger warring darkly in Thor’s eyes and dropped his tone just a little. “He is to be treated with respect as a son of your king. If this is too difficult a task, I will go myself.”

Pulling in a slow breath, teeth clenched and back stiff. “It is not too difficult, father. I will find my brother.” And kill him. He was going to kill Loki for doing this to him.

There was silence for a moment as the ruler and future ruler stared at one another. Odin almost sighed but he resigned himself to lecturing his son later on the seriousness of the breaking of oaths. Still, Loki was no weakling and wouldn’t be seriously hurt by Thor. “I will take an oath from each of you to that effect.”

The vows were made and the warriors followed Heimdall. “Warrior Fandral.”

Fandral turned instantly, not looking back as his comrades paused in their steps for a moment before continuing. Odin held out the sealed parchment. “Deliver this to my youngest in a private moment.”

Fandral bowed as he took the parchment and tucked it into his armor. “Sire.”

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MIDGARD

Tony had taken off his helmet, standing next to Steve and the pair of them just assessing father and son. Face twisting in confusion. “The kid doesn’t look anything like him.”

Steve glanced at the inventor after taking in the white hair. He might agree with that superficial assessment but those green eyes were all Loki. Shrugging, arms still crossed. “Well he is an elf.”

Frowning at the super soldier, sounding confused. “So what?”

Giving Tony a pointed look, sounding frustrated. “So maybe that’s how elves look, how should I know?”

Tony raised an eyebrow, his voice just loud enough to carry and knowingly pushing the God of Mischief’s buttons. “The God of Lies actually telling the truth?”

Loki grumbled under his breath to himself, being sure not to wake Indel. “…I am not the God of Lies…idiots…” He had no idea who’d been giving him that label but whoever they were he would strangle. As if he were even in competition for that title compared to the lies he’d been told all his life. Loki tuned them out, holding onto Indel and watching Fury conversing with a woman commander, Maria Hill if he recalled correctly. In the distance he heard Jane give a squeak of protest and didn’t even turn, except to gesture to let her through the shield. Talia ran up to him, wrapping both arms around his leg. The mortals shifted uneasily but Loki just moved his arm so she could duck under it. Glancing down at her, tone amused. “Are we boring you?”

She shook her head and after a moment covered half her face to whisper. “I don’t like him.”
Loki knew exactly who she was talking about and smirked wickedly. “Would you like to know a secret?” She nodded eagerly and green eyes flicked in Fury’s direction for just an instant. “I don’t either.” He could feign dislike to most of humanity even if he couldn’t care less. There were a few he genuinely liked…and then there were ones like Nicholas. It wasn’t because of any sort of danger that he posed, physical or mental. It wasn’t his lies, he was rather fond of liars. It was that this man, like Odin, was certain that he was right when he was grossly ignorant of how wrong he was. He loved Odin, even if he still couldn’t decide if he would ever admit it, but he didn’t like him right now.

The spy seemed to come to a decision and nodded before approaching him. “Alright, so these light elves are asking for temporary asylum and we can agree to that—you are the problem.”

Raising an eyebrow at Fury, tone dry. “Naturally.”

Nick ignored his commentary. “I would ask for your word you won’t start any shit but you are you after all.”

Eyes flashing dangerously at the mortal as Talia’s widened in fascination. He had worked very hard to make sure Indel and Talia weren’t vulgar. “Indeed. Mind your tongue around my children.”

Fury continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “And it’s not like we can contain you.”

If only Fury knew just how depleted his magical reserves were right now, he would jump at such an opportunity. He wasn’t helpless, but he wasn’t going to be doing anything particularly flashy for several hours. Smirking confidently. “Not without my permission, you would be correct.”

Gesturing to a pair of soldiers who stood in front of several containers. “Fine. You will be surrendering over all magical artifacts for as long as you’re here—…”

Loki effortlessly cut him off. “Then we already have a problem.”

“What is?”

Smirking in amusement, Loki pictured what the good director would look like after touching the Casket of Ancient Winters. “Besides the fact that I require no ‘magical artifact’ as you put it to bring your life to a tragic end? Some of my…more unique possessions will literally kill you to possess them so no, I will not.”

“What items?”


Tony took a step, butting into the conversation. Loki knew he was playing a role but the inventor was seconds away from regretting getting involved. “Look, Reindeer Games, it seems to me—…”

“Lokhi!”

Loki spun around, seeing G’dath and Jane hovering over Azni who was lying unseeing on the ground and didn’t even think, teleporting from point to point. The protective shield disintegrated as he knelt, passing a now wide awake Indel to Jane and Talia wrapping herself against Jane once more, and clapped his hands together. Two tables appeared behind him, teaming with potions and
supplies. G’dath and Loki looked at one another before they worked in concert, she identifying what was needed with terse orders and he quick to retrieve it.

Fury stiffened, getting an un-intentional demonstration of the types of powers Loki actually had.

Loki saw curious hands reaching for the Casket of Winters sitting rather benignly on the end of a table and smacked the back of that hand. Lifting an eyebrow at a scowling Barton. “That would be one of those objects that would kill you when touched.” Shaking a finger at him before turning dismissively. “Bad, Hawkeye.”

Clint hauled back to punch him, stopped by Natasha putting a calming hand on his arm. “Clint.” Another scowl and he stalked away. Loki smirked but didn’t shift focus. She turned her attention back to Azni, whose eyes were now closed and breathing easier. Loki snapped his fingers and a tarp appeared over their heads, she noticed many of them looking relieved and put a hand to her ear. “Sir, this climate doesn’t agree with our guests, we need to move them inside before any more collapse.”

Author's Notes:

Yeah, as much as Thor missed Loki, I can't see their reunion going smoothly.

Next:

A reunion and a lesson: don't upset a mage not fully trained
Chapter 61

MIDGARD

Fury wasn’t sure what to make of anything. As soon as he’d met him during the invasion he knew Loki was crazy. Whether he was born that way or was driven to the point made little difference at the time. But now he was seeing a sane Loki and again that creeping thought tried to burrow in. That thought that had whispered in the back of his mind that at the time he’d ignored. The thought that the trickster had been, at most, a soldier following orders. He gave the thought more credit. Because that meant something else could be coming to finish the job.

There was a strange tension amongst the elves and he couldn’t decide if it was because Loki was here or not. He did notice that whenever an agent was too close to the group Loki would suddenly be there and the tension would lessen. Interesting.

Fury had wanted to insist in dividing the elves up amongst the smaller planes to save time so Loki had been blunt. “Nicholas, unless you would like to have a second installment of immortals rampaging across this planet I suggest you not upset them.” Words alone wouldn’t sway him, it was the warning snarl from an elf addressing an agent who had wandered. Loki didn’t move, he just glared at the mortal. “Maintain a ten foot distance or I’ll let him tear you apart.” Loki turned to snap at the elf. “He is mortal and you are on his planet, get over it.” After that there were no further talks on the matter, no one doubting the truth of his statement.

As much as the director didn’t trust the trickster and wanted to watch him like a hawk, he needed to occupy the faster plane to get back to SHIELD first. He wanted to ensure the demi-god never found his scepter buried deep within the base. He took Natasha, Clint and Bruce with him, leaving the remaining Avengers to ride with Loki and the elves in the military plane with the cargo bay large enough to fit them all.

Jane was currently lying back in her seat, Indel in her lap and both of them sleeping. Talia was in the neighboring spot, her head resting against Jane’s shoulder and an arm wrapped around her. Loki wasn’t asleep and didn’t see that luxury happening any time soon. He looked up and smirked at the familiar face in greeting. “Elder Trax.”

“Pr-…”

Pointing a finger and snarling, ignoring several of the soldiers jumping back. “No. You spent five years treating me as an equal, don’t you dare take that away from me. Not now.”

Trax put a hand on Loki’s shoulder, speaking soothingly. “I apologize, my friend. Do you prefer Lokhi or Loki?” Loki shrugged a little, still watching him with searching eyes. Trax smiled slightly. “Then I will continue to call you Lokhi, and you no doubt will continue to ignore my wishes and call me Elder Trax.”

Smirking mischievously, the tension in his shoulders easing. “Of course I will.” They all looked up as the air around the plane thickened, the crash of lightening and the rumble of thunder following. Loki groaned in the back of his throat as he stood up. He knew this feeling. The magical pulse of power was what separated a typical storm from one generated by Thor’s moods. In fact, this situation was too eerily familiar. “This is an ugly reminder of the conclusion of a very bad day.” When a second rumble of thunder shook the air Jane woke up before yawning.

Steve frowned before asking for confirmation, “You think Thor?”
Loki’s face was resigned, but he was also a little eager. “No, I know it is…and he is not in a congenial mood.” Sighing and glancing at Tony before speaking. “You should probably land before he tears the plane apart to get to me.”

Steve looked around before turning to glare at Tony. “I didn’t call him, did you?”

Tony grimaced as he walked over to them. “I know I’m an asshole but I’m not that much of an asshole.” Both men sent him a dubious look and he exclaimed loudly, “I’m not!”

There was a familiar thud above them all but three specific people flashed back to another plane ride. Tony, Steve, and Loki all looked up at the same time before shouting in unison at the pilot. “LAND. THE. DAMN. PLANE.”

Steve actually said ‘dam’ but the message was clear.

As soon as the pilot had understood the serious jeopardy his plane was in, he was only too happy to land. Everyone was awake now, the elves tense and the Avengers watching curiously as Loki stood to be the first to exit.

The cargo door opened and with his arms slightly raised, winking at Jane, Loki started walking down the ramp before he was grabbed by the front of his armor. “Ah, this does seem familiar!” The word ended in a yelp as he was sent tumbling past Sif and the Warriors 3. Rolling before rising smoothly to his feet, dusting himself off. “Sif. Boys. Lovely day, is it not?” He glanced up at the oppressive clouds and corrected himself. “Or it was, rather.” A fist was thrown at his face by an enraged thunder god, but Loki ducked under the punch. Thor growled and swung Mjolnir but Loki neatly evaded as well, not seeing the occupants of the plane running outside. “I see you’re annoyed with me, brother.”

Punch.

Lunge.

Hammer.

Loki stayed one step ahead. Barely. Not that he was terribly worried. He’d seen Thor move a lot faster and knew the older man was just working off the sharpest edge of his temper. With a roar the thunderer grabbed hold of the trickster by the lapels, causing Loki’s eyes to widen ever so slightly. He hadn’t seen his brother this upset since that time as an adolescent he’d dumped a few stolen herbs into his ale that guaranteed a certain part of his anatomy would give every lady in court a standing ovation. Including mother. Loki had retreated to the library for a week to ensure he wasn’t smothered in his sleep.

Thor threw him against a bolder, using his greater weight to pin his brother. “Is my grief just a game for you? Answer me!” Thor shook him, growling in his face. “How dare you do this to me? Again!”

“It’s just all about you, isn’t it?” Even when it was in his best interest, Loki was incapable of keeping quiet.

Lightning flashed in Thor’s eyes as he snarled. “Loki.”

Hands on his wrists, Loki snarled back into his face. “Did you honestly expect me to go back to a cell willingly? Or…would you prefer it had been real? Would it make you feel better, brother?”
Sif glanced back at Fandral. “I cannot decide if we should assist.”

Fandral frowned, knowing his own response but curious what the others would say.

“Assist Thor or Loki?”

Hogun shrugged. “I recommend caution. Loki remains caught because he chooses to be.”

Volstagg frowned in disappointment. “Hardly entertaining.”

Thor snarled down at Loki, unaware of the discussion going on around him. All of his focus was on the trickster within his grasp. “You capable of sincerity would give me contentment.”

Loki tilted his head ever so slightly before tightening his jaw. “This sincerely pinches so get off me!”

Thor didn’t move an inch away, too angry to even try to determine if Loki was telling the truth or not. The thunderer’s grip tightened on Loki’s armor as he asked, “Why would you do this? You defended me with honor, why would you deceive me like a villain?”

The look that crossed Loki’s face required no translation. It screamed ‘idiot’. But then his expression turned contemplative. “Hmm…oh this is a difficult response. Perhaps your threat of returning me to my cell upon victory might have something to do with it.”

“I might have let you go.” Thor’s hold had loosened, brow furrowed.

Loki just sneered at the very thought. “Oh, please, you would never disobey father for me. Do not take me for an idiot, Thor. You who is to be king is so afraid of him you would not dare to countermand any order.”

Snaping down at Loki with renewed anger as the familiar game of tossing words back and forth between the brothers commenced. “Father is a great man!”

Loki served. “So was I, once, until his lies destroyed me so you’ll forgive my cynicism.”

“You are the great trickster of the nine realms but you are not our father—…”

“Your father—…”

“OUR FATHER!” Thor bellowed this, up until now shaking Loki by the shoulders when he would much prefer to wrap his hands around his neck. He never would since in the back of his mind he knew he underestimated his own strength and didn’t wish true harm on his brother no matter how infuriating he was.

Jane clenched her fists, unwilling to stand on the sidelines any longer. “Thor, let him go.”

Thor frowned as he looked at her, before his blue eyes swept over the SHIELD agents and a very dangerous glower filled his expression. He remembered what happened the last time Loki was on Midgard. He returned his glare to Loki as he asked, “What is she doing here, Loki?”

A wicked glimmer lit his eyes as he smirked. Now this could be entertaining. “What do you think she is doing here? Thor?”

Thor’s face and voice were grim. “You promised to visit her, as a taunt. As a jest—you kidnapped her.”
Jane huffed and retorted before Loki could say anything to make it worse. “No he didn’t! Thor, you’re being ridiculous.”

Thor slammed him back against the rock, oblivious to Loki’s wince and ignoring Jane. He wanted to hear the truth from his brother’s lips for once. “ANSWER ME.”

“Thor! Let him go right now!”

Not looking at her, focused entirely on Loki. “Stay out of this, these are not your affairs.”

Loki purred up at Thor, voice heavy with innuendo. “Is that your concern, brother…our affair?” Thor snarled wordlessly at Loki who flashed his brother a pleased smirk.

Jane’s eyes narrowed and flashed amber, a current of golden magic whipping around her and kicking dust into the air. She would never match Loki in power or Thor in might but she knew a couple of tricks that would knock the thunderer on his ass. “I am making it my affair and I said to let him go.”

“…Jane…” Her eyes glanced to Loki just long enough for him to shake his head slightly. She crossed her arms in a huff, not happy.

Indel’s hands were clenched into fists at his side. Talia was holding on tightly to his arm, eyes wide and Fenris sitting protectively next to them with hackles raised. He ignored Steve trying to distract him. All of his focus was on the man hurting his father. He didn’t care who the big man was, all he cared about was the way his dad was flinching being bent backwards against that rock. Muttering under his breath. “Leave my dada alone.”

Thor clamped his hands tightly on Loki’s shoulders, as if somehow by physical force he could command the uncontrollable trickster. “You will come home brother, and this time you will stay there.” Loki winced, knowing Thor just wasn’t aware enough of his own strength to know he was seconds away from cracking his collar bone.

Thumping his shoulder with his fist and snarling. “By Hel, Thor, let go!”

Then he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Even Steve was backing away warily as the swirl of green magic was forming a malignant cloud around him. In an untrained mage, magic would always respond to emotion over reason. To Indel, Thor represented a threat that magic would target. Loki and made a split second decision. Grabbing Thor’s shoulders, he tucked in his legs and pushed against the rock behind him, sending both of them falling to the side just as Indel’s magic whipped out to destroy the rock, the path of it unmistakable. Thor would have been torn apart.

Agents threw themselves out of the vicinity, Jane grabbing Steve and all of them backpedaling away. Sif’s jaw hit the ground. She wasn’t the only one from Asgard stunned by the raw power of magic. Thor lost his grip and Loki scrambled to his feet, running for his son and skidding into a knee in front of him, holding his face with both of his hands. “Indel. Indel! Stop. Stop right now. Focus on me—…”

“He hurt you.”

Thor blinked in surprise as the ground shook in sympathy to the boy’s emotions, something he’d only seen occur around Loki and Hela, and froze. Loki ignored his brother for the moment. “It’s alright, Indel. It is. Thor is just a stupid oaf who doesn’t realize bones break.” He wasn’t doing this for Thor. He was doing this for his boy. Killing someone at such a tender age would absolutely destroy him. He could and would put a temporary block on Indel’s magic with just
two words, just until he calmed down, but it was better for him to be able to control himself. Stroking his cheek, tone so close to pleading. “Indel, look at me. I know you can do this, look at me.”

Tears blurring his eyes as he found his father’s gaze. “He hurt you, dada.”

Loki tapped his nose. “Then I will hurt him back. It’s what stupid big brothers do sometimes, but he doesn’t mean it. If he says he’s sorry will that make you feel better?” Indel nodded slowly. Calling behind his shoulder without turning his head. “Thor, apologize for almost breaking my collar bone so my son doesn’t send you to Valhalla.”

Thor paled, more from his actions than the threat. “I’m sorry, Loki.”

Smirking down at Indel who was taking deep breaths. “See, you made him apologize and that is a mightier feat than any other.” Thor scowled as the boy gave a half attempted giggle. “Now, I need you to calm down, yes? You do not want to hurt G’dath or Azni, do you? You like them.” Indel obediently snuggled his face under Loki’s chin and breathed slowly in and out, the magic calming like an obedient pet. Talia went to Jane and lifted her arms to be picked up, she doing so with a relieved smile. Indel’s arms came up to wrap around his neck and Loki picked him up, face a very carefully contained mask as he walked up to Thor even though he felt like punching him in his stupid face. “Until you can control your temper, you will keep your hands off me or next time I’ll kill you myself.”

Sif waited until she was sure Loki was out of hearing distance before frowning at Thor. “You gave the All-Father your word.”

Thor’s jaw ticked even as it tightened. “I did not request your input in this particular matter, Sif. Kindly do not offer it.” Sif rolled her eyes.

“Sif?” The warrioress turned to Jane who was dressed in an armor that reminded her a little of Asgardian design, but different. “Can you slap him for me?” Because her arms were full with a little girl she didn’t want to put down.

Raising her eyebrows, thinking Jane meant Loki. From her perspective, the second son was up to his old tricks again and right now she felt like slapping him. “I promised the All-Father I would not harm Loki and I keep my vows.” Thor winced.

Jane smiled just a little. “I meant Thor.”

Sif blinked twice in surprise, then looked like she was considering it. Thor sent Jane a stunned look who smirked a very trickster-like smirk at him. They all turned as a grumbling Loki walked back over, fists clenched at his sides and Indel now being held by G’dath. Jane frowned in concern. “Loki?”

He huffed before explaining in a way only she would understand. “G’dath thinks I should get the other matter out of the way.”

“Oh.” Jane immediately stepped out of the way, pivoting her body so Talia had an unobstructed view.

The fist that Thor’s friends couldn’t see turned blue an instant before Loki slammed it into Thor’s face. It wasn’t uncommon for the brothers to get into physical fights, although as the two had gotten older the trickster had gotten better at feigning retaliations. Still, even in a brawl Thor was a hard man to knock off his feet. This was not one of those times, thrown back a dozen paces and staring up at Loki with respect.
Talia giggled and Jane clapped softly. The warriors started forward instinctively, bouncing off a shield spell surrounding Loki, who knew they couldn’t resist interfering. Sif’s voice was almost a shriek of outrage. “What is the meaning of this??”

Jane instantly scowled at Sif. As if Thor hadn’t started the fighting that had happened so far.

Loki’s expression turned cold but his eyes burned as he met Thor’s surprised gaze evenly. “Mother. Funeral. Fill in the rest.”

Even the escaped prisoners had the option of attending Frigga’s funeral, those that hadn’t died of course, simply because none of them had been recaptured. All but Loki, the one prisoner the elves hadn’t been brave enough to free, who was wallowing in the dungeons, and left to grieve without the comfort of that closure. He wouldn’t have cared if they had chained his ankles to his neck in front of all of Asgard and muzzled him again. The fact that he’d been denied that by his supposed family was a strong, lingering reason he was not in a hurry to forgive them.

Thor’s expression fell but Loki was already walking away before he gave into the temptation and a second brawl commenced. Loki walked far enough away to restrain his temper, breathing slowly. He understood that the game that he played in court left the impression that he hadn’t cared…but Thor should have known better. Of anyone in Asgard, mother had always come first to him.

“Prince?”

Loki sighed and closed his eyes for a moment, face turned away so Fandral couldn’t see his expression. “A criminal is hardly a prince, Asgardian; what do you want?”

Fandral frowned to himself. Perhaps there was no way to bridge the gap between them anymore. He had meant his vows when Loki had assumed control over Asgard during Thor’s exile, but he’d been pulled so easily away from his honor that it was right for the prince to suspect his intentions. But now he remembered the foundation behind why he had meant those vows. There would be no repeat of past mistakes. Loki had his loyalty, even if the stubborn mage refused to ever believe it.

Loki glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, then turned more fully with a frown when he noticed the necklace winking at him. He didn’t even think as his hand reached out, finger lifting the chain lightly off Fandral’s chest to stare with a perplexed expression on his face. “Where did you find this?”

Loosely shrugging, trying to read the expression on the prince’s face. “I stumbled across it one night.”

Those eyes looked up and flashed green. “You have not worn this since we were friends, why do you do so now?”

Surprise in Fandral’s voice as he asked, “Since we were friends?”

Loki turned dismissively. “So be it.”

And Fandral understood. It was when the necklace had been forgotten and relegated as a childhood trinket to the bottom of a chest. That was when Sif and the Warriors 3 became Thor’s friends alone and Loki faded into the background like a shadow. Perhaps the others had committed similar betrayals but his actions had caused Loki’s withdrawal of friendship.
Fandral reached out a hand, snatching it back when energy crackled painfully against his palm as Loki started walking. He remembered that trick. His eyes narrowed. And he remembered his normal response. Fandral barreled forward towards the form his eyes could see but his hands reached slightly to the right. Loki always favored the right. The trickster yelped and reappeared as he was grabbed, his double disappearing as they both fell and rolled to the ground.

They landed on their knees, hands on the ground to balance them and staring hard into one another. The corner of Loki’s mouth twitched upward before he threw himself forward and the two of them rolled together on the ground. Fandral let Loki get one good punch to his jaw because he deserved it and then the two of them started fighting for dominance, wrestling, kicking, tugging at hair, punching at shoulders…and grinning like maniacs the entire time.

It ended in a tie, both of them lying on their backs side by side and panting as they gazed up at the skies. “I am still going to call you prince.”

Loki’s eyebrow quirked at the AEsir, tone warning. “I might set your head on fire if you do.”

Fandral shrugged slightly, unafraid of Loki’s words. “You have been threatening such since we were children.”

“But I really could do so now.”

The AEsir chuckled in mirth at the prince instead of intimidation or fear. “You really could back then as well.”


Fandral was quiet for a moment, considering his words before shrugging again. “So that my friend would know he was welcome in my house when he decided to come home.”

“How long have you known I was alive?”

Fandral spoke softly but without regret. “A while now.”

His tone full of mocking. “And you did not inform the savior of Asgard, my, my…such loyalty.”

Jaw firming at even such a small jab to his honor but speaking to the trickster honestly. “I will not betray one loyalty to appease another.”

Loki’s head tilted to the side, asking curiously, “You would offer friendship to me at the risk of disavowing your allegiance to Sif, Volstagg, and Hogun?”

Fandral huffed as he corrected the trickster. “I am still part of the Warriors 3, but that does not mean I cannot resurrect our friendship, prince.”

“It may come to that.”

Fandral was quiet and still almost too long before speaking softly. “I extended a hand of friendship to you first. Honor dictates that my loyalties are to the man whose gift I wear.”

He was not one to trust easily nor quickly. But the fact that Fandral had kept the pendant all this time helped. It would be acceptable to him to consider Fandral an ally for now. He could not
be trusted as deeply as Jane, he doubted he would ever trust anyone as much as her, but it was a new beginning. Considering the clouds again with his eyes before nodding to himself. “Very well.”

Fandral’s mustache twitched. “You’re still as graceful as ever.” Loki rolled his eyes and sighed.

Jane glanced over to see Loki and Fandral enacting some type of male bonding and hoped that the AEsir followed through this time. But she was determined not to interfere. Instead she focused on the Asgardians that remained. She nodded slightly to the other warriors in greeting, Talia now sleeping on the plane. “Hello.”

Sif nodded in reply stiffly, “Lady Jane.”

She knew why Sif didn’t like her and Jane was fully prepared to reassure the AEsir that she was devoted to Loki. She was distracted when Indel wandered over, pouting. “Mama, I’m hungry.”

Jane smiled gently down at the boy. “As soon as Loki comes back we’ll feed you.”

Volstagg’s jaw dropped open in surprise, sputtering. Indel was far too pale to be a light elf, and combined with the white hair it was a surety of what type of elf he was. “That child is a dark elf!” Indel frowned up at the big man before sticking out his tongue and clinging to Jane’s leg. Volstagg face reflected both surprise and amusement.

Jane’s frown matched Indel’s, eying him warily as she asked, “So? Why is that significant?” She read surprise on Hogan’s face change to a battle-grim determination and scooped up the boy, immediately backing away from them. She knew that look. She’d seen something similar ghost over Loki’s face during hunting to know what it meant.

Fenris raced to her side to snarl at the AEsir. Steps behind him was Trax who had been standing close enough to witness the exchange. Hogun’s dark eyes narrowed and he took a step, met by Steve Rogers who had his arms crossed.

The super soldier didn’t know what was going on, but it didn’t take a genius to figure out one if not more of these AEsir intended harm on a child and that wasn’t something he would stand for. “I think you need to maintain your distance from the lady and the boy.”

Sif looked grim but didn’t pull her sword, directing her attention to the mortal barring the way. Volstagg’s gaze swung back and forth, confused. Hogun didn’t veer his gaze, speaking softly. “Asgard has decreed that all dark elves who leave their world are to be ended for their treachery.” Then Hogun glanced at Volstagg significantly whose face instantly filled with regret.

The rotund warrior shook his head slightly. “But surely…”

“Aesir warriors. To do less than commanded is to sacrifice our honor.” Sif face contorted with a range of emotions at Hogun’s words before it all faded behind a mask that didn’t reveal any of her personal feelings as she came up to his left. The grim warrior was quite correct. The regret was still there, but Volstagg stepped up to Hogun’s right.

Fandral hurried forward, looking troubled but saying nothing. Not yet. He exchanged a look with Volstagg, neither of them happy. It was one matter to meet a foe on the battlefield and neither of them ever had a problem in following AEsir edicts…but this was a child.

Sif met Jane’s horror-filled eyes, speaking quietly. “Step away from it, Lady Jane.”
“IT??” Jane all but shrieked in outrage and clutched Indel closer to her. Indel didn’t understand what was going on, afraid because Jane was agitated.

Steve’s eyes narrowed. “All the elves here are under SHIELD’s protection. If you have a problem, ma’am, take it to Fury.”

Hogun’s expression didn’t waver. Odin’s word was law. Were they to not follow an edict of Asgard they might as well cast aside their honor and live as rogues for the rest of their days. “To not obey the will of our king is to commit treason.”

Jane froze and narrowed her eyes. “You mean like that one time you committed treason… or perhaps that other time?”

Sif glanced at the mortal, shocked. “There is a distinction between following the command of our prince and ignoring the command of our king.”

Jane just raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that exactly what happened when Loki sat on the throne? He was king while his father and brother were indisposed and you directly disobeyed him.”

Steve tilted his head slightly, frowning. “You defied your king?” He wasn’t sure how he felt about that but it did fill in some gaps for him. He also lost a lot of respect for them.

Sif growled. “He wasn’t king—…”

“Enough.” Loki used his index and middle finger, digging a long line in the dirt with a flick of his wrist and a quick burst of power. He’d spent centuries behind the warriors and Sif but this was the first time he’d truly met them on opposite sides of the battle field. He wasn’t worried about Fandral, knowing the blond warrior wouldn’t cross the line. It was the others he wasn’t certain about. But they were Thor’s friends as well as his former comrades. He owed them more than simple evisceration so he kept himself contained… for now.

He clenched his fists and planted his feet, Indel and Jane safely behind him. “The dark elf child has a name. His name is Indel Lokison.” Heads jerked around, the Asgardians understanding more than anyone the significance of the last name. Loki’s name, and his acknowledged son. “Any of you wishing to enforce that edict will address it to me…I promise to send you to Valhalla as painlessly as I can.” His eyes flashed green and narrowed. “If you choose to walk away now and attempt the coward’s way later, I will not be as generous.”

Sif frowned but didn’t step closer. “The All-Father was quite clear about their kind, Loki.” He bared his teeth at her in reply. Like he cared what Odin decreed concerning dark elves. He’d learned his lesson, never to be repeated. He would never again hold denizens responsible for the crimes of a few. Not to mention even if Jane were a dark elf instead of a mortal he still wouldn’t hand her over just because she wasn’t his blood.

Jane. Talia. Indel. They were his. That’s all that mattered.

Now it was Volstagg’s turn to frown, this time at Sif. Killing a child was bad enough. That this was an acknowledged child of a son of Odin changed matters for him.

Tony strode over to Loki’s left. “Hey, Sheena, you’re not killing a kid.” Loki snorted a laugh and Tony looked at him with a new appreciation. “You got that? You?” Loki smirked wickedly for a second before his features shifted back to serious. Steve nodded and moved to Loki’s right, the three of them forming a wall behind the line. Green eyes glanced at the captain for an instant before reaffirming on the AEsir in front of him. He wouldn’t forget this.
There was a choice hanging in the air, the balance shifting the decision one way or the other. He could leave them and Asgard behind to slip out of the nine realms, problem solved. But leaving meant abandoning a dream and he had to know his father’s response. He could kill them, but he and Thor would never be on good terms again if he did. Which left an alternative. A dangerous one that meant trusting those he’d stopped trusting a long time ago.

He glanced at Fandral. Except for one of them. Then he thought about it and realized he had alternatives to just allowing them the freedom of wagging their jaws. He’d reinforced enough spells over the centuries to know exactly the fate he would subject them to for attempting to out him to another AEsir without his permission.

Allowing his skin to burst Jötunn blue, looking them all in the eye with his own crimson gaze without flinching. He wasn’t ashamed of what he was, not anymore, but politically the timing had to be on his terms. “We all know what he says about Jötunn as well, but exceptions have been made.” He may not have flinched but the three in front of him did. He heard Jane whisper ‘beautiful’ under her breath and suppressed a grin.

Thor had slowed to a stop, taking in his brother’s true form for the first time. Same clothes. Same posture. Loki, just him with blue skin. The eyes were the most disconcerting, but not when you took a second look. The same searching, calculating, cautious eyes. This was still his brother. Thor found it a relief that this wasn’t as confusing as he feared it might be; that he would disappoint himself by not being able to accept Loki as he truly was. He did notice the tension in the two groups and approached closer, putting his anger to the side for now. Father’s orders came first and Loki would never address Svartalfheim on foreign soil. “Brother, is everything all right?”

Loki was about to snap that they were not brothers, but then he paused. He glanced down just to be sure but he was most definitely still blue. He studied Thor’s gaze for a moment and found what he’d dared not hope he would ever find in this form. Resolve. Determination. Acceptance. The tension in his shoulders eased, speaking calmly as if he wasn’t Jötunn blue facing off against his brother’s closest friends. “Your friends are under the impression that my son may be killed for being born a dark elf.”

Hela’s words of before came to Thor and now he understood. This was why the little one needed protecting and why she had been so careful to make sure he understood the importance in a united front. Thor glanced at the little elf held protectively in Jane’s arms and grimaced at his comrades. “My friends! The All-Father would never allow such a decree to harm a child and neither shall I.”

Volstagg looked absolutely stunned. “Thor…your brother is a Frost Giant.”

Loki stiffened at the way the man’s tone changed when saying the words. Unconscious or not, it was the tone of a man looking down on another. He pressed his lips together hard to keep from commenting. Then he thought about it and thought the Hel with that. Lip twisting in a sneer. “Is not one of your children Vanir? Is not Hogun?” Volstagg looked at him, stunned, and Loki lifted an eyebrow as he asked, “What is your point?” Volstagg blinked and Loki was surprised to read shame cross his face before the rotund man glanced down.

Thor crossed his arms over his chest before shrugging. “He is Jötunn. I am well aware of his origins…and that he is an acknowledged son of your king.” He growled the rest, a glint in his eye that dared them to deny Loki was the second son of Asgard.

Sif sputtered. “But…he’s a Jötunn!”
Not even attempting to temper his tone, Thor snarled the words at her. “Hold your tongue if you cannot hold respect for my family.” Sif’s eyes flashed but she ducked her head.

Hogun was less easily cowed. “The dark elf—”

Thor turned to Loki. “What is his name?”

Loki looked almost bored, his eyes locked on Hogun, and that was when Thor knew the grim warrior was seconds away from death. A bored Loki was a Loki finished with the conversation. “Indel Lokison, my first born and heir.”

Which made Thor even more aware of the situation. By Asgardian tradition children were prized and cherished but the first born, above all other children, was the child worth dying for. His tone authoritative, turning his body to make it clear to Hogun that Loki and the Avengers wouldn’t be the only ones defending the boy. “Indel is the son of my brother, my nephew.”

Volstagg’s face was contorted strangely. “What of your father’s edict?”

“i will take responsibility for the decree being ignored. This conversation is concluded.” Volstagg looked instantly relieved, as did Fandral. The others silently backed down and the Avengers moved away, crisis averted. Loki’s eyes remained focused on the other three. He was disappointed with them, but unsurprised. He also knew that there was no further danger but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t punish them in a creative manner at the earliest opportunity.

Thor’s eyebrows rose to see Fenris sitting next to Jane’s feet. “A wolf?”

Indel’s thumb popped out of his mouth. “Fenris will eat you if you’re mean!” To add emphasis Fenris threw a very good growl at the thunderer.

Thor’s eyes snapped to Loki in shock whose appearance had faded back to his AEsir state. Turning beet red, Loki refused to meet his brother’s searching gaze as he escorted Jane and his son back to the plane. “Please refrain from speaking the wolf’s name around Thor.”

Indel frowned in curiosity over Jane’s shoulder. “Why?”

Jane started giggling again and Thor blinked in surprise at Loki’s almost sulky tone. “It’s not funny!”

Not having moved yet, watching his brother and asking quietly, “Loki?”

“Shut up, Thor.”

Thor pulled in a breath and his more authoritarian tone. “We are not finished, brother.”

Sighing in irritation, fed up with this discussion that was going nowhere, Loki threw up his arms. “Oh yes, we are.”

Pointing with Mjolnir. “Father commands—”

Ice sword encasing his hand, back to Jötunn blue and effecting a defensive posture. He was stronger in this form. Not stronger than Thor, but enough to give him a better advantage this way. “You. Father commands you, Thor. I am under no edict anymore and I will be damned again before I go back to Asgard in chains.” Jane had frozen and turned, now glaring at him.

Thor blinked and lowered his hammer. “You are not a prisoner.”
Raising an eyebrow in return. “Then it truly is my choice about returning to Asgard, is it not?”

Tony waved from the jet, having already listened to Fury ranting through the comms for the last five minutes. “Hate to interrupt but Fury’s about to crap kittens if we don’t take off soon.”

“Dada, how can-…”

Loki held up a finger at his son. “Indel, do not finish that sentence.” Moving to point at the inventor. “Stark, stop corrupting my son with your vulgarity or soon a very popular human colloquialism will be Loki got your tongue.” Tony’s eyes widened and he slapped a hand over his mouth protectively. That hadn’t sounded like a bluff.

Thor started to reply, but then stopped himself and Loki walked away. Jane tilted her head slightly as she studied Thor before grinning. “Okay I can see it, now.”

“Jane?”

Grin widening and speaking sweetly, saying this purely as revenge. “You in a wedding dress.”

Thor’s jaw dropped as he flushed red. Then he thought about it and his eyes narrowed as he walked into the plane. There were only a few people privy to that adventure and his mischievous brother was one of them. Crossing his arms over his chest and glaring down at Loki who was sitting with a raised eyebrow. “You were never to mention the wedding.”

Flashing him a bright smile as Talia crawled into his lap, Volstagg turning to hide a laugh. “Well I’m hardly going to lie when she specifically asks me if it really happened. Lying is wrong, after all.”

Indel frowned as he asked, “Lying’s wrong?”

Loki grinned at his son. “Only for everyone else.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Thor groaned at the trickster. “Brother I do not know if Asgard can survive more than one of you.” Loki’s green eyes flashed. He knew Thor was jesting, but he also knew there were a lot of people celebrating his no longer being there.

Jane knew that look and knew it was best to head it off before Loki dwelt for too long. She also knew the story but she wasn’t afraid to prompt him into telling it again. “Did Thor make a lovely bride, Loki?”

Loki opened his mouth and Thor dove for him, large hand over his mouth. Loki raised both eyebrows and counted to five in his head, just for fairness’ sake. The thunderer didn’t move his palm so Loki being Loki bit him. Thor recoiled with a yelp, glared, and slumped in the neighboring chair before crossing his arms over his chest. He quickly glanced at his palm and as always, when Loki bit he drew blood.

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Author's Notes:
**Sigh** Oh so predictable AEsr. Not to worry, Loki will get even ;)

Next:

Negotiations begin
MIDGARD

Tony was twitching by the time they landed. He shot Loki a glare and shot into the air, disappearing down a tunnel that held an underground bunker. Perhaps ‘bunker’ was the wrong word for it. It was a massive, multi-layered compound with everything from a military hangar to conference rooms to more than enough military bunks so no one had to share.

Loki noticed that the elves kept giving every mortal looks of disdain and even seemed to turn their noses up at the AEsir. G’dath just shot him a look and he hid a grin. She had certainly been right about the elves not being impressed with Thor. His presence kept their territoriality to manageable levels and soon they were sequestered to their own section. Azni and G’dath went with them to make sure everyone settled in.

Fury pulled those remaining towards a conference room, no one noticing that Loki had vanished until he returned with an impressive amount of sandwiches on a tray. Volstagg took a step, halted by his glare. “I am not feeding you before my children or there will be nothing left.” He would rather not feed the AEsir at all but he refused to listen to him moan about it. Thor was frowning minutely at Loki and the trickster realized more of his anger was bleeding into his tone than he’d intended. An irritated look crossed Volstagg’s face for just a moment but there was something else in his eyes. Perhaps regret.

Loki let Jane and the little ones pick and choose what they wanted before they and everyone else took a seat. Tony threw open the door and stomped up to Loki, glaring down at him and eye twitching. “Fix it.”

Loki blinked innocently up at him. “To what do you refer?”

Tony had tried desperately but the material wouldn’t budge, which translated to magic in his mind. Stabbing a finger at his face, ignoring the little girl in Loki’s lap frowning at him. “Fix them. Right now. Not when you feel like it or I’ll fix you.”

Slowly Loki raised an eyebrow, curiously asking, “What possible leverage could you have to offer?”

Tone flat, eyes glancing at Thor. “Miami.” He knew Loki didn’t want Thor knowing about Miami, if for no other reason that the thunderer would likely hug him and say how proud he was. Now Jane looked curious, even more so when Loki sighed and snapped his fingers. An instantly relieved look crossing Tony’s face.

Bruce’s eyes kept moving between Loki and Stark. “Tony?”

Tony grinned and snatched up a sandwich, moving an empty chair from the corner so he could sit next to Loki. “Nothing, Brucy, just negotiating a cease and desist against the wedgie of doom.”

Jane glanced at Loki before hiding a grin. Clint snorted, arms crossed and glaring with mistrust at Loki who seemed to almost preen with pleasure at his animosity.

“If we can actually focus on the matter at hand?” Eyes turned to Fury who had slipped in silently, standing at the head of the table.
Loki shot him a toothy smile. “By all means, little ant, speak away.” Jane nudged his ribs when she noticed the look that crossed Fury’s face and Loki grinned at her in amusement as he asked, “Yes, my dear?”

She turned red as eyes were redirected to her. Slouching in her seat, burying her face in Indel’s hair with a mutter. “You suck.”

“I hardly think that is an appropriate conversation to be having in mixed company.” Jane didn’t respond to Loki except to slouch further, knowing chastising him would only encourage him to embarrass her further. Sif’s expression shifted from mistrust to disgust and Loki mentally grinned, pleased.

Thor was well used to Loki’s games by now and didn’t even glance at him. “We must return to Asgard in the morning, father was most insistent.”

“If the elves are agreeable we have no problem with their leaving.” The look on Nick’s face said quite clearly he had no problem with Loki leaving as soon as possible. Talia was already asleep but Indel turned with a fussy whimper to lean against Loki’s arm. Loki stood up, winking at Jane and picked Indel up as well before exiting the room. “Just where the hell is he going?”

Volstagg didn’t even pause in assembling his impressively large sandwich to answer Nick, having already had several small children. “Little ones of that age require a midday slumber lest the demon in them emerges.”

Tony jumped. “Demon??”

Jane clarified easily. “Cranky.”

The inventor blinked before looking instantly relieved. “Oh.”

Jane turned her attention to Thor, focusing the conversation. “Have you asked Loki if he wants to come with you?”

Thor didn’t even look in her direction as he replied with a shrug. “He is of Asgard and father commands…”

Perturbed that he wasn’t even looking at her. Loki may dismiss her input on occasion but he at least had the courtesy to look at her when he shot down an idea. “No, I actually think he is of Alfheim so his going anywhere is between him and SHIELD, not Asgard.”

Now Thor looked in her direction with a confused frown. “Jane, these are matters that don’t concern you.”

Her eyes narrowed, enough so that only Bruce blinked in surprise when he noticed a small flash of amber. He wasn’t sure what it meant but he had a feeling the physicist was much more than when she’d left. Jane was too focused on Thor to notice anything else. “I am making it my concern. Neither he nor Indel or Talia go anywhere until I get some assurances from your father that he is free to come and go as he pleases.”

Sif opened her mouth slightly, then closed it again when she noticed the way Fandral was frowning at her. Her brow furrowed ever so slightly but she decided to stay an observer for now.

Fury took a step forward, trying to regain control of the discussion. “Ms. Foster, this is not a matter for SHIELD to get involved with. Certainly not for someone of his…character.”
Jane detected the change in tone. She was pretty sure everyone in the room had, especially as Thor had directed a scowl the director’s way. She wouldn’t let Loki talk about himself like that and she sure as hell wasn’t going to put up with it when other people did it. Her nostrils flared, hands balling into fists. “Fine. We’ll play it your way, then. Am I correct in the assumption that I am a United States citizen?”

Tony barely glanced up for a second from the screen he was tapping. “Yep. Checked your records myself before I moved you into the tower.”

Not looking at Tony, staring down Fury with calm assurity. “And is it my understanding that marriages would automatically grant my husband citizenship?”

The billionaire looked up slowly before smirking. “Yep.”

Nodding to herself as if the matter were settled. “Good, then at some point don’t be surprised if you have four people missing in the middle of the night and when you do find us, you’ll have an Asgardian Prince as a citizen of this planet and adoption papers for two elves well underway. Then you can explain to King Odin why abducting a citizen of this planet is suddenly your and the Avenger’s problem.”

Smirk widening, a devilish spark in Tony’s eyes. “Sweetheart, you follow through on that and I’ll send the paperwork for Locks and the kids myself.”

“STARK!”

Shrugging at Fury, not impressed. “Big brother carted him off to be punished but no one ever mentioned he couldn’t come back.”

“It was implied.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “So what? It would also be implied with the records that most of the Avengers have that we should all be in jail, not out saving the world. He served some jail time and helped save the universe. As far as I’m concerned, debt paid until he tries to take over the world again.” He’d been savoring this moment for quite some time. It was the perfect conversation. The perfect tone. “Not to mention Phil isn’t dead so I don’t really have a reason to be mad at him since the invasion wasn’t his idea; and thanks so much for telling us you asshole.”

Fury stiffened. “You don’t know that for sure.” Glares shifted in Fury’s direction who didn’t even flinch.

Tony leaned back in his chair and got comfortable. “About Phil being alive and right here?” He turned his pad to point to a spot on the map. “Yeah…I actually do. About Locks being mind-controlled and forced to come here to open the portal? Yeah, I know that for a fact as well.” Clint’s expression closed off, but there was less tension in his jaw. Tony glanced at the Asgardians who were all suddenly fascinated with their fists. Letting the sarcasm flow as he looked them over. “Superior race my ass.” Thor looked up in surprise. “You’ve known him for how long and you just now figured out he was innocent?”

Volstagg frowned slightly. “The All-Father’s decree of Loki’s innocence was not a recent event, man of iron.”

Rolling his eyes. “Uh huh. Last six months though, right?” Volstagg looked back down like a chastised child. “Thought so.” He glanced at Jane who was smiling slightly. “He saved the lady doctor over there, for his own reasons or not I don’t really care and she certainly isn’t
complaining.”

“Then what the hell was all that about back there?”

Another shrug, thinking quickly. “Didn’t know all the facts at the time…wasn’t trying to upset his kid, though. Damn. No wonder he’s pissed at me. JARVIS, get me a search of popular kid’s toys.” Muttering to himself and scrolling through a list. “Should get him something to make up for that.” Pausing with a frown. “Kids like ponies, right?”

Jane smiled. “Books, books, and more books. Actually, you can bribe both of them with the same titles. Geniuses, the pair of them.”

Natasha barely moved, making a dismissive sound as she asked, “You would label him a genius?” Her eyes, however, held a lot more interest than her body language was displaying.

Jane was not known for being cagey with her answers but Loki had already warned her about Natasha Romanoff. “Yes.”

Tony looked up with an odd gleam in his eyes as he asked, “Seriously?”

Shrugging to herself, knowing that Tony was counting down the days when he could have a thorough discussion with not just one but two geniuses of his caliber. “I’m pretty sure you could have bribed Loki not to take over the world with a Kindle and a really good steak.”

“Huh.” The inventor shrugged after a moment of thought. “20/20 I guess.”

Natasha leaned forward ever so slightly as she purposefully used a dismissive tone in the hopes of getting a useful response, “Considering the poor development of his previous invasion strategy I would hardly label him a genius.”

Jane’s normally open expression closed off. “You try to take over the world after being tortured for a year and see how well you do.” Thor and Tony both flinched at the same time. She focused back on Thor. “Assurance first, or his feet do not leave this soil.”

Frowning intently at Jane. The last time he had been around Jane, she had developed a grudging gratitude for Loki saving her life…and that description was being generous. “Jane, why are you so concerned about my brother?” She gave him a considering look, glanced at the other men and women, before standing up and turning with a tilt of her head to give them some distance. After a moment Thor joined her in the corridor. “Jane?”

She gestured slightly. Her privacy spells weren’t nearly polished yet but she knew their voices would be muffled to anyone nearby. “You never came back.” He moved to reply and she raised her hand slightly. “Wait, just wait a second, okay?” Thor nodded slowly. “You went back home because Asgard and your father and the throne will always be more important to you. That’s not a bad thing, but it made me realize something.” She gave him a small smile after a moment of thought, having come to this realization a while ago. “You like me…but you’re not in love with me. I don’t think you ever were. Not really.”

“And you?”

She let out a slow breath, not wanting to hurt him but wanting to be honest and clear. “I think I was in love with the idea of being in love. You dragged me out of my theories and showed me the reality. You showed me the stars…and I didn’t want to give that up.” Nibbling on the inside of her lip. “I loved you but…once I figured out you weren’t coming back...”
“I believe the human colloquialism is ‘you moved on’.”

She smiled slowly, happily. “I did. For a while it was all about my work. Now it’s about finding that balance between the two.” She shrugged. “Besides, we both know I’m not queen material anyway and you’re always going to do what’s best for Asgard. That’s someone like Sif but it’s not me.”

Thor wasn’t so sure he agreed but he didn’t argue with her. The starry-eyed look in her eyes when she gazed at him was gone. Instead he focused on the question that continued to plague him. “How is my brother involved in this affair?”

Jane grinned instantly. “He tricked me.” Thor’s eyes narrowed but it was tempered by curiosity. “I wanted to build a Bi-frost here and he helped me, disguised as someone else. But it went wrong and…by accident I landed where he was and he rescued me.”

Grimness filled Thor’s expression. “My brother is well known for causing accidents, Jane.”

Jane was quick to shake her head, playing on a hunch that Odin had kept his little excursion to Alfheim’s former moon to himself. “It wasn’t him. I know who but…it doesn’t matter. The point is I got to be around a Loki who wasn’t putting on a performance. He was clever and funny and showed me so much, not just of the universe but of myself and…I fell in love with him. I fell for all of it, with his bad attitude and his not completely pathetic jokes and his brilliant ideas...”

“You love my brother?”

The smile that filled her face she couldn’t stifle even if she tried. As it did every time she thought about Loki that way. “It’s hard not to love Loki when he lets you.”

Thor’s grim expression slowly lightened as he nodded in agreement. “Aye.” He knew exactly what she was saying. Right now Loki was putting on a show, as he always did when he wasn’t around just family. Now it was his turn to look thoughtful. “So you and he are courting?”

Her spine stiffened just a little, wanting him to know how serious they both were about one another. “We’re following Asgardian traditions to the letter as required for an Æsir prince.”

Thor smiled broadly down at her, happy. “Then he truly respects you.” It was Jane’s turn to look surprised but she realized she shouldn’t be.

“If the two of you are done with your fucking soap opera I would like to get on with this meeting.”

They both turned in Fury’s direction, Tony rolling his eyes over the director’s shoulder. A voice called from within the conference room. “Indeed, shall we conclude this most enthralling gathering?”

They all walked back in, Loki sprawled casually in the chair that was leaning in an impossible angle without falling, his legs on top of the table. Fury took his position at the head of the conference table and leaned forward. “Why are you here?” He knew there was more to this than just the rescue of a few elves.

Loki propped his arms behind the back of his head, tone as if he were about to tell a story to his children. “Well, Nicholas, when a mother and a father love each other very much…”

Tony started snickering but Nick was unamused, slamming his fist into the table. “Why the
fuck did you come back here?"

Loki gave Fury a patronizing look. “As I previously explained, mortal, the light elves required my assistance so I provided it.”

Sif crossed her arms and shot him a disbelieving look. Fury looked just as doubting. “I know when someone has an agenda so let’s stop dancing around in the shit.”

The trickster wrinkled his nose. “What a ghastly turn of phrase.” Loki’s amusement faded but he didn’t move, eyeing the mortal coldly. “I’m here to kill someone. Slowly. In a hopefully protracted and painful manner.”

With the exception of Jane everyone in the room including Thor tensed. Fury sounded almost clinical. “I can’t let you do that.”

Loki barked a laugh. “You can’t stop me.”

Thor leaned towards Loki, sitting on the other side of Jane and focused on the trickster. “Who, brother? Who is your enemy?” Thor immediately thought back to their previous confrontation on Midgard two years ago. Just as before he hoped there truly was an enemy to vanquish that wasn’t his brother.

Not even glancing in Thor’s direction, still in an intense staring contest with Fury. “A sadistic creature called the Other.”

Jane’s voice was quiet. “Whatever he is, he’s not human.”

Steve was frowning at the table. Some of the people here considered advanced humans in a separate category just because of their mutant abilities. Asking respectfully, “Was he born on this planet, ma’am?”

Loki answered for her, tone casual. “Hardly. He arrived here quite recently.”

Fury blinked as he glanced at Jane before looking uninterested. “Ah, then it’s not our concern what you do with him.”

Loki grinned and purposefully picked up that proverbial stick. “No concern at all…except for the damage he caused your planet with his Krimminger devices.” Jane immediately shot Loki a look.

Steve stiffened, his question careful. “This Other is the one that brought them here?”

Volstagg jumped to his feet with a cry. “Krimminger device??”

Sif leaned towards Thor. “Is the All-Father aware of this?”

Thor held up a hand slightly to Sif, trying to catch his brother’s eye. “Loki, he cannot die at your hands. He must be brought back for Asgardian justice.” Loki snorted.

Fury was going to interject with that little comment. “Hell no. You brought back him for Asgardian justice and he got off with a year for mass murder. This time this guy is ours.”

Thor looked almost amused as he redirected his attention to Fury. “You will not succeed in conquering this adversary without us.”

Standing up to his full height, glaring proverbial daggers at the thunderer. “I am not going
through this shit storm again with nothing to show for it!”

Thor and Fury continued to bicker back and forth, Loki watching like an amused cat. He lifted an eyebrow at Jane when she smacked his thigh. Whispering softly to her. “Yes?”

She gave him a mock glare. “You did that on purpose.”

He shrugged unrepentantly. “Of course I did. Nicholas is too amusing when wound up. Besides, I will have my revenge with or without my brother’s permission. He can’t stop me and he is aware of it.”

Lowering her voice further before asking, “And the other problem?” Loki took her hand and the two of them faded from the room, unnoticed by all except Bruce who had been quietly listening.

Jane looked around, realizing she was sitting in a very large satellite dish. She leaned back and smiled as she felt familiar arms wrapping around her. He nudged her temple with his chin, his hold tightening just a little. Frowning in curiosity. “Where are we?” It was still New Mexico, she was fairly certain, but she doubted even he knew as she felt him shrug. Not even with Azni and G’dath would he leave behind Indel and Talia right now. “You left Mischief with them, didn’t you?”

He grinned mischievously. “Maybe.”

This far away just for a conversation meant he didn’t trust the current company they were keeping even a fraction of an inch. Rubbing his forearm, her magic reached out to caress his own and a taste of his emotions washed over her. “What are you worried about?”

It was just them, no one else here to hear. No one to ever know so he didn’t even try to deny it. “Thanos is coming.”

They’d used the dark passage, it was unavoidable at this point. But she knew that wasn’t an immediate worry so something else was troubling him. “But that’s not why.”

He sighed softly and pulled her closer. “No. The ship that we saw in the sky, the world eater. Even with the planet consumed the dark passage will remain.”

Jane blinked quickly in horror. She’d known for a while now of the world eater and that eventually they would have to leave. This little tidbit Loki hadn’t offered before now. “It’s coming here.”

He nodded slightly and tightened his arm just a little further. “I could take you, Indel, and Talia away from here.” His tone turned persuasive as he purred against her ear, smirking when she leaned back with a soft moan. “We could slip between the cracks and follow the dark roots to the unknown worlds outside of the nine realms.” He didn’t use actual persuasion because that was cheating but he wished he could.

It took effort, but Jane forced herself to focus. She didn’t consider that an option but she had been positive he wouldn’t run anymore. Then it occurred to her why he would consider it. “You’re afraid for us.”

Whispering softly against her ear. “The thought of losing you…terrifies me.”

She wanted so badly to turn. To stare into those bottomless, otherworldly green eyes and offer him the reassurance he needed but his hold was too firm. “Loki…”
Continuing to speak, needing to say this. “And not just for myself, although that is reason enough. If I lose you, I will become worse than Thanos could ever dream of being. There—there is a prophecy that I’m not supposed to know about. I’m supposed to bring about Ragnarok.”

She remembered it from her reading. The end of the universe, and the beginning again. It was an endless loop of life and death that didn’t make sense to her. If it was inevitable it made every action pointless and she didn’t like that thought. “And you think you will…”

“I know I can—…”

Whipping around and surprised he let her, reaching up to hold his face. “Stop right there. Now you’re being ridiculous.” Hurt crossed his face before he hid it. But he was still listening so she continued. “Anyone could bring about the end of everything, it doesn’t mean they will.”

Clenching a fist tightly, restraining his frustration. “But no one wrote a prophecy saying they would. No one has Hela and the armies of Helheim and Niflheim at their beck. With one word from me I could unleash the dead on the living, tip the scales of life, and end us all.”

The words should have terrified her but they don’t. Anyone else would have considered them a threat but Jane knew better. Cocking an eyebrow at him and suddenly sounding amused as she asked, “Since when have you ever done what was expected of you?”

“Never.”

Bopping his nose with a finger, lightly chiding him. “Why would you choose now to do something so idiotic to prove them right? The God of Mischief. The God of Chaos. He wouldn’t let anyone label his destiny and throw it in a box. He’d fight to make the destiny he wants. So are you choosing to end everything or not?”

Slowly he blinked with surprise, realizing she was right. Loki smiled reluctantly. “Chastised by someone not even a tenth of my age.”

Her eyes flashed amber and she retorted confidently. “But ten times smarter than you, apparently.”

He pulled her back into his arms and sighed against her temple. “I gather running isn’t an option.”

She curled up against him, wrapping her arms around him in turn. She hated his armor in these moments, knowing he couldn’t feel her like he needed to. “Not a chance. These guys hurt you. They need to pay for that.”

“Strategically it would be smarter to wait until they are occupied consuming Midgard to obliterate them.”

Unlike what anyone else might think, he wasn’t throwing out that suggestion just to get a rise out of her. As a strategist he automatically found the soundest plan that yielded the results he wanted. It was her job to provide him the broader perspective of why it was right or wrong.

She made a negative sound in her throat. “Except we can’t allow the Chitauri to kill humans as a distraction.”

His tone was genuinely curious now. “Why? It worked last time.”

Forcing her mind to stay calm, she steered away from the moral high ground as reason
enough and to concentrate on a reason that he would accept. He was a warrior and a prince, he had to have more of a reason than just because it was morally right. That argument was a quicksand trap, filled with his retorts of sacrificing a few for the greater good. “Will there ever be another me born? Ever?”

He rubbed her temple with his cheek and purred softly. “No, you are unique.”

“And you like Tony, will there ever be another him?”

He laughed huskily. “Hopefully not.”

She rolled her eyes with a grin but kept asking questions, “And one day they will be mortal and die, do you think there will be other humans you might find interesting? Funny? Entertaining?”

“I suppose so.”

“Not if the world eater destroys earth.” She said the words quietly. Gravely.

He huffed at her softly. “I did propose when their distraction had just started. A less populated area perhaps. Here is practically barren…”

Cutting him off gently. “And even if the devastation is localized, it will still kill thousands of people. Maybe a couple who were going to have a child that would grow up interesting…and now that child will never exist.”

He blinked twice before looking around and whispering. “Oh…” He’d never thought of that and he wasn’t sure why it had never occurred to him. Why couldn’t Jane have been around when he’d grown up, or someone like her? She explained things in a way that made sense but also inspired new thoughts and concepts.

Jane kept talking, not oblivious that his mind was turning but wanting to keep the momentum going. “Humans die every day, it happens. It’s unavoidable. But it doesn’t mean that we allow for an already short life to be even shorter. Those with the ability to make a difference have the responsibility to do so.”

Such a profound statement. He asked her curiously, “Who said that?”

Her lip quirking a little, surprised she’d retained that little snippet. “A human from about two hundred years ago. He was a president, too. So?”

Loki sighed with resignation. “There is a higher probability of failure with any other solution…”

“But?”

He could talk her around with the logic of it but Jane didn’t act with logic, she acted by what her heart told her. As much as she might think her argument was sound, it wasn’t. It was heavily flawed. But…she was his guide and she’d shown him more than once that it wasn’t about the numbers or the logic or the preservation of higher beings at the sacrifice of lesser beings. It was about protecting the innocents that mattered most. The regrettably rare, kind people like Jane who could look at someone like him and find someone they love. He might never understand, but in these matters he would always bow to her wisdom.

Taking in this new bit of information to formulate a strategy to minimize Midgardian
casualties even if the probability of success decreased. “I would have to be on the surface at the time of their arrival. If I destroy them from here instead of Asgard or Jötunheim I’m going to need more than just rest and a solid meal.”

“But it can be done?”

He pulled in a slow breath, considering all that would have to be done, not just to succeed in destroying the world eater, but for later. “Yes, but after we’ll also need to make Midgard less attractive to Thanos.”

“We have to get the scepter.”

His lip quirked. The scepter was an important aspect but regrettably not the only one. He couldn’t stay here and the sooner he left the better for them. But there were other matters that would pull Thanos here first unless the titan had a better, more urgent target. He would have to check in with Hela soon to get an idea of how much time before Thanos discovered the Gem of Reality was gone.

“Yes. And we have to convince the Avengers to leave Midgard.” Jane winced and Loki huffed. “Aaand we have to gain the trust of one of the factions SHIELD call mutants, I require at least two of them to channel enough translated magic from earth’s heart.”

Her brow furrowed as she asked, “Why?”

His lip twitched in amusement as he replied, “Some matters are purely determined by paternal and maternal contributions. With these special gifts that are beyond the norm of the species, they are either inspired by the heart of a world, or supported by her. Whichever is the case, these mutants are favored by Midgard.”

“So basically we have to steal the scepter, since no one is going to give it to you. We have to convince the Avengers to do what you tell them, most of who don’t trust you. And we have to gain the cooperation of a group who don’t trust you or SHIELD.” He nodded slightly. Her tone suddenly wistful. “What was that other plan of yours again?” He gave her a sharp kiss to her temple and said nothing, planning.

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**Author's Notes:**

Hey, hey, the gangs all here...and squabbling as predicted. I just can't get these children to behave themselves.

**Next:**

A theft: A God of Mischief high on sugar; A tale of truth long overdue
Chapter 63

MIDGARD

All was quiet and settled, the perfect time of night when it was just late enough that the next shift was about to start and the previous shift was more focused on thoughts of leaving for their assigned quarters than on paying attention to the cameras. There were random patrols through the compound but they were mortal and assumed too much. They assumed they could see him. They assumed that their technology was infallible against magic. It was neither. Loki slipped soundlessly down the corridor in an unassuming form, no one paying attention to the air vents where he was located. The silly humans thought because he was a demi-god with an ego larger than this planet that he wasn’t used to skulking through shadows.

He smirked and white fangs gleamed in the metal tunnel that ran parallel to the corridor that led to his prize. He walked on all fours, tail flicking as he walked to the end, the air rustling his black fur. A movement of his right paw and the grate popped open, allowing just enough room for his lithe body to slip to the floor.

A spell to conceal him.

A spell to trick the cameras.

He stood up as a man, his body changing seamlessly to appear AEsir in his green and gold armor. He tilted his head slightly as he studied the scepter. He wanted to just reach for it and grab it, but G’dath had taught him patience. If the mind gem, one of the lost infinity stones, truly was at the heart of it then it would control him just as easily again since the scepter had not been his to own. Until the Other and Thanos were dead. That thought made him smile darkly.

For now he must treat this as carefully as the Casket of Ancient Winters. Dangerous. Deadly. Elemental.

He waved his arms in precise movements and clapped his hands, just once. A green flash surrounded the scepter and when it faded, it was still there. He eyed his masterpiece critically, looking for any flaw. This wasn’t about ego. This was about fooling even an expert that the scepter was still there, even if it wasn’t. He smirked and nodded, taking a step back as he melted back into a fox. He leapt up to the air duct and slipped away soundlessly, the grating closing quietly behind him.

Thor glanced to the right as Loki walked out of the shadows of the corridor, his arms crossed. It was a credit to his nerves that Loki barely paused before frowning slightly at the thunderer. He had just returned from his little expedition to retrieve the scepter and it was late enough that Thor shouldn’t be here. Asking carefully, “What are you doing, Thor?”

“I could ask you the same question, brother.”

We are not brothers. Loki viciously bit down on the inside of his bottom lip to keep the words from slipping out. Shrugging nonchalantly. “I just went out for a stroll.”

Brow furrowing, Thor’s expression concerned at the mischief his brother was no doubt up to. “You have not been given leave to wander Midgard at your choosing.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed in turn, more than tired of the older AEsir’s constant need to attempt to control him. Asking sharply, “Am I or am I not a prisoner?”
Thor blinked twice in surprise before answering honestly. “I told you, you are not--…”

Loki sneered and cut him off. “Then it truly is none of your concern what I do. If Nicholas should wish to scold me for walking thusly without a chaperone then send him, otherwise I am going to retire for the evening.”

The thunderer sighed in exasperation since getting Loki riled hadn’t been his intention. “Brother--…”

The trickster snapped instantly. “Stop--…just stop.” Thor, like father, didn’t know how to interact with him and he’d accepted that a long time ago. It still didn’t mean he was going to change himself for them. “You will one day, one day, carry his mantle as king and rule Asgard. That is not today and until then you are a prince. I may no longer be Asgardian or a prince but I will never be your underling.”

Surprise filled Thor’s face. Underling? Was that Loki’s perception of how he was viewed?

Loki kept speaking, ignoring whatever was going on in Thor’s head. “So until I vow allegiance to someone STOP ordering me around.” He started to walk for the door and glared when Thor reached out an arm to block his path. “WHAT??”

Thor changed his mind. He’d wanted to try to talk about Svartalfheim. Or before, over the matter with Jötunheim. But his earlier realization that Loki wouldn’t discuss it here remained true so he put it to the side. But now that the rage had calmed he could see the change in his brother and he was surprised. When had it all gone wrong? He wondered when they had gone from the closest of friends to such bitter rivals. Thor couldn’t remember and he hadn’t noticed even if he could. He’d been oblivious, which was not a good state for a future king to find himself. “I apologize for not respecting you more, Loki.”

Loki was a liar and a masterful one. You can’t lie easily to a liar. And even if Thor were to try he had always been horrible at it. The tall Asgardian was sincere, and it was not just some placating gesture that someone had forced him to do…he honestly meant it. Loki’s jaw slowly fell open, blinking owlishly at the slightly taller man. He couldn’t think of what to say. He, of all people, couldn’t string along the words and just gaped like a fish.

Thor smiled jovially. “Finally. I have waited a thousand years to find some way to silence you for just a moment.”

His green eyes narrowed slowly. “A momentary lapse that shall not happen again.” Thor just chuckled and thumped him good naturedly on the shoulder before turning to leave. Loki scowled and rubbed at the bruise forming once the older man was out of sight.

Jane savored a long, slow drink of the deliciousness that was coffee. She had suffered for far too long without the caffineinated beverage, in her opinion. She was going to have to learn the dimensional storage trick because she needed coffee. She was in heaven. She grinned at Bruce as he sat down across from her and sang. “Morning.”

He blinked in surprise. “Good morning?”

They were both sitting in a large dining hall, people wandering in and out, either to stay
and eat or to grab a few things and go. Currently there weren’t many people as it was early, Jane and Bruce sharing a long table in the middle of the room.

Grin brightening as she took another sip. “You have no idea how much I missed coffee.”

He asked curiously, “There wasn’t coffee on…um…”

Jane grinned good-naturedly. “The Light elf world is called Alfheim. And unfortunately no. Coffee is strictly a Midgardian delicacy, quote un-quote.” He peered over the top of his glasses. “I personally think Loki was lying about that but I can’t prove it yet until I visit the other realms.”

“You’re--…he’s going to take you to other planets?”

Jane’s grin broadened as she popped her ‘p’ and took another sip, “Yep.”

Indel and Talia walked into the cafeteria holding hands, pausing in the doorway and peering around. They spotted Jane and Bruce talking quietly and hurried to the far wall to grab a tray. Talia stood up on her tiptoes for the pop tarts, showing them to Indel who scrunched up his face and shook his head. She shoved them back before jumping excitedly and pointing. Indel grinned and they quickly loaded it with three cinnamon rolls. They had icing on their fingers and stuck them in their mouths, pausing to curl their noses.

Talia shook her head. “I don’t like it.”

Indel shrugged. “Dada likes cinnamon.”

She joined in the shrug before turning around. “Hold it!” Talia and Indel both froze and everyone else looked up curiously as Jane stood and asked an unnecessary question, “Who are those for?”

Talia was an even worse liar than Indel and hid behind her brother. Indel turned guiltily and nibbled on his lower lip. “Um…me?”

Shaking her head since Indel wasn’t a closet sugar fiend like someone else she knew. Normally Loki abstained just because of the way both his body and his magic reacted but she knew he was in a mood to cause trouble today. “No way. Nuh uh, put them back.” A flash of green light filled the room and Loki popped into existence, a hand on both of their shoulders. He stayed just long enough to stick out his tongue at her before vanishing again, taking his children and the sugar with him. “Loki! Get back here!”

Thor chuckled as he entered and walked with focus towards the pop tarts. “Trouble, Lady Jane?”

There was no way in hell she was dealing with this by herself. Her eyes flashed amber and Thor blinked in surprise when he noticed. “If you think it’s so funny, you can deal with Loki hopped up on sugar.” He opened his mouth to question what she meant, then stopped himself as the memory of sugar anywhere near Loki came to him.

Snakes falling out of the sky like raindrops. Puddles that barked. Every warrior in the training yard falling over themselves because they’d lost the ability to walk with balance. Sif screaming and running from everything because she was literally afraid of her shadow.

That had been Loki at 4, and it was the last time father had allowed anything with sugar near the trickster. A look of absolute horror crossed Thor’s face before he turned around and thundered (pun intended) down the corridor. “LOKI.”
Flashing in to grab another tray, Loki rolled his green eyes. “Like I’m idiotic enough to hide in my assigned quarters.” Jane stormed over and lightly slapped the back of his hand, causing the tray to wobble the tiniest bit. He raised an amused eyebrow at her, asking, “Yes, Miss Foster?”

She scowled at him, watching him put fruits and two chocolate milk on the tray. Her scowl turned into a frown of puzzlement. “You hate chocolate milk.”

He shrugged and grinned cheekily, mischief dancing in his eyes. “It’s not for me.”

She judged the resolve in his eyes and sighed, deflating even as she asked, “I’m not going to be able to talk you out of this, am I?”

Purring at her softly, thinking of several delightful ways she could try. “You may of course attempt to do so…but no.”

Jane shook her head fondly and resigned herself to the inevitable, refilling her cup. She was going to need it even if she was going to leave this as mostly Thor’s problem. “Fine. But the rules still apply.”

Loki batted his lashes at her playfully. “You know I have no rules.”

Slowly she lifted an eyebrow. “I think we need to work on your ability to compromise.”

He smirked at her. “I don’t even know the meaning of the word.”

Smirking back at him. “But you know the meaning of the phrase ‘tickle torture’.” He froze and stared at her. He was ridiculously ticklish and she was not opposed to taking full advantage of that fact. Nor in sweet talking Indel and Talia in helping her. “You can’t avoid me forever and I will get you.”

He knew she wasn’t bluffing and scowled at her. “You’re not supposed to ruin my fun.” She was supposed to be his co-conspirator. His partner. Not to mention if he was going to put up with Sif, Volstagg, and Hogun’s continued existence he needed to vent a little.

With a shrug she sat primly. “I beg to differ. I’m not ruining it, just tempering it.”

“Prince?” Loki glanced back at Fandral while putting another croissant on the tray, who looked to be in pain. Fandral’s tone was pleading. “Please refrain.”

Raising a tray innocently, voice full of saccharin. “These are good for me.” The blond warrior looked instantly relieved.

Jane growled and took another sip, already sitting on the table. “Don’t fall for it, he’s hoarding several cinnamon rolls.”

Loki blinked rapidly in feigned innocence. “Would I do that?” He rolled his eyes when she just continued to stare at him and Fandral shuddered. “Very well. If you can catch me, the mischief ends.” He heard him before the arms could come around him, teleporting away and causing Thor to lose his balance and fall to his knees. Reappearing sitting on Thor’s back and grinning evilly. “You’re going to regret that in a quarter of an hour. Brother.” And out he popped once more. Jane hid a smile behind her cup.

Thor paused for a moment to think of all the horror Loki could unleash that wasn’t lethal. But he was a warrior of Asgard. An AEIsir who’d fought in countless battles and faced down horrors. A prince and the future king of Asgard. *Running away wasn’t an option. Right?* Looking up
with a pleading look. “Heimdall?” Absolute silence greeted him, the Gatekeeper no doubt as fearful of Loki being in Asgard at the moment as Thor was in being here with his sibling high on sugar.

Bruce sighed, thinking they were all being a tad melodramatic. “How bad could it possibly be?”

The God of Mischief on a sugar high turned into a prank demon, but none of them could think of a way to describe it to do the horror justice. Jane, Fandral, and Thor all sent him a pitying look and suddenly Bruce decided he needed to be in the lab today.

When a dozen mice poured through the lab door Bruce thought about setting traps, until he thought about it again and peeked into the hallway. Then he looked up. A pair of agents were floating by him, struggling with zero gravity that only affected them.

A terrified scream had him jerking around, seeing an agent running by with a chair rapidly chasing her. With teeth. Bruce exhaled slowly. This was going to be a terrible day for everyone if his blood pressure spiked. He took a step before pausing to frown, seeing that he was on a beach. Glancing down, feeling his bare feet sink into sand, he took another step as warm air breezed past him. Not too far away there was a chair with a book and his reading glasses. Bruce slowly smiled and took the hint, having no doubt he would find himself back in the base once Loki was finished tormenting everyone.

Fury had been swearing in three different languages about goddamn gods of mischief and their goddamn immaturity…until his mouth disappeared.

Tony had doubled over laughing, having been around to see that. He stopped laughing when he turned neon pink and it was Pepper’s turn to laugh at him. Absolutely nothing happened to her because Loki wasn’t an idiot.

Thor, Sif, and the Warriors three avoided the drama and concentrated on finding the trickster. Loki rarely conceded to a rule. He agreeing to anything with Jane was something they were going to take full advantage of. If he agreed to stop when he was caught, it meant he was physically here and just had to be found.

Five was reduced to three very quickly, Volstagg discovering his red beard had grown snakes and Hogun’s hands had turned into two large spiders. Both of them ran in the opposite direction, screaming like girls.

Thor looked up at the ceiling with a scowl, knowing the trickster had just played on their worst fears. “Loki!!”

Loki’s voice drifted over them, laced with malice. “Unless you want me to kill them for even thinking about attacking my children you will allow me my revenge.” Sif’s expression turned worried before she hid it.

Thor didn’t press his brother further and the hunt continued. They waded through a sea of chocolate, Indel and Talia in a boat and giggling at everyone. Fenris was between the two, barking like a dog and tongue lolling in clear amusement. Mischief was steering and grinning like a maniac.

Sif huffed. “He knows I hate chocolate.”

Thor grinned since he knew Loki was well aware. His grin disappeared as a chocolate waterfall opened up at her feet and she went plummeting into a vat of fudge with a scream. A scream
that cut off as she landed with a ‘splat’ and promptly sank. Fandral and Thor glanced at one another. Fandral tilted his head slightly. “All things considered, he could have punished her more creatively.” Both of them sighed before continuing to search.

Carefully they navigated a room that had turned upside down, the two of them now covered in chocolate. They walked past a pair of interns that couldn’t stop burping bubbles. Fandral tapped Thor’s bicep once and motioned to a shadow that didn’t belong. The thunderer didn’t think, lunging forward. Loki appeared and neatly evaded, using a springy chair to vault over his adversaries. He tore through a wall like running through tissue paper, cackling the entire time.

He turned, back against the wall as the AEsir stumbled to follow. Smirking, he turned into a sparrow to avoid getting caught and flew upwards towards an air vent. Just as he reached supposed safety a hand shot out from the vent and nabbed him with one hand. A human hand belonging to an annoyed archer.

Loki wiggled and sighed. “Damn.”

Clint climbed down to the floor, a far too smug grin on his face. The trickster was eyeing the mortal holding him carefully, daring him with his eyes to squeeze too tightly. The side door opened, Jane looking indulgently amused. She didn’t even have to ask Clint, the agent handing the trapped demi-god over to Jane. Loki glanced back and forth between the pair of them suspiciously, realizing Jane had enlisted the archer’s aid. Clever of her to do so.

Clint gave her a curious tilt of his head as he asked, “He’ll really fix everything?”

Jane smiled and lightly stroked her fingers over Loki’s feathers, opening her hand so he could settle himself into her palm and answered Clint easily. “Of course he will.”

Loki puffed up his feathers, retorting stubbornly. “Eventually.”

Fandral groaned but Jane just gently chided him. “Now, please.”

Loki glared up at her. “You’re not supposed to cooperate with the enemy.”

Jane’s lip twitched in amusement. “You should have made that a rule, then.”

Loki huffed and disappeared, but the base started to right itself in stages. By the time Tony was no longer pink, the warriors were no longer screaming, and Fury had a mouth, Bruce was back in his lab. Sif was still covered in chocolate.

After having his fun, Loki decided to find a quiet spot for some much needed solitude. It was frustrating how truly hard that was to find. He could go to his assigned quarters, he supposed, but that felt too much like admitting defeat. It didn’t take Loki too long to figure out that no one had spine enough to handle his glare and soon the rather impressive office he’d decided to occupy was vacated.

“Loki.”

Loki closed his eyes for a moment, not in an indulgent mood right now. But then ever since their confrontation he hadn’t been really interested in conversing with Thor. On Alfheim he’d been almost eager to see Thor again but he supposed he’d just naively assumed that matters would have gone differently between them. Thor was still a blind idiot and he, in turn, was still a pest who grated on Thor’s nerves.
“Thor.”

Thor thought very carefully before speaking. There was so much he wanted to say. But he was still a jumble of emotions. His anger had faded, replaced by that jumble and he couldn’t seem to decide what to say or do first. “Have you decided to accompany us to Asgard?”

Loki’s eyebrows shot into his hairline as he turned. Never had he thought such a phrase would leave Thor’s lips. Not only asking his intention but refraining from throwing in the usual command. But sincerity wasn’t his strong suit and the response was almost complete before he even realized he was speaking. “You’re an oblivious idiot, Thor, and you always will be.”

“Explain.” Thor ground his teeth together to keep from saying anything more, waiting.

Now Loki sighed tiredly. This wasn’t the first time he’d attempted this topic with Thor. He knew this was a conversation that was going to go nowhere. But he gathered himself to try one more time. “Your ignorance of my fate for one.”

“Then help me to understand…father wants you home.”

Scoffing at the very thought that his life could ever go so simply. That he could simply return to Asgard and father would forgive him just like that. His life never worked that way. “Of course, as desperately as he wanted me there the first time…that ended well for me. Rotting away in solitude in the dungeons until the end of my days…” He glared at Thor. “That was certain to help my disposition. Your words mean little while you understand so little.”

Thor slowly shook his head, sounding mystified with a hurt undertone. “When did you start to hate me, brother?”

Eyes flashing green, hissing. “Stop sounding like an adolescent female. I do not hate you, you imbecile, I am irritated and frustrated with you. You were exiled to be a better king and you returned to Asgard the same moron you left. Meanwhile I attempt to end the war by killing Laufey and get thrown off a bridge into the abyss for it.”

Thor blinked in surprise, certain Loki’s memory was failing him. “You let go, Loki, no one threw you off.”

Loki felt like punching something. Not his normal reaction except when dealing with Thor who always, **always**, fixated on the wrong part of the conversation. Pacing and waving his hands. “The point is that you never see what is right in front of you.” Spinning and jabbing a finger in Thor’s direction. “I do not hate you—I do not trust you. There is a difference.”

Thor could remember centuries of adventures and schemes and refused to believe that it had all been an act. Recently he could see the difference now that he was paying attention, Loki half of the time the playful mischievous boy he remembered and the other half a snarling, bitter man. “You used to trust—..”

Loki cut him off, his tone clipped. “Yes. Centuries ago. And then I found out the cost of that trust.” Thor’s brow furrowed to hear more than just anger and pain, there was grief in Loki’s tone. He dropped Mjolnir and pulled over a chair, sitting down. He rested his forearms on his knees and folded his hands together. Loki’s brow furrowed slightly, tone mystified. “What are you doing?”

“I have wish to hear this tale.”

Snapping defensively at the thunderer. “It’s not a tale!”
Thor nodded slowly, gravely. “And I wish to hear it.”

Loki blinked in surprise, brow furrowing slightly before glancing away. Murmuring almost too quietly to hear. “Of course you will hear, but you will not listen. No one heeds the Liesmith.”

Thor’s voice was nothing but sincere. “I will listen to what you have to say, brother. This I vow.” Loki started just a little, as if he were surprised Thor had even heard him. But those piercing green eyes studied him silently.

This was the first time Thor was observant enough to realize there was a reason for his actions. He clenched his fists once before relaxing them. “I will speak of this…and if you interrupt me just once I will never finish and I will never speak of it again. You may continue to wallow in ignorance until the end of time.” Out of the corner of his eye he saw Thor nod once again gravely, face set in resolve to remain silent. He hated the truth. He hated it every time he uttered it. At least this time it was his choice in what he said. “It was just before my proving day. I was to select where I wished to go to prove myself a warrior. Trolls? Bilgesnipes? Or perhaps the forests of Alfheim. The desert of Vanaheim. Attack Fire Giants—...it was all before me. As ever Hela was by my side, helping me narrow down my choices.”

Thor remembered. Up until she settled into Helheim, little Hela had been Loki’s shadow ever since her creation. He said nothing, just listening as Loki continued. “There was a special alcove above the advisory council room that was perfect for our private discussions. We could hear them talking, more of hushed whispers than anything, and then in walked Odin.” Loki started pacing.

“The topic of conversation was of course Hela. Too powerful. Too dangerous. Her magic needed to be caged or taken away completely. He said nothing, he just let them talk.” The agitation in his voice increased. “Two hours later, it was decided that when I left she would be put to death. ‘To contain an uncontrollable mage.’” Thor barely kept himself from making a sound of protest, clenching his teeth together tightly. “She wasn’t dangerous. She was like me. She pranked and we paired up often but she’d never hurt anyone. Death simply because they were afraid and since she wasn’t technically of the royal family she wasn’t offered that protection.” Spinning around and jabbing a finger in Thor’s direction. “Protection that you swore was hers because of me. I wasn’t about to let that happen. I stole away with Hela to Helheim, and we conquered the demons that had overrun there from Niflheim to set her as their queen.”

The thunderer felt ice slide up his spine. He hadn’t known. Not any of this. Not that Loki had chosen Helheim as his proving ground. Not why Hela was gone. He’d just known that she was gone and father had placed a ward around Asgard that would unlock at the saying of her name, and forbidden any AEsir from ever saying her name again. The only answer that father would ever give him was that Hela had chosen her new home and as she had been accepted as Goddess of the Underworld for the safety of the citizens of Asgard she could never return.

No warrior would dare mock Loki if it were common knowledge that he had defeated the demons of Helheim. It was a running joke amongst the warriors that Loki had tricked Odin into granting him warrior status without a kill to show for it. Why had Loki allowed it all these centuries? Why had I not stepped in sooner?

Loki clenched his hands together behind his back. “And where was mighty Thor? Where was Sif and your friends? You had already all proven yourselves mighty warriors so you were out fighting trolls. None of you had time for your friend, for your beloved baby brother. You would hear nothing of my fears, of my asking for your help. You laughed and said I was being ridiculous. That it was inconceivable for father to agree to Hela’s death.” Loki laughed sharply, mockingly. It was such a grating sound that Thor flinched. “And you wonder why I said nothing on Midgard. That is your reason. You who always assured me that father would love Hela as a daughter.” Then Loki
looked thoughtful. “Well, I suppose you were right in that regard. Because I heard them before Odin came in. The talk of how similar arguments had been brought to Odin concerning me. They couldn’t propose death to a prince but they did try to contain my abilities. And then I unknowingly broke the cap to make her.” Loki shrugged as if it meant nothing to him when Thor could see it meant everything. “So continue to spin lie after ignorant lie and placate me, Thor. I stopped believing that you truly understand the state of Asgard a long time ago.” Snarling, eyes flashing a dangerous green and stilling. “But know this. Indel and Talia are mine, whether you acknowledge them as family or not they are mine and I will kill anyone, anyone, who tries to harm them. Even your father.”

Loki would be grieved to do it, but if it truly came down to Indel and Talia or Odin, he would choose them. He might not be able to live with himself after, but no matter how much it would destroy him his children came first. Loki made a vague gesture as if to say that he was finished.

Thor wasn’t sure what he could say in response to that. He had failed him, failed Loki. And the pieces finally fell into place. Loki had started keeping his own counsel from then onward and Thor hadn’t noticed. Loki had withdrawn from everyone save mother and no one knew why. The bitterness and anger had grown in leaps and bounds, the pranks were mostly aimed at the council and taking a more malicious tone. Thor nodded, knowing there was one thing he could do, even if he was rebuffed for his efforts he would continue to try.

Thor jumped out of his seat and crossed to him in two steps, wrapping him in a hug. Loki jerked because it was a surprisingly gentle hug that Loki could have pulled out of if he wanted to. Thor was never gentle. His hugs were bruising and his affection overwhelming…this was nice.

Struggling to keep his tone even, asking quietly, “What are you doing?”

Thor felt amusement curl his lip slightly. “I thought it was obvious. I am hugging my brother.”

Loki was out of barriers. He’d shoved Thor away because he was positive the thunderer could never be, should never be a brother to a Jötunn. Thor hadn’t flinched at his true form. He hadn’t flinched that his son was a dark elf. He knew what he’d done on Midgard and he was still here. Thor was still here, reaching out to him, trying to pull him back.

Pride demanded that he shove Thor away immediately, as he was once denied that same protective comfort. Even if he had expected it, he was still hurting that Thor’s first reaction was anger and not relief that he was alive. But the tiny, tiny part of him that would always be Thor’s little brother; the small part that had been nurtured by Jane’s love, that had gained strength by Indel’s idolization and Talia’s need, commanded something else. He remembered what Azni had said. Love never stops.

Brow furrowing, asking softly, “Why?”

Thor felt his voice roughen slightly, enough that he knew Loki could hear it. “You know better than any that my first reaction is not always the correct one.” Loki snorted softly and Thor grinned just a little. “My brother is alive and had I the ability to restart our reunion once more, I would ensure he knew I celebrated that fact.”

Loki slowly leaned his head forward in reply, his face turned away from Thor so his cheek rested on his shoulder, and allowed himself to be held.

Thor closed his eyes, his hold still gentle, and a fist lightly gripping the back of Loki’s jacket. “Oh, Loki…” His brother was alive. He was alive and he wasn’t pulling away. He wasn’t
fighting him or spitting poison in his face. For the first time since they had been boys his brother allowed himself to be held without even a token amount of resistance. It wasn’t a returned hug, but it was a start of what Thor hoped was a new beginning between them. Loki had always been smarter than him and after all of his trickery he supposed trust had been lost on his side as well. But he knew Loki had for once told him the truth.

“…you do know that I love you, do you not?”

Loki blinked against the sudden burning of his eyes, silently nodding his head even if the gesture was a lie. He hadn’t known. He’d suspected. He’d hoped. But it had been a long time since he’d heard the words.

Thor felt a grin split his face, filled with joy and acceptance of not just his brother’s return but of the expansion of his family. But now that he had a clear picture of the past, he understood Loki’s fear. Fear that returning to Asgard would put Indel in danger, just for being a dark elf. Fear that Talia would be in danger just for being his daughter. And there was nothing in the nine realms that made Thor more dangerous than when his family needed protecting. Thor nodded slowly to himself. “We will form a plan, my clever brother, and if you are not satisfied with what Asgard has to say, I will assist you in slipping away with your family.”

Not moving, eyes still open as he probed, “And if Odin demands contrary to my wishes?”

Thor nodded again, not willing to release Loki until the trickster chose to step back. “You have my oath as promise, brother, not even father’s order will dissuade me from protecting you and your children.”

Eyebrow quirking, green eyes distant. “He could threaten to take the throne from you.”

Thor chuckled softly, deeply. “A crown and a throne are many things to me, Loki, but they will never be more important to me than you.”

…”sometimes I'm envious, but never doubt that I love you’…

Loki remembered those words. Said by him what had felt a lifetime ago before Thor’s failed coronation. When it was just he and his brother, standing in the wings. Brother. His brother. Loki wished they were blood. He wished he’d never found out the truth. But this was close enough, and it was a sentiment that echoed through his own mind and heart. He would never again let his own ambition destroy the bond between them. If this was his day for truth, he might as well say what he’d been wanting to say for quite some time. Swallowing thickly. “What I said on the eve of your coronation…I meant it.”

Feeling like he could fly without Mjolnir, Thor smiled freely. “…cow.”

Grinning and closing his eyes, for the first time in centuries, Loki’s arms came up to hold Thor in return.

OUTSIDE OF THE NINE REALMS

Hela did enjoy one aspect of being the queen of the underworld. She enjoyed the ability to walk slightly out of phase of the rhythm of the universe. It allowed her to journey where she wished, untraceable to the rest of the universe. The trick was getting where she wanted to go, but that’s what the dark passages and the golden branches of Yggdrasil were for. Now with the Gem of Reality safely in her possession that journey had become that much easier.
In this instance she walked amongst the small, blue creatures Malekith had brought to Thanos to navigate the catacombs. Watching them try and fail had its own source of pleasure but she started feeling sorry for them eventually. She wouldn’t do anything for them, her eyes on a bigger prize, but she did pity them.

Their activity paused as the devil himself appeared. Thanos held a mechanical device of some kind in his hands. For a stunned moment Hela actually thought Thanos was going to do his own dirty work. But no, he pointed and they preceded him.

She wasn’t worried, her calculations had taken this situation into consideration. He was still a week away from discovering the truth, no doubt inspired now that he knew where Loki had gone. A naughty grin spread across her face, picturing Thanos’ glorious reaction when he discovered he’d wasted so much time for nothing. She’d already planned for this. She’d been meticulous in everything.

After his resulting tantrum he would be spoiling for carnage. But it would still take days or even longer to assemble an army worthy enough to attack. There were several inhabited planets in the area. It wouldn’t be too hard for him. She would have to time it perfectly but his learning of the Other’s death and the Skrull extinction would only anger him further. Then a little guidance, perfectly timed, would have him focused on Asgard once he knew who was there.

She laughed evilly and spun in a circle.

So close. She was giddy and eager to push things along but she tempered herself. She had been waiting almost 700 years for this. She had the patience to wait a little bit longer.

Author's Notes:

Ahh...so satisfying. We had fun and angst (with a little bit of brotherly love).

Next:

Never say your spells backwards; Hogun expresses himself; Sif's being a bit of a ...[word that rhymes with witch]
Finding an empty office where humans weren’t constantly underfoot was an interesting challenge for Indel but he’d managed it. Talia wasn’t feeling well, taking a nap in G’dath’s quarters with Fenris keeping watch so he’d gone in search of somewhere to read and work on his spells. Indel grinned over the book he was reading, seeing the inventor his dad liked eyeing him curiously from the doorway. “Hi.”

Tony barely kept himself from running. He wasn’t scared of elves but he didn’t really do kids. “Hey, squirt, where’s your dad?”


Stark took a look around, frowning as he asked, “He just leaves you alone?” This had been much of his childhood but Loki didn’t seem like that type of asshole. Of course until recently he didn’t think Loki could ever be the fatherly type so it showed how much he knew.

A preteen version of Loki became visible, rolling his green eyes. “Of course not.” Tony yelped and jumped back, causing both boys to grin. “I’m Mischief.”

Tony panted and grasped at his chest. “…best name choice of the decade.”

Mischief performed a little bow and smirked. He was here for more than to keep Indel company. It was possible Loki was never going to trust those three Asgardian’s around his children again without a buffer that met Loki’s approval.

Indel was nodding excitedly. “He keeps me out of trouble.” The two boys shared a look. “Sorta. He keeps me from saying my spells wrong. Like this one.” Reversing the book and pointing to a set of runes. “It would be really bad if I said H’ten’ool-…”

Green eyes bugging, Mischief grabbed for Indel as some sort of blood red portal exploded behind him. Tony yelped as he was yanked off his feet. He grunted, then groaned as his shoulder protested, his wrist encased in a steel grip that kept him from tumbling to his death. He looked up at whoever had caught him and thanked every deity he could think of that Locks always seemed to have one ear to the ground.

Loki took two steps forward, fighting the gravitational force sucking everything in the room into it. His arm snaked around Mischief’s waist and ‘pop’, they were all in a different room. They all collapsed into a pile on the floor, except for Loki who kept his balance. He was gone a second later, Tony pushing himself off his face and staring in horror at the ceiling. Loki returned a moment after that, glaring down at the two boys.

Both Mischief and Indel looked scared and clutched one another, screaming in unison. “Accident!”

Tony was flat on his back, ignoring the two rug rats as they fumbled over themselves with a desperate explanation: how it was an accident and why they shouldn’t be punished for scaring the humans. A knock on the doorframe caused everyone to look silently at Bruce except for Loki who was still silently looking at the boys.

The scientist sounded a little hesitant, but also a little amused. “Uh…Fury wants to know if
that was a black hole.” The statement was putting it mildly for the blind panic the SHIELD agents were currently in.

Loki narrowed his green eyes at them before turning and smiling pleasantly. “Just an illusion I created for my son’s amusement.”

Indel frowned in confusion. “But--…” Mischief slapped a hand over the boy’s mouth, smiling a toothy grin at the mortal.

Loki didn’t turn back, talking just a little bit louder. “My son would have to be quite a bit older to create such an anomaly.”

Bruce didn’t buy it for a single second. Deadpanning. “Impressive illusion.”

Loki just shrugged casually. “I am rather gifted.” He bared his teeth, the false smile falling as mischief sparkled in his eyes. “However, if the director would like to request I create a real one in his office he may do so. I’m certain I can keep the damage relatively localized.”

Bruce felt his lip twitch as he replied. “I’ll let someone else inform him.”

“A wise decision.” Loki waited until Bruce was gone before looking back down at Indel. “That was one. Two more ‘accidents’ like that and you lose your dimensional privileges for a year.”

Indel pouted at the perceived injustice. “It was an accident, dada!”

“Which is why you will not be punished, this is a warning to be more careful. Mischief.” The boy tensed and Loki smirked. “Try not to live up to your name all the time.”

Mischief pouted as well. “I didn’t even do anything.”

Loki raised an eyebrow at the make believe boy. “For once.”

Slowly Mischief grinned. “Okay, fair enough.”

The trickster turned to look down at the mortal still laying on the floor and staring blankly at the ceiling. Asking casually, “Something you wanted, Anthony?”

Tony shrugged from the floor, still fascinated with the ceiling. “Too traumatized. Can’t remember.”

Loki shook his head mournfully as he asked, “Why am I friends with you?”

“Cause I was stupid enough to agree to it instead of running, screaming, in the opposite direction.”

Loki took a very quick look at the mortal’s mind, determined it was just normal shock, and decided to give him some time to himself. Tony would find him when he was ready. Turning his attention back to the other two. “Go find G’dath or your mother and stay there.” The boys scrambled to their feet and ducked out the door a second later. With another quick glance at Tony, Loki took his leave of him and sought for a little bit of solitude himself.

Loki was determined to not be found this time. He supposed he should just turn invisible but he didn’t want to waste his magical reserves unnecessarily. He didn’t make it a full floor before he was found. That he was sought out by one of the warriors 3 made him curious, but cautious. He nodded slowly to the warrior in greeting, still perturbed with the man but wanting him to start the
hostilities before he retaliated. “Hogun.”

The grim warrior said nothing, but then that wasn’t so surprising. What he didn’t say with words he often said with his silences. Currently his silence was hostile.

Leaning back against the wall of the corridor almost casually, Loki shrugged. “We have a tolerance for one another. It would be a pity if we were to become enemies.”

Hogun was not one to mince words, speaking bluntly. “You have no concept of honor.”

“And you do?” Loki had a whole host of offenses to hold against the grim warrior now. Ignoring all the small acts during their past adventures together; the most current would be defying him as king, threatening his life before his journey to Svartalfheim, and considering killing his son. This man should be kissing Thor’s ass he wasn’t already dead. The thunderer was the only reason that hadn’t happened at this point. A shark-like grin spread across Loki’s face as he asked, “Which actions would you consider dishonorable? Saving Thor’s life?”

“It was a trick.”

Loki’s expression turned amused as he corrected the warrior. “I am quite certain were it not for me he would have died. I hardly find that to be a trick.”

Hogun shook his head ever so slightly before replying. “Your death was a falsehood, proving your actions without honor.”

Slowly Loki crossed his arms over his chest. “I find it truly fascinating that you think I actually care if you are upset by my deceptions.”

“Your utilization of magic--…”

Loki cut him off at that tone. He was done allowing anyone to disparage his craft to his face. “Thor is alive because of my tricks and to me that is all that matters.” Loki lifted an eyebrow, asking softly, “If your family had been spared during the Vanir war, would it have truly mattered to you how it was done?” Hogun sucked in a pained breath and Loki glanced away. “No. Of course not and I will not give you the opportunity to lie. What is it about me that vexes you so, Hogun? Is it that you are uncomfortable that my tricks are mightier than your weapons? Is it my sly nature that offends you so? Or perhaps is it envy?” Hogun frowned heavily and Loki clarified that last rhetorical question. “Were you to have the gifts I possess, they might have lived.”

Hogun was silent for quite a while, but there was silent acknowledgement in his eyes. Then his frown shifted. “You did not return to Asgard.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed just a little to himself, speaking thoughtfully. “You think me a coward. Running and hiding from my father.” The grim warrior had nothing further to say so Loki nodded to himself before his green eyes locked on Hogun once more. “I did not return in an effort to protect Indel from narrow-minded fools like you who act on honor and laws when convenient.” Loki bared his teeth in that false trickster smile. “You have enjoyed my tricks but they were simply that. Just a bit of fun.” He rubbed a single finger along his upper lip as a reminder of the stitches that had been there. “There is a reason certain dwarves still spit when hearing my name.” Something strong and deadly filled Loki’s eyes and the grim warrior stilled instinctively. They were no longer friends, but they also weren’t enemies. Not truly. Not yet. Loki thought it was only fair to make certain Hogun knew how close he was to crossing that line to the label of enemy that Loki would never let him return from. “If you intend harm to them you are an enemy. This is your warning, Hogun. This is your only warning. Do not make the mistake of becoming my enemy.”
Hogun looked over the figure he had known for centuries. He was a man of few words but he rarely wasted them on Asgard’s second son. A trickster who loved creating chaos. Until now, an adolescent in a man’s body of loose morals and no concept of honor. There was something different about Loki. Some might label it a maturity but he was more inclined to think of it as resolve. Whatever it was, he found that he respected it. The warrior remained silent for several moments longer before walking away but Loki didn’t miss the slight nod of respect before doing so. Loki’s brow furrowed in confusion.

Loki smelled him before he was even close enough to be seen. Not that Stark reeked, but he was human after all. The natural hormones and pheromones that surrounded a mortal was hard to miss. The cologne certainly wasn’t helping his abilities at stealth. Of course Tony wasn’t trying to be quiet. He walked casually down the corridor, intentionally making noise with his feet so as not to startle the demi-god sitting in the darkened corridor, meditating.

“Very Yoda of you.” Loki didn’t respond, knowing he would just become irritated with the inventor if he inquired as to who or what Yoda was.

The trickster raised an eyebrow as Tony waved a folder under his nose. *How in Hel did Stark find me?* “Yes?” Tony stayed grim and with a sigh Loki took the folder and opened it up. *Such an archaic method of delivering information considering all the technology here that mortal’s took such pride in.* Then he blinked to realize inside the folder was an electronic pad. Unlike Thor, he knew how to manipulate human technology. Rolling his eyes, he scrolled through the open file, his confused expression clearing.

Tony’s voice was confident. “Fury showed me that with his classic glare, paranoid about something jumping out of the ocean and eating us. I have no idea what it is. But then I thought who else is practically a walking encyclopedia? So, boy genius, you know what it is. Share.”

Yes, Loki knew what it was. But this was more Hela’s forte than his. With a soft huff Loki pushed himself to his feet and glanced up towards the ceiling. “Hela.”

She appeared by walking through the wall, cackling when Tony yelped and grabbed at his chest. “Don’t DO that!!”

Loki picked up the pad, ignoring the mortal, and holding it over his shoulder as he asked her, “A friend of yours?”

Hela paused, squinted, and dropped her head. “Son of a bitch.” She disappeared a second later.

Tony’s eyes moved from Loki to the spot where Hela had been and back again. “Do I even want to know?”

Casually tossing the pad back to Stark with a shrug. “Merely a dragon who wandered-…”

“A what??”

The other eyebrow lifted at Tony, still speaking calmly. “Dragon. Tall, scaly creature that lives in the depths of your oceans.”

Tony glared, sounding slightly insulted. “I know what a damn dragon is. What’s it doing in my ocean?”

Amusement coloring Loki’s tone as he asked, “Your ocean? I wasn’t aware it was
proprietary.”

Puffing himself up arrogantly. “Hey, I’m Tony Stark. There isn’t anything I can’t own.”

Nodding slightly, a sly little grin curling Loki’s lip. “I will be certain to tell him so. Well, I suppose I will say so and Hela will translate for me. Either way expect a visit from a rather annoyed 15,000 year old creature.”

Tony jaw dropped, sputtering as he asked, “How many?”

Still talking breezily as if they were discussing the weather. “Well dragons aren’t very spacial creatures so I suppose he could be older. Time has little meaning to them.”

With a frown Tony returned his gaze to the picture. There were thermals that Fury was still perusing but this one had caught his attention. “All I see is weirdly moving water.”

Supplying helpfully. “His camouflage. Without it he is rather noticeable.”

Stark’s mind moved on to the next problem, thinking about sheer water weight as he asked, “How can a dragon live in the water with wings?”

“They cannot, hence his species evolved without them. Actually he is rather snake-like in appearance.”

Tony’s lip twitched dangerously as it suddenly occurred him from all he’d read about Loki and Thor of a certain serpent banished to the seas of earth. At least according to the myths.

Containing the sudden burst of excitement, asking carefully, “Does he have a name?”

Loki already knew where this was headed but he liked toying with the man so he allowed it. “Hmm…I would suppose so but I never asked.”

Hela reappeared, arms crossed. “Jörmungandr says there are a few uninvited guests in his home.”

Tony’s voice raised an octave, squeaking. “His name is Jörmungandr?”

Hela gave Tony a funny look before replying. “Yes.” She turned to look at Loki, a very specific look in her eyes. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about it, would you?”

“Like world serpent, Jörmungandr?”

Loki growled at him, already knowing where the mortal’s mind had wandered off to. “Yes. And no the damn thing is not my son!” Tony snickered. Loudly. Addressing Jörmungandr’s underwater guests. “Why do you think I’m here?”

Hela’s voice was matter of fact. “The Other.”

And wasn’t that answer amusing for her to offer. The Other wasn’t the only one on his agenda and she knew it. He’d meant what he said, he would obliterate the Skrull on this planet and now was the perfect opportunity. “That is part of it, yes.”

“Then what is the other part, liar?” The new voice turned heads, Sif entering with a hand on the hilt of her sheathed sword.

Hela scowled at Sif as Loki turned. “Tormenting you of course, my dear.” Not looking at Hela as he spoke softly to her mind. <A discussion for later, daughter.>
Hela didn’t even blink. *<I think she would make for a lovely throw rug in my study.>*

Loki’s brow furrowed just a little. *<You can do that?>* He heard Hela’s cackle in his head, which wasn’t exactly an answer. He glanced at her. *<Hela.>*

Hela took the hint and teleported away. Sif’s dark eyes stayed locked on the trickster as she asked, “What are you hiding this time?”

Lifting an eyebrow, arrogance filling his voice, “You forget yourself.”

Her glare hardened as she retorted. “You are no longer a prince. I forget nothing.”

Loki tilted his head slightly. “I have always found it so amusing that you assume if you glare hard enough I will tell you everything.”

Sif rushed forward, forearm snug against Loki’s throat and his back against the wall. Tony stumbled back from the aggressive rush forward, almost screeching, “What the hell is wrong with you, woman?”

Sif snapped at him over her shoulder. “Leave us to our discussion, mortal. This does not concern you.”

Tony lifted both eyebrows in shock. A quick glance showed him Loki looking more amused than anything. A devilish look crossed Tony’s face. Whistling and casually strolling away, he went looking for a physicist who was a hell of a lot scarier than the warrior goddess.

Loki silently studied Sif, still faintly amused. This was always how they interacted. She had a brain when she chose to use it, but her emotions were her weakness. He knew if he kept jabbing at her temper eventually she would react physically. He smirked in victory, curious what she thought she could do.

His amusement faded quickly when she pulled a small vial out of a compartment in her armor. A few drops on the tongue would loosen the lips of every species with the exception of AEsir. Her tone smug and taunting. “I had never thought this would have been effective in loosening your lips but you are a frost giant, after all.”

It could be nothing more than a bluff but this was no longer a jest between them. She had no idea how deadly a game she was now playing. He hoarded secrets like a miser hoarded gold. Secrets told to him were safe because he didn’t repeat them. He’d been forced once to give away truth, however small in quantity it had been. The words had burned like acid as they escaped him for Thanos’ pleasure. He was going to bring everything he was down on the Titan for that fact. His voice too quiet, his body unnaturally still. “Be careful, Sif. Be very careful.”

Sif ignored her instincts screaming ‘danger’. Thor needed to know Loki was up to his old tricks, but she was determined to get as much information for him as possible. She ignored everything except her focus on the green eyes she was locked with. “You deceive the prince of Asgard and future king—…”

“An act that occurs regularly—…”

Pressing herself closer, yelling at him. “You should be on your knees worshiping him for his continued generosity!”

“Which part disturbs you more, Sif? That he still favors a lying Jötunn over yourself…” He spun them around, pinned her against the wall, and easily disarmed the vial from her hand. He let
it drop and shatter on the floor. Disarming her was easy enough that he knew the vial had been all bluff but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to exact some revenge. Leaning in closer to smirk salaciously, his lips inches from hers. “…or that you willingly allowed a frost giant to slip within your sheathe?” She snarled and punched him without thinking. He just danced back with a laugh and absently wiped a drop of blood from the corner of his mouth. Giving her a mock bow. “I see you still have that temper.”

Her eyes narrowed, snarling, “You were never to speak of that.”

Loki shrugged dismissively towards the shattered vial. “You should know better than to threaten me unless you are prepared to follow through.”

“You two are about to piss me off, aren’t you?” Jane was breathing a little faster than normal, having run down two flights of stairs and a long corridor to get here before blood was shed. She noticed a few tiny flecks of blood around Loki’s mouth and took a deep breath to keep her magic from spiking. There was no doubt Loki had a talent for pissing people off. He’d probably said something rude. Still, no one had a right to lay their hands on him.

Sif remained oblivious to Jane’s steadily rising temper, defending her actions. “He hides his intentions from Asgard’s future king—…”

Jane cut the other woman off decisively. “But he doesn’t from me so get over it. Keep your hands or fists or whatever to yourself. If I thought it was something you needed to know I would have said something.”

“I should have known civility was impossible between the two of you.” Thor was shaking his head slowly as he joined them in the corridor. And the way Sif suddenly went all starry-eyed made Jane a little queasy. Judging by Loki’s expression he was feeling similar stomach upset.

“Thor—…”

Loki spun around, cutting Sif off with a slight pout that was mostly show. “You wound me, brother. It was she that started the hostilities.”

Sif snarled lowly at the trickster, defensive in front of Thor. “And I’ll be certain it is finished with a dagger to your back, traitor.” Loki rolled his eyes with a dismissive sound.

Jane stiffened even as her eyes narrowed but Thor beat her to the punch with a severe look. “SIF. No honorable warrior speaks of such matters, not even in jest.” Loki glanced at his brother in surprise. Sif had been saying such empty words for centuries. His brow furrowed just a little, wondering if perhaps Thor had just never heard her.

Sif crossed her arms and glared. “I wasn’t jesting.” Jane was reminded of a pouting teenager who didn’t think before she spoke. The problem was whether or not Sif meant the threat, she was more than capable of carrying it out. Judging by Loki’s expression he was used to hearing such things. She knew this needed to stop.

“That’s it!” Both Loki and Sif pulled up short, glancing at a glaring Jane who turned and growled at Thor. “Bring her.” Jane reached out, snagged Loki’s wrist, and started walking. He followed silently and Sif might have made a comment if Thor hadn’t leveled her with a glare that had her following with her arms still crossed. First room available, with a wave of her hand the door slammed open and Jane dragged Loki inside. A pair of agents ducked out a second later, and fled when Sif and Thor followed. Spinning around, Jane held up a halting hand. “Wait outside please, Thor.”
Thor frowned, not understanding what she hoped to accomplish. “Jane—…”

“Trust me, this will go a little bit smoother if you wait outside and grab anybody who tries to run.” Thor transferred his glare from one stubborn brunette to the other before nodding and stepping outside, closing the door behind him.

Sif snarled. “I do not answer to you, mortal—…”

Jane’s magic picked her up and slammed her into the wall, pinning her there. Sif’s eyes were huge, staring in horrified shock at the human. Loki smirked as he asked with a chuckle, “You were saying, Sif?”

Jane’s eyes flashed amber, glaring back at Loki. “Stop antagonizing her, you’re only making it worse.” He slowly lifted an eyebrow, still looking amused but he didn’t push her temper further. She rounded back on Sif. “And you. I really hate being referred to as mortal because I know it’s an insult. Knock it off.”

Loki clenched and unclenched one of his fists. “Her hostilities started over her hair and haven’t ceased since.”

“You mutilated me on purpose!” The words were almost howled back at him, anger and horror hiding the shattered dreams that went with the act.

Throwing up his hands in disgust, focusing his question to Jane, “She’s been accusing me of such for centuries and I’m in the wrong?”

Jane crossed her arms, asking him objectively, “Did you explain it to her?”

Crossing his own arms in response. “If she is too imbecilic—…”

She cut him off. “That means no. Why?”

Red started creeping up his neck before he subdued the response. “I am not explaining myself in front of her.”

Jane pursed her lips slightly, thoughtful. She turned back to Sif who was glaring mulishly. She was going to be blunt and she was going to horrify both of them but G’dath was very practical when it came to certain issues between mages. “Fine, let’s talk about sex.” Loki recoiled in surprise. She addressed Sif who had started blushing, asking quietly. “Did you know that magic has a mind of its own?”

“What?” Sif all but spat the question, struggling against its hold. Once she’d gotten over the initial shock of Jane’s display, her mind shoved Jane into a category with Eir. She wasn’t afraid of the AEsir healer and she would be damned if she would show fear to a mortal.

Jane nodded and continued as if oblivious to the other woman’s agitation. “It does. When young mages aren’t paying enough attention in controlling it, magic will do things that weren’t intentional. Like when two warriors decide to assist one another in discovering sex for the first time.”

Sif froze with wide eyes. *Loki had told her??*

Jane knew she should feel jealous that Sif knew a side of Loki that she had yet to experience but she knew he only had eyes for her. Just the topic should have made her a stuttering mess but she felt strangely calm and centered. She smiled just a little as if she were chiding a naive child and not a woman much older than herself. “Needless to say, a mage isn’t concentrating on his
magic if his mind is on his partner.” Sif’s eyes moved to Loki who had been staring rather intently at the far wall. She scowled enviously when she noticed he wasn’t blushing. Jane’s voice gentled, tone sweet as she requested softly, “Tell her?”

He sighed but obeyed and that more than anything surprised Sif. *When did Loki ever do what was asked of him?*

He crossed his arms loosely over his chest, looking slightly annoyed and tapping his bicep with a finger. “I tried to find a counter spell. I looked in every book in Asgard’s library but there was nothing I could find. Changing hair temporarily until the new color grows back, those spells are perfectly normal. I’ve never seen anything that would change it so permanently…” He shrugged a little, still not meeting her eyes.

Stiff but no longer angry, Sif asked, “And you could not tell me that?”

Loki met her gaze now and glared. “And give you more reason to mock? The only gift I have ever had was my magic. Why would I give you more ammunition? By the time I realized it was permanent you were already screaming to all who would hear how deplorable I am on the battlefield. How useless my ‘tricks’ were in a real fight. How I wasn’t a true warrior like your beloved Thor—…” He pulled in a slow breath, tone turning dismissive. “After that I realized too late how conditional your friendship was now that you’d gotten what you wanted so that you could move on to the first son.”

Sif growled. “I never loved you—…”

He snarled back. “And I never loved you. I liked you, and you turned out just like everyone else.”

Her eyes narrowed but there was little heat in her glare. “You should have explained.”

Shouting as he lost control of his temper. “Who taught me? Who? I’ve been studying magic on my own for centuries! If I had known I would have taken precautions—how could I know?? Do you truly see me asking my father such questions? My mother? Everything I’ve ever done I’ve had to figure out on my own, of course I make mistakes!”

He disappeared an instant later and Jane sighed, letting Sif go. The warrioress collected herself, tone incredulous. “I don’t know what you see in him, mortal.”

Jane’s eyes flashed and she gave up controlling her temper. She could feel Loki brush his fingers against her arm so she knew he was there even if he was through talking to Sif, supporting her. “I see a man that I love more than myself, who loves me back.” Sif blinked in surprise but Jane ignored her. She honestly didn’t care if Sif or anyone else knew. “I see a man who tried to apologize to you for an accident that you, yet again, can’t show enough courage to forgive.” Jane took a step back, tone quiet. She would have to be blind not to see the love Sif had for Thor. But through the picture Loki painted she had a clearer understanding of why Thor had lost interest in her as a future wife. “I guess it never occurred to you, Sif, that the reason Thor stopped thinking you were beautiful might have nothing to do with your hair. Maybe he just can’t stand the sight of your ugly, spiteful soul.” Shock. Horror. Hurt. It all flashed in Sif’s eyes eloquently. “Maybe you should stop trying to convince Thor to hate Loki. It’s only making you look like a bitch.”

With a shake of her head Jane turned, knowing now it was pointless. Sif was even more stubborn than Thor and Loki, together. Muttering under her breath, she pushed open the door, made sure it was open just long enough for Loki to slip out with her, and stalked down the hallway. Sif roared and threw the nearest object at the far wall, which happened to be a glass paper weight. She
turned when the door closed, Thor standing there with his arms crossed. “I have no idea what you saw in her!!”

Tilting his head slightly, having easily heard everything, Thor took a moment to consider what he saw in Jane. There had been personal reasons of course, before the dark elves had taken his mother, but beyond that there was another reason. A reason that kept him from accepting any other woman before her as more than just a potential lover. Because Jane hadn’t been wrong in her assessment. “I saw someone who I believed could do the impossible.”

Running a hand over her hair. “Well, she certainly is at that.”

Shaking his head slowly. “Nay, I do not mean her ability to do magic.” Although it was quite impressive to see the true diamond Loki had found for himself. “I believed that she would be able to win Loki’s trust.” Thor also realized that Jane was more than just a potential lover to Loki. No one had held so much sway over him since mother. This was a woman his brother intended to marry. “I was right more than even I imagined.”

Snarling, jealousy coloring her voice. “Why would that be a consideration for choosing her? You wanted to make her a queen, your queen. What does your thrice damned brother have to do with anything?”

Thor smiled almost sadly, a hint of longing in his voice. “It is the reason I won’t choose you.”

Sif’s breath caught in her throat. “Wha-what?”

Blue eyes drifting to the right slightly, his tone reminiscent. “I remember playing in father’s throne room with Loki. We were very little, and it was quite late. We took turns sitting in his chair and ordering our invisible servants. Then Loki just stopped playing and gave a formal bow as I sat during my turn. When I asked him what he was doing, he told me that only one of us would rule Asgard and since I am the oldest it has to be me.”

Sif nodded decisively. “As it should be.”

But Thor was already shaking his head in disagreement. “What is right for my father is not right for me. I made no promise to him but I promised myself that when I became king, Loki would bow to no one. He would be my equal.” It had been a dream from so long ago he’d almost forgotten it. But now that he and Loki were taking steps towards a renewed brotherhood the desire had returned with a vengeance. Staring into her eyes with finality. “My queen will share my vision, because I will allow no one to make him feel less.” He realized that he had his own blame in making Loki feel less but he had already promised himself to work on that. “At every opportunity you have belittled and mocked him.”

Sif made an objecting noise as she protested, “No more so than anyone else. Even you--…”

She had cut herself off but Thor was already nodding in agreement. “Aye, I admit I was a terrible brother.”

He smiled as he nodded. “I was, Sif. Whether by action or inaction I was not his brother in arms. None of us were.”

“He was—is just as bad.”
Thor nodded ever so slightly in agreement. Loki wasn’t blameless, either. But the past was just that. What mattered was the future that he wanted. “And I choose to no longer abide it. As I know he has defended me without my knowing, I vow to do the same for him. A queen is as important as a king in that how you treat others will be reflected and emulated. He would never tell me if he was disrespected, but I will do my utmost to shield him from it. And if that means I must rule with no queen then that is what must be.”

It could be done. He could have a wife without the granting of titles. It would simply make his having a child more important, for his first born would be heir to the throne. Although. Even without that happening the crown would simply pass to Loki and then to Indel, and that thought wasn’t as terrifying as it would have been a few years ago.

Sif sputtered even as she almost shrieked with incredulity, “Because we don’t get along??”

He tilted his head at her in consideration before replying. “Nay, that is only part of it. It is that you will not try, Sif. Loki is one of the most difficult of persons to get along with, I think even he would readily agree, but you do not even try. Three hundred years to sulk over the color of your hair, an accident, is long enough.”

She glared angrily, already knowing it was futile. “He says it was an accident.”

Thor nodded and responded promptly. “And I believe him.”

“He, if he told you he didn’t try to destroy Jötunheim you would believe. You have been ever blind to the evil Loki is capable of.”

Thor didn’t understand enough about Loki’s tricks to know the extent he was capable but he knew that his brother’s mind was a far more deadly weapon than his magic. He’d seen the mischief Loki had committed along with the malice. But he’d also seen the side hidden away. The side that loved their mother and their people. “Nay, I am not blind to his mistakes. I am hopeful he will change. I witnessed Jötunheim and I stopped him. I witnessed Midgard and I brought him home. He served in the dungeons and came to my aide when I asked it of him.”

“He did it just to be free.”

Sif was right, but only partially so and Thor was ready to defend him. “Aye, he did, but it was not his only reason. He fought to avenge our mother. But he did more than I asked of him, and for that I will listen. He saved Jane’s life when he barely knew her, simply because she was important to me…and he saved my life on Svartalfheim. As a matter of honor, I owe him my ear if not my protection.”

Hissing angrily at him. “He’s not a true warrior so he is not offered acts of honor. Why should I grant him anything when he has not proven himself? He tagged along with us for centuries, staying to the back and watching us fight for glory, riding in our wake. What has he ever done to prove his worth?”

“Did you ever ask him? Did any of you? I know where he went and I know what he did. My brother accomplished what no AEsir ever has and it is little wonder he had not the thirst for battle that I once did. Loki proved himself a warrior a thousand times over when he was much too young and perhaps if one of you has the courtesy to ask him, he might tell you.”

Sif looked absolutely disgusted, but there was also pity in her eyes. As if she pitied him for believing yet more of Loki’s lies and perhaps she did. “Ask him what? What could he possibly tell me that I would believe?”
And Thor could see why Loki stopped trying. Perhaps it was time he did as well. “You will not believe, Sif. My mother--our mother always knew when Loki spoke the truth. My queen will know when the Liesmith offers the same.”

He turned and left, not even pausing as she screamed at him. “Not in a thousand years has he ever told the truth!”

Author's Notes:

Ah, Sif. She really just doesn't think before she speaks. Or acts. Whatever should be done about her ;)

Next:

Something's coming
Loki rolled his eyes, arms crossed as they were all, yet again, in a conference room. He was starting to believe that was all the humans did when they weren’t fighting their enemies. He’d already popped in on Azni and G’dath. The elves were getting restless. This long not above ground didn’t sit well with them. Not that they’d be idle for much longer. The world eater would be here within a day. He’d assured them within 24 hours, one way or another, the waiting would be over.

Fury turned on the overhead without preamble, watching reactions closely. Loki just looked at the image blankly while Jane tilted her head slightly with a frown. The AEsir looked equally mystified and of the Avengers, Tony’s eyes were the most analyzing.

Narrowing his focus on Loki, Nick growled at the trickster. “Giant snakes that one scan might be. That doesn’t explain what the hell this is.” It was an underwater thermal scan. The object was about the same width but it was much shorter than the dragon.

Volstagg paused, a sandwich halfway to his mouth and blurted a question in confusion. “Snake?”

Tony’s lip twitched. “Jörmungandr.”

Thor turned to Loki with a blank expression as he asked, “Who?”

Loki filled in the blanks casually since he refused to let this degenerate into a discussion of the possible offspring he’d fathered or birthed according to human myths. “Dragon.”

“Ah.”

Mystery solved, Volstagg went back to eating. Loki sent Tony a cold look, his voice whispering in the inventor’s mind. <Continue, Anthony, and you will find evidence of your subpar performance in coitus with the delightful Virginia on your human internet.>

Tony made a scoffing noise, causing heads to turn. “Yeah. Sure. Do it and implicate yourself, genius.”

A tiny little smirk pulled at one corner of Loki’s mouth. <I do not believe she consented to the surveillance in the first place. Of the two of us, who actually cares if she is distressed?> Tony pulled in a breath and pointed a finger, not given a chance to say anything. <At most, Virginia will convince Jane to be annoyed with me. You, she will no doubt withhold sexual favors for your indiscretion.> Tony glared but wisely kept his mouth shut and leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed.

Fury leaned towards Loki and interrupted a one sided conversation he didn’t care about. “I know you know what this is, you son of a bitch.”

Every AEsir at the table bristled and growled. Fury blinked in surprise as Loki turned to give him a casual look. He was familiar with the human colloquialism. The others weren’t. Not that he was about to say as much, annoyed with Nick’s high-handed manner. “As I am the acknowledged son of the revered late queen of Asgard, you should apologize for the insult against my mother before you have a very big problem.”
Nick sounded as stunned as he felt. “It’s a damn phrase, not an insult.”

There was a knowing glint in Natasha’s eyes as she looked at Loki. “Which you are well aware of.”

A single shoulder lifted upward. “An insult to her, no. An insult to me, yes. I am running out of patience with you, Nicholas. Stark tempers his irritation with amusement. You are simply irritating. If you wish for my cooperation you must learn to be diplomatic with those you despise.” His green eyes flashed. “I may not kill you, but I may turn you into something…creative.” Volstagg and Hogun shuddered but wisely kept quiet. The heavy frown on Jane’s face as she stared at Fury needed no interpretation.

His face devoid of any emotion, tone almost monotone. “I apologize for any insult to the queen.” Tempers were soothed while Fury stayed focused. “What. Is. It?”

Loki shrugged again, this time with both shoulders and sounded dismissive. “Skrull, most probably.”

Steve was still frowning intently, turning his attention to Loki as well. “The Other’s army?”

Stark diverted his attention to frown. “Are these those things that tried to shoot me in my own damn tower?”

Glancing between the two men before sighing. “Yes and yes.”

Heads turned as the door opened. Fury whipped around, his order about no interruptions plain. “The hell is—-”

Talia hissed stuffily at the tall mortal and bypassed all of them for Loki, curling up into his lap. Her little face was flushed and obviously unwell. Jane frowned in concern, scooting closer to lean against his shoulder and rub the little girl’s back soothingly. Loki’s face softened, tucking golden strands behind her ear. As much as he wished magic cured everything, a common cold still remained elusive. All he could do was soothe the symptoms, reducing the fever and congestion.

Fury hissed. “Dammit, do I need to quarantine the lot of them?”

Loki shot the director a cold look. Thor and the other AEsir frowned in confusion. “What is this Midgardian treatment? Surely it is not as effective as elven healers.”

Bruce straightened just a little, explaining to the thunderer. “It is a period of separation to ensure diseases aren’t spread amongst the general populace.”

Thor just shook his head, looking almost horrified. “Barbaric. Almost as effective as your means of collecting blood.” Loki stiffened.

Tony glanced around. “Uh…no offense, Locks, but I hate shots. No plague germs, right?”

Loki sighed at Stark who was leaning overdramatically away from them in his chair. “It is what you humans refer to as a common cold. While her period of growth is different, she is in fact aging. She could be considered mortal until her majority. If anything, it was your disease ridden citizens that gave it to her.” Loki craned his head around to stare at Thor. “You did not give them your blood.” Thor froze, looking almost afraid to respond to the question in Loki’s eyes. Jane didn’t say anything except to slowly shake her head. Loki slumped and swore under his breath.
Bruce scribbled something down on a small slip of paper and secretly slipped it to Tony who put it in a pocket without glancing at it. G’dath stuck her head in, pausing to see who now had Talia.

Loki made a slight jerk of his head, to indicate he would keep her. A slight twitch of his eyebrow and she jerked her head back slightly. Indel was with Azni.

He nodded his head slightly towards her in thanks. G’dath smirked and left.

Unconsciously Fury’s volume decreased the slightest bit with a child in the room. “If we could focus on what may or may not be killing us soon.”

“Cool, I say blow them up.” Loki didn’t move but Tony felt a light slap to the back of the head. Absently rubbing the back of his head, confused. “No?”

Giving the inventor a condescending look, voice dripping with disdain. “Is that your human solution to everything?”

Hawkeye had his arms crossed, glaring. “Better than opening the gates of hell and letting someone else do the dirty work for me.” Loki rolled his eyes and decided against retorting, moving a lock of hair behind Talia’s ear. Clint felt his expression turn slightly puzzled as he watched the trickster act so differently around his children.

Loki instead focused back on Tony. “If that is your solution you will run into a very large problem with sharp teeth. Dragons are not forgiving creatures. Destroying their home will ignite a war you do not want.” Mostly because Loki would choose the dragon’s side if it came to that.

Thor remained thoughtful, noticing that Loki may have the answers but he wasn’t truly volunteering a solution. He doubted he’d get a straight answer from Loki but he would try anyway. “Brother?” Loki glanced at him. “What is your plan?”

Giving Thor a toothy grin. “You know me better than that.”

The thunderer remained insistent. “To understand the part we must play, it is useful to understand the goal.”

Fury was mystified as he asked, “Who the hell says any of us would do anything this lunatic thinks up?”

Loki ignored Fury, shrugging at Thor as if the answer was obvious. “To kill them, of course. Just not yet.”

Bruce frowned and decided to step in as well. “When?”

Loki shrugged casually again, leaning back in his chair once more as if he didn’t have a care in the world. “When they move to attack.”

“When the hell did I turn invisible?”

Natasha had her hands folded on the table but she paused in watching to glance at Fury. “You have to admit, sir, even the AEsir who clearly do not trust him are listening.”

Fury frowned, realizing she was right by the way Sif and Hogun were studying Loki’s every move and conceded. Turning his own attention to the trickster. “And you know they’re going to do that how, exactly?”
Loki threw that condescending look in Nick’s direction. “He is known to me…and I know what he wants most.”

“Which is?”

The trickster raised a single eyebrow. “The Other wishes for the scepter that you have buried in your vault. He will tear through all of you to get to it. The Skrull legions are a means to that end.”

Fury and the Avengers all tensed, sharing looks. All of them wondered how long Loki had known the scepter was here. Thor was focused on his brother, “How many legions, Loki?”

The trickster joined Jane in rubbing his hand up and down Talia’s back while answering Thor. “If the emperor spoke the truth, two.”

Fandral leaned forward. “What emperor, prince?”

Lip twitching slightly in suppressed amusement at Fandral. “The former emperor of the Skrull, on a former planet called Skrullos.”

Thor nodded with satisfaction. “You had a hand in their demise.”

Bruce’s brow furrowed. “You seem pleased by that?”

The thunderer looked at the scientist gravely. “Assassins were sent to Asgard in an attempt to kill the All-father. We do not mourn their demise.”

Loki sounded airy and dismissive. “Thor I am hardly capable of destroying a world. The heart of the planet died and took them with her.”

Fandral’s fingers brushed against the necklace around his neck, not sure he believed that. Jane’s lips turned downward slightly before the expression cleared. That had definitely been a half lie but she wasn’t about to point that out.

“Thor, what information do you have on Skrull?”

Thor looked thoughtful for a moment before answering Nick. “Tyr is more familiar with their species than I but they are shape shifters. Not as skilled as Loki but close enough to fool someone ill prepared.” Fury glanced sharply at Loki who flushed blue for a few seconds in response even as he sighed through his nose at Thor’s big mouth. “Their strength is well matched to our own and their technology is advanced.”


Thor nodded slowly after a moment of thought. “They are tolerant of both, though I would venture they would not fare well in Jötunheim.”

Volstagg snorted. “Not many would.” The warriors all shared a reminiscent smile.

Fury and Thor continued their discussion but Loki’s attention was diverted. He frowned after a moment of studying the thermal images again. Two legions couldn’t fit on a ship this size. It also wasn’t practical to have only one ship here. Which meant there was another ship out there, just not detected yet. His mind turned over how the Other strategized. The Other may have no qualms in borrowing his own plans, but he knew this creature’s fallback was a shock and awe campaign of overpowering the enemy with numbers.
The Skrull ships are fast. They could be from one position to the next in a matter of minutes on a planet this size. But the Other isn’t anticipating a problem and he is taking his time. Time for the hatchlings to reach maturity. Time to power up the systems and formulate interception. He paled. He wished he was wrong but he knew he wasn’t. 24 hours. The Other is coordinating with the world eater.

Not even he and Hela together could act as a shield for everyone else in a dual assault like that. Mortals be damned, this could kill his family. He had to get them off this planet. He would come back. He may not want the innocents of this planet killed but if he had to choose between the two, his family came first. He stood up, a sleeping Talia on his hip and halting conversation.

“Loki?”

He ignored them, his hand over Jane’s wrist as he tugged her out of the room with him. Jane dug in her heels a little. She knew that look that he was trying very hard to hide from her. “Loki we have to stay and finish this.”

He whipped around, tone low and insistent. “Not with this many. The timing will have them and the world eater attacking at the same time. I will not leave you on this planet with such an opposition.”

She blinked up at him. There was that strange mental jump of his that she had almost gotten used to. But then she thought about what he was saying. He wasn’t saying no, he was just intent on keeping her and the children safe. Nodding thoughtfully. “Us. So, you move us…where?”

Loki had already thought this out. The safest solution even if it was the furthest away. “Helheim. Hela will keep you safe.”

She wasn’t going to ask why not Asgard. She knew the why and she wasn’t going to push him. As far as she was concerned, it was Odin’s move at this point. But Jane slowly felt a frown form. His need to move them was urgent, not just to keep them safe but for timing’s sake. “What’s the catch?”

Mentally he smirked. Leave it to his Jane to know him so well. The golden branches were tricky even if they were the most efficient way for dimensional travel. Normally it would be out of the question to bring a human along but Jane was no mere mortal anymore and he had been certain some of their last lessons together would prepare her for such a journey. The problem was inherent in trying to keep time from distorting through the underworld. Going back and forth without draining his reserves would take a day. Maybe even longer. “Using the golden branches through the dark roots, time distorts. A journey of a few minutes takes a great deal longer.”

Jane shook her head. “Then there has to be another way.”

And there was, his clever girl knowing his backups had backups. “A dark passage would be ideal, but there isn’t a direct connection from Midgard to Helheim. Any other feasible method will drain me too much. I will be useless in a fight.”

She nodded and completed his point. “More time.” She pulled in a deep breath and proposed an alternative. “Then we stay down here and-…”

He cut her off with a snarl. “I am not-...”

Moving closer and interrupting him in turn. “It’s the right thing to do-…”

He immediately backed up a step in retreat and she froze. “No.”
“You can-…”

His eyes flashed angrily, saying whatever he could to convince her there was no swaying him. “No. I will not sacrifice family for them. They are Thor’s allies, not mine.” She pleaded with him silently, so much hope in her eyes that he would do this. It just angered him further. It always came down to his rules, his standards not meeting anyone else’s. Not Asgard’s. Not Odin’s. It was little wonder that he exploded with anger at times like this. Almost howling the word in her face, “Why?? Why does everyone I love always want to change me? I am Loki. I cannot and will not change. Not for Thor. Not for my father.” He glared dangerously, so much anger and frustration clashing in his heart and tearing at his control. “Not even for you.”

“Loki-…”

Both Jane and Loki turned and snarled in unison at Thor. “Stay out of this.”

Holding his hands up to appease, Thor stepped back. Talia roused with a whimper and both Loki and Jane instantly stilled until she was asleep again. He studied her silently, feeling his will clashing with her own. He loved her and because of that love he desired to please her, but she had to know his children’s survival took precedence over her desire to assist the heroes of this realm.

Loki brushed past Jane, pausing as a privacy bubble settled around them. He could have forced his way through easily. He could have teleported. He would always hold more power and know more spells than she would. But she was his equal. He respected her and that meant listening when he didn’t want to.

She didn’t follow, knowing he would only retreat further. But because he was still there she knew he was listening. “You are Loki…which means no one can force you to do anything you don’t want to do. But I seem to recall a conversation about a dream that of course I know nothing about. I’m trying to help.”

His tone was almost dead as he asked, “What does Midgard have to do with anything?”

Licking her bottom lip. “I remember a name.”

He sounded dismissive but the opposite was true. “Indel? Talia?”

“Pepper.”

His head cocked slightly in her direction, tone restless. He vaguely remembered mention of her in the vision but he’d dismissed it at the time. Asking with a small amount of curiosity, “What is your point?”

Her lip twitched slightly in amusement. “Patience, prince. Now Indel looked to be about ten, right?”

“Correct.”

Jane already knew the answer but she wanted it said. “Which would translate to how many human years?”

“Approximately 250 years.”

Gesturing vaguely around them to all the mortals that surrounded them. “Humans, like Pepper, don’t have that long.” He turned fully with a frown, now a thoughtful expression on his face and she pressed on. “And I really don’t see her voluntarily accompanying us to Asgard or Helheim
or wherever you want to stash us today.” Although how Pepper could be alive centuries from now still remained a mystery to her, but to her it just made Earth surviving intact more important.

From what Loki knew of the woman, he knew Pepper wouldn’t leave with Tony and the other’s lives at stake. If his timing was off by even a few minutes the world eater could do irreparable damage to the sky, rendering this small planet uninhabitable. He was desperately grasping at straws and he knew it at this point. “It could be a coincidence, a distant descendent.”

Grinning in triumph up at him. “Possibly. Either way it means earth is still in one piece, with humans still living here.”

A grumpy look crossed Loki’s face and she felt like dancing in victory. A small victory at the moment but with just a little more careful prodding it would pay off with a big victory. “I thought I was the strategest of this relationship.”

Smiling in reassurance, her tone carefully playful. “You are. You take care of the details and I’m focused on the big picture.” She sobered but put out the only two choices that made sense. “So, either we stay here or we go to Asgard. Those are the logical choices, prince. Either way you fight like we both know you want to.”

He studied her a little more intently and purred softly, taking a step towards her. “Do you know how exquisite your mind is?”

Her grin changing subtly as she took a step as well. “No but I can’t wait for you to tell me.”

His own face sobered, almost regret in his voice but not even for her could he change certain aspects of his nature. “I cannot sacrifice who I am. I’m not a hero.”

She tilted her head a little. He said that too often in her opinion but it had become obvious to her he was hung up on the word. “I think you’re stuck on a word that means something different to a human.” He desperately needed her to continue so he remained quiet. “To Asgard, there is a specific mold of what a hero is, right?” Loki nodded slowly. It wasn’t him. It was someone like Thor. His father. He would never fit that mold and every AEsir knew it. “It means something else to humans. Yes, sometimes it’s the big, muscly guy who throws himself into the fight without a proper plan and hopes to saves the day. For years my hero was my 5th grade teacher. She gave me a physics book and taught me how to use a telescope.” Reaching up to put her hand on Talia’s head, brushing her hair with her thumb. “You think you’re not a hero to Indel and Talia? Think again. You’re a different kind of hero. You think, and you think carefully. You gather the facts and make the decision that makes the most sense, even if it’s not the ‘moral’ decision. It may not fit Asgard’s vision of a hero but I’ll tell you what it does sound like. A prince.” But saving the world aside, there was something more important he needed to know. “Ask me whose side I’m on.”

And there was that subtle shyness that sometimes appeared, his eyes meeting hers for a moment before glancing away. He spoke softly, hesitantly. “Whose side are you on?”

Smiling instantly, stepping closer. “Yours, you dope.” He grinned in amusement…and relief. “I’m not trying to change you. I fell in love with you. This smart, funny, talented, overtly sarcastic drama queen—…”

“HEY!”

Ignoring his protest, wishing they didn’t have an audience or she would kiss him to quiet him. “…is exactly who I want. But because you sometimes can’t see what you want even if it turned
around and bit you in the butt if I do you can better believe I’ll point it out.”

He gave her a strange look. “Did any of that make sense to you?”

She shrugged with a sheepish grin. “Some of it.” This wasn’t about changing him. It was about doing whatever it took to preserve a dream. “We need to stay and do this. You know Thor won’t leave and I know you love him too much to let him stay and die.”

He sniffed and glanced away but she knew the suggestion he made he’d already dismissed. “I can come back once the three of you are safely tucked away.”

“But you wouldn’t be able to forgive yourself if something happened to him between now and then.”

His face sobered. “Death is a part of life.”

Leaning her head against his chest, knowing his mind had drifted to his mother. “Maybe. But it doesn’t mean we accept it gracefully. We fight it as long as we can, or people like Thanos have already won.” He grimaced and pulled her closer.

He couldn’t offer them to Asgard, not when he didn’t know his father’s position concerning Indel. Until he knew that, until he had that vow, sending them there wasn’t a consideration. He glanced over at Thor who stood silently, watching him and waiting…and showing amazing restraint.

He nodded slowly to his brother, comrades in arms once more.

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ASGARD

Odin studied the edict that had been transcribed in ink and signed by his own hand. An edict to destroy any remaining dark elf that dared to leave their realm. His normal penmanship had been a harsh slant of letters to betray the rage behind such a law. Usually his laws would specify a group being condemned. This had been the first edict to condemn an entire species. He couldn’t dismiss it, or this wouldn’t be the only edict he’d rescind. Hela’s banishment would be the second of many others.

He knew his flaw even if he would never admit to it. He, like Thor, lost all sense when rage took over. A weakness known to Loki, who had taken advantage of it more than once. Odin supposed the only time that temper had truly backfired on the trickster had been when he had returned to Asgard as a youth, running his mouth about Hela now being the queen of Helheim and beyond the Advisory Council’s reach.

Loki had pushed at his temper until, in a fit of rage, he’d forbidden the girl’s return. Thanks to his past foolishness all of his edicts, once formal law, had to go before the advisory council before they could be cut up and discarded. Neither edict have they allowed to be destroyed. Still, it didn’t mean he was powerless. There was nothing that said an edict couldn’t be altered. He’d retained that power at least.

He made the correction he would announce in court, so that Indel would be in no danger when he came here. He sat back in his chair, studying the parchment lying on his desk. Suddenly a horrified thought occurred to him and he journeyed to the bi-frost observatory as quickly as possible.

“Sire——”
Cutting off Heimdall effortlessly, focused on answering one very important question he had forgotten in his haste. “Has Thor found Loki?”

“Indeed he has, sire. Some hours ago.”

The Gatekeeper wasn’t saying it, but there was something very subtle in his usually stoic expression that didn’t bode well. “Were there…difficulties?”

Heimdall was and always would be loyal to Asgard first and foremost. He had also sworn many pledges to the royal family, from king downward. But he would also consider himself a comrade to Thor and the Warriors Three. His conflicting feelings of the trickster aside, his vows came first and he questioned the honor of some of their actions. Particularly in light of the vows they’d given the All-Father. “From what I have observed most have been resolved in one manner or another.”

“Injuries?”

“A brief discussion between brothers…” Heimdall’s lips thinned. “The warriors were prepared to obey your edict, halted by both brothers and several mortals.”

It was exactly what Odin hoped he wouldn’t hear. Asking stiffly, almost fearful of the response, “The boy was unharmed?”

Nodding slowly. “Verily.” Odin exhaled without even attempting to disguise his actions or maintain his normal kingly demeanor. If something had happened to Indel, even minor, Loki would never forgive him. He knew he was going to have a discussion with Thor. He had a feeling he would have to grill the other four as well. Heimdall’s voice pulled him from his thoughts. “The origins of Asgard’s prince is no longer unknown.”

Blinking in surprise that Loki would regain enough of his confidence to embrace that aspect of himself. “He told them?”

There was a hint of pride in the Gatekeeper’s eyes. “The prince showed them…defiant even in the face of their…adversity.”

Odin felt his eye twitch. Asgard was a realm divided when it came to the opinion of Jötunns. Those that had fought in the war on Jötunheim had taken to demonizing them and spread that belief through the next generation of warriors. He had known for centuries now that Loki would be horrified to learn that he was adopted. His learning his species with the current climate had promised to be devastating and he’d been right, far more than even he’d known. He had allowed it to go on for too long.

A very thorough discussion awaited those four. He would not allow Loki’s newfound confidence to be stifled. Nodding slowly. “Inform me, Heimdall, if anything new develops.”

Heimdall could see the four corners of the universe with his gaze, but even some matters remained hidden. He didn’t know where Thanos was or his plans. Hela was almost constantly shrouded from him. And he wasn’t certain yet why the princes remained on Midgard but he suspected there was a foe to be vanquished. “I believe they will be on Midgard for a few more days.”

Now he sighed, but there was a hint of hidden affection to the sound. “Of course they will. When they have concluded their business and intend to return, inform me.”

The tall AEsr bowed and vowed to do so with one word. “Sire.”
“And Heimdall…” His golden eyes moved to the aged monarch who had turned, facing the palace but yet to walk away. “…if it appears they will be overwhelmed by whatever they intend to battle, call upon Tyr. I will have the guard ready to move at a moment’s notice.”

MIDGARD

Tony flipped the scrap of paper in his hands over and over. Bruce had handed him some type of file number during Fury’s previously attempted but failed conference with no other explanation at the time. Mentally shrugging, he tapped it into the computer and felt his brow furrow as a password prompt appeared. He knew the note didn’t indicate a password so he rested his weight back on one leg and crossed his arms in thought.

He ran through all the usual guesses before he started throwing in random ones. “Try password.”

Tony cocked an eyebrow at the scientist, asking in surprise, “Really?”

Bruce just shrugged as he walked into the workroom. “It’s public information.”

“Then why all the secret-hush-hush?” Bruce didn’t say anything until Tony typed in the password. Files popped up on the screen. His brow furrowed as he started plowing through them. Crime scene photos. Autopsies. Quietly asking, “What is this, green bean?”

Everyone had reacted in different ways while the Krimminger devices had been functioning. Bruce sighed softly before explaining, “My paranoia running rampant. I’m normally hyper vigilant that there will never be another…HIM created.”

Tony’s brow furrowed as he tried to interpret what Bruce was saying. “So you had JARVIS pulling files during this planet’s moment of less than fuzzy feels?”

“I asked him to look for patterns.” He nodded wearily at Tony’s surprised look. “I know. It took me weeks to go through the files once things had calmed down. This is the only file I kept.”

His shoulder’s shrugged slightly as he asked, “Why? It just looks like random deaths to me. What pattern did JARVIS find?”

“The way they died.”

Tony sobered as he spoke, “How did they die?”

Bruce pulled up another file. “It was an antigen, specifically designed against their DNA.”

“Mutants?”

The scientist nodded once. “They were but it wasn’t targeting the mutant genes. It was targeting them.”

“Their group?”

Bruce took off his glasses, cleaning them as he sighed. “Maybe, but I’m actually skeptical.”

The planet was divided into two extremes. There wasn’t anyone that was really neutral. You either supported mutants or you hated them, whether because of fear or prejudice. “Why? Those
“They were the target but the antigen only works individually.” Bruce might believe it was one of those groups if it weren’t for how specific the serum worked.

The medical side of science wasn’t really Tony’s forte but he knew a little bit of everything. “So basically someone created a poison for John Doe and gave it to him.”

“Which isn’t as practical as something that could be used in mass.” The scientist nodded in agreement. “Which leads me to think whoever this was wanted this dismissed as random hate crimes.”

“Wow, that’s…creepy.”

Putting his glasses back on, taking in a slow breath before speaking, “It’s not exactly my field but I have a theory.”

Tony gave Bruce his full attention. “I’m all ears.”

“None of these people knew each other. They died at different times, different countries. They were different genders and had different occupations…there was only one common denominator I could find.” Bruce stepped over to the screen, pulling up different locations. Ten countries, with ten medical hubs. “Three of them were part of the genome project. Six of them were blood donors. The last had a blood transfusion 5 years ago.”

“Nice. Somebody would have to have some pretty damn long arms to do the gathering.” Tony’s eyes swept over the geography before glancing sideways at Bruce. “So, are we thinking new project after we save the universe?”

Bruce didn’t answer the inventor directly. “Did you see Loki’s face when Thor mentioned he’d given a blood sample to SHIELD?”

Tony shrugged a single shoulder as he countered, “Yeah, so? Locks is a paranoid little shit and not SHIELD’s biggest fan.”

“Is he knowledgeable enough to know what science can do with that blood?” Tony shrugged silently again.

“Yes. I am.” Both of them jumped and whirled around to see Loki standing behind them with arms crossed. It was clear by his expression he’d heard most if not all of the conversation. Bruce took slow breaths, fighting for control. Loki didn’t step closer, focused on Tony but well aware of Bruce’s status. “Jane was ever so helpful in educating me.”

Tony turned the valve and let the sarcasm flow. “Great. Remind me to thank her.”

His green eyes narrowed. “Stay away from Jane, Anthony.” Tony wasn’t sure if the trickster’s tone was protective or proprietary. He knew better than to try to find out. He held up his hands and took a step back. Loki’s expression turned blank as he asked, “Do the AEsiir need to sleep with one eye open while on this planet?”

“We wouldn’t attack the big guy.” Tony looked both shocked and insulted.

Loki lifted a single eyebrow, his expression still blank. “I am not concerned with your little group, Stark. I am concerned with this corrupt agency.”
“SHIELD wouldn’t—…”

The former prince cut off Tony effortlessly, the blankness fading to reveal steadily growing anger. “SHIELD is not precisely my concern. As much of an annoyance as I find him, Nicholas is not foolish enough to attack an ally. But he was not a governing body over this agency until recently and there may be those within it still loyal to them.”

“Yeah, those pricks would totally do it.” Tony didn’t and never would have a good opinion of the council. He nodded in agreement, though how they were involved in all this still eluded him.

Loki turned his head slightly in Bruce’s direction. “Has there been enough time for they to make use of my brother’s blood?”

“I don’t know.”

“Make it a priority to find out.” Both men stiffened, hearing the shift in tone. Prince Loki was stepping forward and he wasn’t asking for their cooperation. He was commanding it.

Tony pulled back a little, hand held out and surprise in his voice, “Whoa, prince arrogant, so not your minion. Maybe you’ll get a better response if you ask nicely.”

Loki bared his teeth in a trickster smile and faded from sight. No flash or sound, just that creepy fade from view so that neither was sure he wasn’t still in the room with them. The inventor and the scientist glanced at one another, realizing at the same time that was as close to nice as Loki was going to get today. They sighed in unison and did as they were told.

Author’s Notes:

Lots of tidbits thrown in here. Have fun :D

Next:

Loki doesn’t like telepaths; Hela reveals what can be…and what will be
Chapter 66

MIDGARD

The quarters Loki was assigned were impressive for a military bunk. More so than even the mortals knew because apparently Hela had decided they needed expanding. She had added two bedrooms and moved around the original room to act as a living room. One bedroom was dominated by the bed, all four of them plus Fenris and Mischief comfortably able to share it if they wished.

Indel was already asleep, on his back and snoring softly. Loki was lying next to him, supported by pillows under his back with Talia curled up against his side. She was looking much better, just tired but unwilling to sleep just yet. He could hear Jane puttering in the bathroom but Talia’s soft voice gained his focus. “Papa? Are we going to live here now?”

It was an interesting thought and it had its appeal. He found mortals definitely entertaining. But he knew he wouldn’t be able to live here as himself or it would put everyone in danger. Humans would be afraid of him for decades to come. They couldn’t hurt him but they might try to turn that fear on his children. Then his response would truly give them a reason to be afraid. Asking Talia softly, “Do you like it here?”

She scrunched up her nose in thought and shrugged. “It’s okay…I don’t like the growling man.”

An amused grin pulled at his lips, imagining the look on Fury’s face when he calmly told him he and his family were moving in permanently to SHIELD headquarters. He’d never seen a human brain melt out someone’s ear but it might be entertaining. “Well, if we lived on Midgard we wouldn’t live with him.”

Her head bobbed a little in acceptance before the look turned cautious. “Ok. We’re not going back to Alfheim, are we?”

Mentally he damned every single elf on the Senate. He would love nothing more than to do precisely that but it wasn’t an option any longer. In a few centuries her fear would fade but it made the immediate plan of living on Alfheim impossible. “No, we’re not.”

Talia looked instantly relieved and he had to force down his rage or he would pop back over to make the necessity of a new Senate unavoidable. He couldn’t kill everyone who angered him or the universe would become a very lonely place. “Okay.”

He tilted his head slightly towards her, asking curiously, “Where would you like to live?”

She chewed on her lip, thinking carefully, before looking up hopefully. “Could we see grandfather?”

That surprised him. “The AEsir don’t frighten you?”

She shook her head quickly as if he’d asked something silly. “No.” Then she grinned and her next words made him quietly cackle. “They’re stupid. Not scared of stupid people.” Her mirth faded, a hint of fear in her eyes. “Is there a S-…them there? On Asgard?”

Again that urge to kill every single Senate member burned in him briefly. If he pranked the Hel out of them he might feel better. Decision made, he moved his focus back to Talia and rubbed her back. “No, Asgard has a king and he rules alone.” Except he had noticed that Odin leaned a little
too much towards the Advisory Council’s decisions. It wasn’t the first time he’d ignored his instincts telling him those pompous fools had more power than they should. Maybe he wouldn’t ignore those instincts this time, since they were almost always right.

Talia perked up as she asked, “And someday that will be the big blond man?”

Loki nodded slowly, no longer terrified of the thought. “Yes, someday Thor will be king.”

“What about you, do you get to be king?”

He chuckled in self-deprecation. “Hopefully not. I would be a very bad king.”

“Nuh uh.”

He wasn’t going to win that argument so he didn’t bother to correct her. He knew politics, but he also believed a good king needed a firmer moral center than what he would ever possess. With a frown Loki gently lifted the Helheim rock always around her neck. Only now there were tiny beads on either side of the pendant with even tinier runes carved in them that felt like Uru. “What is that?”

Talia yawned and snuggled into his chest. “Not sure. Big sister said it will keep us safe so we never have to be scared again. She’ll take us through a magic doorway to a special place and tear apart the monsters.” Loki felt his lip quirk without his permission. “Will she? Is big sister scary?”

His beautiful Hela. She was a part of him but she was also freer. She was wild because she’d had centuries of growing up without mother or father or someone to temper her. “Sometimes… I’m afraid of her.”

Talia frowned, eyes already closed and voice sleepy. “But you’re never scared.”

How he wished that was true. If that were true he never would have broken. Or before, if it were true he would have found the courage to wait for father to be awake again and demand to know if he was a son or a war trophy to be discarded. But then again, if not for fear he wouldn’t have what he had now.

Commanding her softly, tone gentle. “Get some sleep.”

The new day had brought about a purpose, maps pulled out in the command center, everyone trying to anticipate a time frame. Loki cheekily refusing to say anything other than ‘soon’ wasn’t helping Fury’s mood.

“Sir, your guests have arrived.”

Currently he and the Avengers were spread out, looking over computer screens with other SHIELD agents. Eyebrow raising, Fury turned to see Charles Xavier entering the command center with another man who seemed to have an affinity for a beat up leather jacket. Tilting his head slightly towards the X-men in greeting, surprised. “Professor.”

Charles nodded back even as Wolverine’s eyes kept moving. “I was told our presence would be needed.”

Fury frowned slightly in confusion since it hadn’t been his idea. “By who?”

Loki appeared, Jane at his elbow. “An acquaintance of mine.” Fury glanced at the trickster
but he was already resigned enough that he didn’t say anything. He knew if he ordered the demi-god out of such a sensitive area he would just be ignored.

Wolverine looked slightly impressed. “Neat trick.”

Loki looked less than impressed in turn. “Indeed. The two of you would be what mortals call mutants?”

Charles rolled forward and extended his hand. “Charles Xavier.”

Jane smiled and took his hand, knowing if Loki grasped it he would probably break it just because he could. “Jane Foster. This is Loki.”

Charles inclined his head. “A pleasure to meet both of you. This is Logan.”

Logan’s eyes looked Loki over from head to toe before saying snarkily, “And I thought I liked leather.”

There was more to this mutant than just a power and Loki could sense it. There was a faint metallic odor that almost overpowered his natural scent. Loki’s lip twitched. “You should meet my brother. He seems to favor metal as much as you do.”

Crossing his arms, voice gruff. “Yeah? Who’s your brother?”

Loki crossed his own arms and matched his tone. “As much as I regret it, Thor.”

That got Logan’s attention. He’d met plenty of hero wannabe’s that changed their name to play a part. He’d assumed that ‘Loki’ had done the same. But tie that to Thor and he realized this was the insane little shit that tried to flatten New York. “Wait a minute…” Claws unsheathed, Jane yelped as Loki pushed her out of the way and agents jumped to their feet. Wolverine swiped in an arc with a roar and tore through Loki, whose double made a mocking show of pain and faded.

Loki stiffened to feel a grip like steel coil around him and a very sharp blade scratch against his neck. Loki whispered in his ear. “No manners, whatsoever.”

< Loki—… >

Loki jerked back so forcefully Wolverine flew into the far wall. Three shades whiter than normal, the trickster trembled from head to toe as he stared with wide eyes at the man in the wheelchair who had whispered in his mind a second before he disappeared. But his normally soundless means of travel was accompanied by such a tearing/jarring sound that everyone jumped and Jane clapped her hands over her ears. A small cry of pain slipped past her lips, the pain spiking from the magic in her veins. Whatever he had just done did not make the universe happy. As soon as she could gather herself together she whipped around to glare at the man Loki had reacted to.

Wolverine picked himself up and dusted himself off, looking around. “That was… different.”

They both looked down as ice slowly coated the floor. They couldn’t see a spot of origin, the path moving outward but stopping to circle around Jane who was clenching her fists so tightly her arms were trembling as she stared at Charles. Their breath started to fog, they and the agents shivering.

If she had stormed in with sound and fury it would have been less frightening than the silent entrance Hela made. She drifted as if skating on air, stopping next to Jane and just staring at
Charles with glowing green eyes. The tense silence that filled the air no one was willing to shatter until Hela slowly shook her head. “I thought we had an understanding, mortal.”

Fury’s head kept jerking around before narrowing his focus to Hela. “Just who the hell are you?”

Slowly Hela diverted her attention and Nick suddenly wished he didn’t have it. There was no room in the moment for indulgence. She purred in such a persuasive way that there was no choice but obedience, her magic wrapping around her voice. “Jane Foster misses her friends. You should make arrangements for them to visit.”

Nick nodded to himself numbly, his free will succumbing to the magic behind her command, and left the room. “Of course I should.”

Tony’s eyebrows hiked up, muttering under his breath. “Go Gorgeous.” Steve pulled in a breath to speak, halted with Stark making a motion by jerking his head. This was one time the captain did not want to make his presence known.

Hela turned her attention back to Charles, speaking without inflection. “I am going to be very generous. This is a singular opportunity and I suggest you take full advantage of it. I want you to read my mind.”

Wolverine took a step protectively. “Professor-…”

Charles held up a hand and nodded slowly. He’d had his suspicions about who she was. Her appearance here only confirmed a private theory of his. He focused his mind on the complicated one before him and a vision expanded around him. It was hard to see figures, but colors were in sharp contrast, touch was still present, and sound was as clear as a bell.

_Ash. Flashes of red that took a moment to identify. Blood._

_So much pain it was staggering._

_And beneath the laughter and screams there was fear. Anger. Defeat._

_Words spilled, a powerful mind extracting what couldn’t be hidden._

Charles pulled in a strong breath and retreated from her mind sharply. The overall impression he took away was torture, and looking into her eyes he knew it wasn’t she that had suffered it. Now there was the heat of anger in her voice. “Do not ever enter his mind without permission again.” Loki had a very short list of who could speak to him in such a manner that he would accept without such a reaction. As harmless as Charles appeared, he was an unknown.

He nodded gravely. If he’d known about the telepathic trauma he never would have tried. Charles was merely fortunate the trickster’s flight instincts had taken over or there would have been no stopping Loki from making sure the telepath was very dead. It also didn’t escape his notice the protective anger pouring from Jane. He didn’t know her but the impression he gathered could only be described by one word. Mate. He gave her an apologetic nod. “He has my sincerest apologies. Causing distress had not been my intent.”

Reluctantly Jane nodded, her anger cooling slightly. Wolverine looked as confused as he
felt. “Wait, you’re here because of an asshole who tried to destroy New York?”

Tony frowned at the mutant. “Hey!” Eyes turned to look at him. “I get to call him an asshole because we’re friends, you don’t.”

Wolverine’s voice with sarcasm at the inventor. “Oh, excuse me. Lunatic.”

Hela snarled sharply. “I am here because I choose to be here but if you would all prefer to die tell me now. Without my assistance I doubt he will return so your demise is eminent.”

<You are so certain he is the only solution?>

Her expression didn’t change at Charles’ rather naïve question in her mind but something in her eyes spoke eloquently. Hela glanced at Jane and winked, seeing the worry there ease as she whispered in the sorceress’s mind. <Not to worry, Jane. I’ll find him for you.> She turned to the right and followed the golden path down to Helheim. It wasn’t terribly taxing for either of them to take the golden path from realm to realm. Loki hadn’t done that. He’d panicked so badly he’d teleported from point to point. He could have ripped a hole through the universe with a maneuver that desperate.

She bypassed court, walking into her rooms and staring thoughtfully at her potions table. Off to the side there was a small vial. He’d pieced himself back together once but this was a reaction he wouldn’t be able to suppress or control. If she couldn’t guarantee the sanctity of his own mind, he would never be able to voluntarily be in Charles’ presence, much less Thanos’.

She retrieved the vial before wandering slowly out of the palace and following a path. It was what she was coating the cage in Niflheim: liquefied Uru with a spell imbedded within that acted as a barrier to prevent psychic penetration. This had been what was left over. She found him under a weeping willow, sitting and curled into a half ball. He was silent, staring blankly at a small pond where ghost-like fish moved within.

Æsir armor was intricate, created individually for each warrior so no two had the same weaknesses nor the same way to be removed. She carefully maneuvered around his semi-comatose state, removing the golden half-moon from his breast plate before sitting down next to him.

Her movements were slow and purposeful, the viscous liquid moving sluggishly along the piece and creating a protective shell that hardened clear. She blew on it gently, smoothing her fingers along the surface. Even at his most casual dress this was one piece that was almost always worn.

She looked over his head to wink at Freyja who had wandered over curiously. It wasn’t time yet for their formal introduction but the little girl knew that. Soon was all Hela could promise. The timing had to be perfect or Loki would lose all focus. The little girl leaned in and kissed his cheek, giggling and darting away as he slowly lifted his head.

Slowly his eyes moved back to Hela who was already putting his armor back to right. He couldn’t decide which shamed him more. That he’d run from a mortal…or that Hela had found him. Then she paused with a frown, her finger lightly on his breastplate. He glanced down with a frown of his own, snorting when she flicked his nose and then grinned at him.

She sat down again next to him, leaning against his shoulder and threading their fingers together. Soft power rose up from beneath them, saturating his depleted stores. Not a trick that could be performed without consequence. She wouldn’t be able to do it again for quite some time or risk damaging his ability to even use magic.
Loki looked outward dully. “I’m going to be useless against Thanos if a mortal scares me that badly.” His expression was distant but his thoughts were ping-ponging every which way with recrimination. It hadn’t even been a formal battle and he’d run. He’d fought for centuries the perception that he wasn’t a warrior but now he believed it. And Jane. He’d just abandoned Jane. If this had been a true enemy she could be dead right now.

Hela made a dismissive noise. “I find Charles is exceptional. Perhaps not as powerful as Thanos but very close.” She picked up the vial so he could see it. “Besides this will make the threat of Thanos moot, to you at least. It binds to the metal, emitting an aura. The metal will now protect the wearer with a psychic shell.”

If anyone else had told him this he wouldn’t believe. But he knew his daughter wouldn’t lie to him, not about this. Slowly he looked over the vial before asking curiously, “What is it?”

Hela said the words very carefully. “It was Uru.”

“Was?”

This would be the part where most would scoff in disbelief. But Loki, like she, knew that anything was possible. “I modified it.”

Loki made a choking sound. “How??”

She shared a grin with him, feeling rather pleased with herself. “The AEsir alchemist who created Uru was not a very honorable man. I’ve been keeping him busy for my own pleasure.” Her own pleasure. He knew exactly what she meant by that. Armor. Weapons. She’d been equipping her army.

Loki whipped around, hands on her shoulders. “Hela, no.” Her lips quirked in amusement. “You will not bring Ragnarok down on us.”

Her eyebrow lifted as her face turned blank, asking quietly, “Is that my intention?”

Loki continued speaking urgently. “It is the catalyst, you know it is.”

Purring in amusement at him. “How you underestimate me, father. I think I am a little more aware of the rules than you are-…”

Cutting her off with a snarl, his gaze full of reproach. “No. You will not twist words and perceptions with convenient rules that alter as you see fit. Not with me. Not about this.”

She was going to have to talk to Jane because Loki was most definitely losing his sense of humor. He should know her better than this. Or perhaps it was just the pressure getting to him. He’d fought in wars and he’d fought well, but it was usually someone else’s plan with his own modifications. He wasn’t used to having all of the control and clearly Thor wasn’t stepping forward to take charge. Maybe she should direct her attention to Thor instead. Respecting Loki didn’t mean not stepping up to share the burden. Uncle needed to learn the meaning of the word compromise, especially if he intended to one day be king of Asgard. “You would be surprised how accommodating one of the sister fates can be when she is not swayed by the other two.”

“…what?” He stared at her in awe, amazed that she had met them.

She relaxed back and after an indecisive moment he joined her. “There is a line that cannot be crossed but there is a way. Two enemy armies, the living and the dead, lined against one another on opposite sides of the line, offense to offense. That is what will shake and break Yggdrasil in the
backlash. But my dead used as defense is permissible.”

“Defense?”

Shrugging her shoulders, thinking of the women and children of Asgard who would remain behind even if every man went to war. “On Asgard, Thanos’ army against whoever grandfather manages to convince to fight. The dead may be used as the line to protect the innocents from the warriors. They are a wall, not an army. That is the distinction.”

“I’m not going back to Midgard.”

She didn’t look at him so he didn’t see her private smile. He wasn’t afraid, she could hear it in his voice. He was sulking. But she was Hela and knew how to motivate him. “That is your choice. I can bring Jane and the little ones here for you without trouble…it just seems a shame.”

“What does?”

Using a word they both hated, goading him. “The inevitable. Even I sometimes find pity when it is nigh.”

He practically spat the word. “What is inevitable?”

She eyed her nails and flicked them outward lazily. “It is Tony’s due time. With or without you fighting, he will not walk off that battlefield.”

Growling protectively and shoving himself to his feet. “You will not come for him.”

She didn’t get up, shaking her head slightly. “No. He is destined for Valhalla. That is out of my control.”

He narrowed his eyes at her in disgust that she’d won so easily. “Bring them here.”

“If you go back to Midgard, only in the event of mortal danger. If you stay here, I will obey.” She smirked and generously opened a shadow for him to walk through, knowing what he would do. He snarled and disappeared within.

“Is that why I died, because it was my inevitable fate?” Hela tilted her head slightly as Amora stepped soundlessly under the willow tree. Then a brief grimace crossed her face before the enchantress corrected herself. “…milady.”

Hela gave Amora an amused look and pushed herself to her feet. The enchantress in death looked the same as she did in life. Those she welcomed to Helheim did not carry the physical injuries of life. “Nothing is truly inevitable and he knows that. There is always a choice. It may be a choice between two unpleasant options but there is a choice. You chose to give up, which made your death inevitable. Tony. Midgard. The Other. They are all choices that Loki has to make. He can choose to fight. He can choose to kill. He can choose to save a life. The only time anything becomes inevitable is when no choice is made.”

“I thought one’s due time was an inevitable conclusion.”

The queen’s lip twitched in sly amusement. “If you’re clever enough, there are even loopholes to that end.” Her eyes turned distant. “Sometimes the only choice is to choose death…but not even that is permanent if you plan carefully.”

Amora pulled back with a thoughtful expression. In spite of AEsir opinion, she knew what
she was about to say was true. “You cannot see the future.”

Hela loved that so many believed she could. It made her feel wickedly good to not correct them, almost like a game to see who was clever enough to figure it out. “No, but I am a mage and I embrace my gifts. Time and magic are intertwined, for just as time exists through every facet of the universe, so does magic. In a waking moment I can see the course of a life ending, because in that moment magic will return back to Yggdrasil as the soul is released from the shell. Loki has such a gift but chooses to ignore it. Except once…”

“Once?”

Hela nodded slowly, thinking of Loki’s fit on Asgard after finding out he was Jötunn. “During Thor’s exile. He was distraught to the point of beyond reason for much of it but during a lucid moment he saw Thor’s choice to stay at Jane Foster’s side and die a mortal. He chose to alter Thor’s course.”

And suddenly Amora realized she’d misjudged just how many of Loki’s decisions revolved around Thor. She’d known about the negative, but she hadn’t realized that even at his angriest the trickster had Thor’s back. “He’s going back to Midgard, then?”

The shadow Hela provided had been a direct path. A temporary dark passage that she, as the queen of the underworld, could create at will. “He’s already there.”

Amora sounded mystified and confused as she asked, “Why would he ignore such an ability?”

Hela knew this answer from experience. “Because it’s so tempting to check on the ones you love to make sure death isn’t creeping up behind them.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

Looking at the enchantress as if addressing a naïve child. “It becomes an obsession. Eventually you focus so much on when those around you might die that you forget to enjoy the time you have with them.” Amora blinked but Hela had already turned, a devious little smile on her lips. “My reminder has a purpose. He’ll be irresistibly drawn now to use it just once more.”

“And?”

The humor faded as the seriousness of the situation gripped her spine. That was the true danger of this plan. There was no halfway. It would succeed to benefit many, or it would fail and end them all. But to achieve her goals it was a situation she willingly created. “He’ll discover that he’ll have a choice to make. There is someone who is going to die, and only he can save them. But to do so will cost him his own life.”

Amora tilted her head slightly, befuddlement in her voice. “Why wouldn’t you just tell him that like you did with the mortal?”

But Hela was already nodding to herself. “Because he has to see it for himself, it’s the only way.” She and Loki were both liars. He’d never completely believe if he didn’t see the truth. “If it were an option I would take his place…but it’s not.”

Amora’s voice rung through the quiet peace of Helheim. “Who? Who could be so important-Thor. Is it Thor?” She practically shrieked the question, her love prior to death following her into the afterlife. Hela didn’t react beyond shaking her head slightly. “Then who is so important to the trickster prince of Asgard and the Queen of the Underworld??”
Hela turned and she wasn’t *Hela* in that moment. It was like the surface was gone to reveal that at the core, this was and always would be the most basic elements of Loki. Voice rough with anger, hurt, frustration, despair, but most of all love. “Our father.”

**Author's Notes:**

*Dum dum dum...*

**Next:**

Hela expresses her displeasure; Loki chats with an archer; A confrontation with Midgard
Chapter 67

MIDGARD

Jane’s head jerked up, sensing more than seeing Loki. She made sure all three children were heavily involved in their books on the floor of the living room before slipping into the bedroom and moving the door so it was almost closed. Loki was sitting on the edge of the bed, arms resting limply on his knees and head hanging down. His whole body seemed to be drooping forward, held up only because of the stiffness of his armor.

She’d been worried about him but knew better than to go hunting for him. Loki wasn’t found until he allowed it. Jane walked forward silently, brow furrowed as she struggled to think of a way to help. She gasped in surprise but didn’t resist as he moved to wrap his arms around her hips and bury his face in her belly. She sank her fingers into his ebony locks, not petting so much as massaging his scalp with her finger tips.

“I’m-…”

Jane immediately dropped to her knees so they could be face to face, hands moving to cup his face and whispering fiercely. “No. You have nothing to be sorry about. Don’t you dare apologize to me for being a man.”

His brow furrowed, caught off guard. “A man?”

Her lips curled in amusement. “I know you love to think of yourself as a god among men but you’re not. You’re a man.”

His face contorted, irritation and hurt fighting for dominance. “Insulting me by comparing me to a mortal will insure I offer no such thing.”

The look that crossed her face was a familiar one. Usually it was before she called him a brat. He stubbornly held onto his feelings since she was the one insulting him. Jane read the stubbornness and with a sigh leaned forward to touch her forehead to his. “Loki…” Then her eyes narrowed a little to herself, thinking carefully before speaking again. “Odin is a terrible father.”

The tension in Loki’s muscles slowly eased as he made an attempt at humor. “Insults against others is always acceptable.”

She had a point that had nothing to do with fluffing his ego so she ignored him. “Your brother doesn’t think before he acts. Sif is never going to learn to shut up. Hogun will always grieve for the family he lost. Fandral is a slut and Volstagg is no mental giant.” She pulled back just a little and looked deeply into Loki’s searching eyes. “These are not problems that gods have. These are problems that men and women have. Incredibly strong, long-lived people with egos bigger than this planet but just people.”

He spoke slowly as he studied her. “So you’re not calling me a mortal.”

Lightly she traced his eyebrow with her thumb. “Of course not, you know better. G’dath is a woman. You are a man.” She shrugged just a little and he decided not to get into the argument that technically neither of them were in comparison to a human. Not to mention her next question had him glaring all over again. “You’ve heard of fight or flight, haven’t you?”

“A body’s instinct--I am a warrior. To be controlled by one’s instincts is unacceptable.”
Jane rolled her eyes, exclaiming. “We’re not at war yet!”

“I abandoned you to a threat-—”

“Because you knew I wasn’t in danger.” She said this with conviction, knowing if her life had been at risk his reaction would have been completely different.

“You don’t know that.”

“Oh yes I do.” His jaw was set stubbornly again so she took his face between both her hands and shook him slightly. She knew only part of this had to do with guilt. The rest had to do with how an AEisir would view his reaction. “I don’t care what Asgard has to say about it. What does Loki have to say about it?” She saw him puff up and knew there was only one way to guarantee she would win this argument.

He was ready to fight, but his muscles unwound against his will and he melted into her when she kissed him. He pulled back to breathe, murmuring against her lips. “Cheater.” She grinned, her eyes fluttering shut as he stole another kiss. Loki tilted his head forward to press his forehead to hers, speaking quietly, “I would say…that I have to learn to live with it. Or to work around it.”

She moved her head up just enough to kiss the tip of his nose, her fingers playing with his hair. “Hela found you, I take it?”

His slight purr was completely unconscious, pleased with her attentions as he answered. He rubbed the golden piece of his breastplate with an index finger. “Yes, and provided a solution. She has assured me her alterations will prevent any future trespasses.” He snagged her wrist lightly to keep her from distracting him. “I was apologizing for abandoning you.”

“Like I said, don’t apologize for that. I can take care of myself.”

He ducked his head to nibble on the lobe of her ear, grinning when she moaned and offered him better access. Whispering huskily, “Of course you can, shield maiden. On any account, since you refuse to accept an apology I will simply endeavor to make it up to you another way.” The red that heated Jane’s cheeks betrayed where her thoughts had turned and a devious grin spread across Loki’s face as his voice deepened. “My, my…who ever would have believed less than chaste thoughts belonging to Lady Jane Foster?”

She smacked his chest lightly even as she molded closer to him. “Jerk.”

Loki decided to wander the halls for a moment before returning to discuss matters with the two mutants. There was a conversation he needed to have first, long overdue…and he knew if he was alone long enough the archer would find him. Loki froze in place, Barton in front of him with his side arm out. “We need to talk.” Loki’s head tilted slightly back, hearing Natasha come up behind him. The archer gestured with his chin. “Interrogation room, just there.”

The trickster wasn’t worried. Even with their rather impressive abilities they were both mortal. He could teleport out of harm’s way in an instant. He gestured and the door opened, he walking in casually and leaning back against the far wall. Unlike the other interrogation rooms, this one was empty with no one-way glass leading to an observation room.

Clint closed the door after Natasha had walked in and nodded minutely. Raising his gun, aiming right between Loki’s eyes before demanding, “Where are my arrows?”

Loki crossed his arms and bared his teeth at Barton. “An area of Midgard you call Brazil.
Next time, don’t shoot at my son.”

“I wasn’t aiming for **him**, asshole.”

Shrugging boredly at the mortal who thought he was threatening him with a fatal wound when at worst a bullet to the head would give him a headache. “I could care less where you were aiming. You caused my child distress, therefore, you were punished.” Forming a cup with his right hand, the digits spasmed and an ear popping change in pressure filled the air before it faded. Speaking softly to confirm to the archer what he had done. “No cameras and no audio.”

Clint sighed in relief and holstered his weapon, ignoring Romanoff’s raised eyebrow as he asked, “What’s the plan?”

Loki purred softly at the man who was practically owned by SHIELD. “It depends on who’s asking, Agent Barton.”

Barton’s tone was demanding, “Is the debt still acknowledged or not?”

The trickster smirked, shoulders relaxing as he cast aside his false animosity. Barton was less of an enemy and more of an annoyance to him. Clint also wouldn’t speak of the debt in mixed company unless he was comfortable with dispensing of their farce. “It is.”

Clint nodded firmly, “Good. Then what is the plan?”

Studying his fingernails, eyes flicking to Natasha for a fraction of a second. He was curious why Clint had invited her but he suspected he knew the reason. The archer’s deep affection for her was known to him. “The Avengers must be convinced to leave Midgard.”

“With you?”

At this point Loki saw no harm to give away a truth he’d kept to himself. “I have yet to decide if I will accompany Thor to Asgard or not.”

Natasha frowned and interrupted. “Thor seemed to believe you would.”

He shrugged lightly at the assassin, speaking bluntly, “Thor childishly expects that matters will simply go his way without question and we will face this threat in a head on battle of cataclysmic proportions. I am currently debating the merits of joining Asgard now versus waiting until Thanos is knee deep in AEIsir blood and primed for destruction, slipping a knife into his back while bypassing the golden kingdom and leaving the nine realms entirely.”

The assassin’s face turned speculative even as she silently filed away that name. “I’m impressed. That sounds like a plan I would implement.”

Shrugging again with a dismissive tone. “I am mocked for not being an AEIsir warrior with reason.”

Clint’s eyes firmed as he asked, “Why would the Avengers need to leave earth?” Not that the idea didn’t sound awesome to Clint but from what he knew almost everything Loki said and did had a reason…unless he was just fucking with him.

Loki’s lips twitched, not needing to read his thoughts to know what the archer was thinking. “It will make Midgard less attractive to the Other’s master without you here since you helped thwart his initial gambit for the Tesseract. There is still a risk with so many people available for him to kill for death’s glory, but it would make Asgard a more attractive target if you are all there
Clint pressed further, emphasizing the reason he’d cornered the trickster to begin with. “And our agreement?”

Loki sighed softly. “…there is that…I pay my debts, archer.”

“When?”

Quickly calculating in his head before shaking his head, green eyes irritated. “The timing is off. Were I to take you now, they would not accept you and Idunn does not pick apples this time of year.”

Natasha looked back and forth between them, frowning. “Clint?”

Barton waved a hand at her to hold off her questions, focused on Loki. “Then I’ll exchange this debt for you staying-…”

“No.” Loki was across the room, snarling in the human’s face. Natasha tensed but didn’t move to interfere, instead listening. “You will not bargain your desire for a half-fulfilled debt. I will not be indebted to you for the rest of my existence.”

Clint met his aggression defiantly, unafraid. “It’s my call.”

Jabbing a finger at him. “The bargain was made, the terms set. Live with your decision.”

The archer pressed his lips together firmly in irritation before Natasha snarled. “Alright, enough. Barton.”

Loki turned away from the archer, moving. Clint eyed the pacing demi-god before explaining to his fellow agent. “I knew Loki was being controlled.” And for a time he had been as well. But once Selvig started working on his project the dynamic between he and the trickster changed. “He used me as a tether to keep his brains from scrambling permanently. I didn’t have control but I was semi-lucid, I was able to help him better with his plans of pulling the Avengers together to stop him. I pointed out weaknesses. I told him who would be the most useful for dissecting information-…”

“Why have you kept this from us?”

Barton blinked once in surprise at her before explaining, “Nat. How do you think the director would react? I would be compromised in his eyes.”

Natasha felt her lips thin at the criticism before nodding once reluctantly. She knew only too well a compromised agent conveniently turned up dead or disappeared entirely. “If it eases the sting of betrayal I will offer this…I didn’t give him a choice in his participation.” Loki went back to leaning against the wall, his arms loosely crossed. “Barton was the one who inspired Selvig in creating a failsafe that could close the portal with the scepter and I ensured it was carried out. He mentioned your abilities in dissembling and I performed the role expected.”

Clint nodded and continued where Loki left off. “And in return, Loki told me he owed me something I wanted, anything that was in his power to grant.”

Since he’d volunteered this much to his spider, Loki supplied the rest. “An offer I could not fulfill at the time since I was in no condition to complete it. Our agreement was that upon my return I would seek him out. Clint would like to be with others of similar interests, and of any race in with the infinity gems he covets.”
the nine realms the light elves are the most accomplished archers.”

“Considering how your race flaunts your own prowess I will interpret that as a compliment.”

“It is.” Then Loki smirked at Natasha in amusement. “They are also…I believe your human word is ‘snobs’.” Nat snorted and he glanced at Clint who nodded minutely. “They would never accept a mortal in their midst, even if I were now to advocate for him as a citizen of Alfheim.”

“Is their hostility innate or taught?”

Tilting his head ever so slightly as he considered her question before responding, “Both. Light elves are taught that mortals are lesser beings, as most of the nine believe. They are also an instinctual race and to them, you are prey.”

“And you brought them here?”

Loki huffed softly at the spy. “At the time there wasn’t much of a choice. Besides, consider that not one of your numbers have been attacked thus far. That is my influence.” He nodded towards Clint, changing the subject back to the original discussion. “I was to steal away from Asgard with one of Idunn’s apples, to grant him an AEsir’s life, and take him to Alfheim.”

Natasha barely turned her head towards Clint before her entire body stiffened to control herself, “Were you ever—…” Were you ever going to tell me?

Clint’s eyes said it all. No.

Her brow furrowed. Why bring me into this now, if he’d never intended to tell me?

Loki smirked a little, easily able to see the questions piling up in her eyes as her shock betrayed her. “As I said, I pay my debts.” Both agents turned in his direction. “You and yours vanquished me, but didn’t kill me. I owe each of you a favor, given as I see fit, of course. I assume Barton thinks a similar arrangement might appeal to you as well. I personally have my doubts but it is for you to decide. Five thousand years is a long time to be alive with regrets so do not agree in haste.” He nodded slightly as he looked around the room. “The effect is permanent to this room so speak at your leisure.” Waving his hand, the quiver and arrows he’d banished reappeared on the floor.

Muttering ‘asshole’ under his breath, Clint almost dived for them before Loki could change his mind. They weren’t friends. They would probably never be friends. But they both enjoyed antagonizing the other.

“Be cautious, archer, lest your opinion of the little spider’s costume should slip my lips.” Natasha raised an eyebrow at Clint.

Barton stood up and glared at the trickster. “I could threaten the same thing about Sif.”

Loki cackled softly. He may never have said anything out loud but he had an appreciation for how gloriously formfitting her armor is. “Too true, except that I can escape Sif at my leisure… your widow is not so easily avoided.” Loki stepped back and let the wall swallow him, the surface rippling.

Clint took a step and yelled at the corner. “I could tell Jane Foster!”

A smirk in Loki’s voice as it echoed in the room. “Very good…there is hope for you
yet…”

Loki had walked into the command center without ceremony or explanation, gesturing to the two X-men to follow him. Charles looked as if he might speak but the trickster ignored him and preceded them down the hallway. Thor had frowned even as he shook his head at his brother’s antics. He and Sif had ventured into the command center to learn if there was any change concerning the Skrull.

There hadn’t been so currently they were looking over different terrains, getting a feel in anticipation of the battle ahead. Agents jumped to their feet as Hela appeared, laying almost lazily across the narrow banister that framed a row of work stations. “Niece!” Thor’s cry was a boisterous greeting, as always. “Have you decided to join us in smiting our enemies?”

Hela sighed slowly through her nose. Thor’s enthusiasm was going to be the death of her. She murmured softly under her breath, the mortals around them freezing with the exception of Bruce and Tony. She’d just come from a brief chat with Anya and she was not pleased. She focused on Sif and spoke without an introduction to the topic at hand. “I find your convenient memory amusing, Lady Sif.”

The warrioress frowned in confusion, glancing from Hela to Thor and back again. Clearly she didn’t understand Hela’s point at all as she asked, “Convenient memory?”

The trickster queen’s expression was a sly one, but her eyes betrayed her lack of amusement. “I’ve heard whispers that you made a vow to King Odin. That no harm would befall Loki.”

Sif stiffened as she clarified her position. “I swore that I would bring no harm to him, not that I would stand in his steed to prevent injury.”

Hela blinked almost innocently at the warrioress, turning that gaze to Thor as she asked, “Isn’t that the oath you swore when you became an AEsir warrior? To be sword and shield for the royal family of Asgard?”

“He is no longer a prince-…”

Hela’s voice cut through the air like a knife through soft butter. “You made a separate vow, did you not?” Hela’s voice turned coy. “Yet you struck him.” Thor’s eyes widened ever so slightly in realization.

Sif blinked rapidly since she refused to be afraid of Loki but Hela scared her even if she would never admit it. “He provoked me.”

The trickster chuckled softly, contemptuously. “My, my…like a child before her mother, how pathetic.” Hela teleported from point to point, standing in Sif’s personal space. “You are an AEsir warrior, admit to your mistake.” Thor backed away several paces, knowing this was not a conversation he wanted to get in the middle of.

Heat raced across Sif’s face at the reminder that an AEsir warrior wasn’t afraid of the truth. Her actions were what they were. “I struck him.”

“Breaking your vow?”

Sif stiffened and nodded sharply. “Aye.”
Hela’s tone darkened as it deepened. “You need to learn to control that temper of yours.”

“Your command?” Sif asked but without the sneer Hela would have expected.

An unamused smile curled Hela’s lips. “My suggestion. Thor.” She crooked a finger at him. He looked between the two ladies, approaching with caution.

“Niece?”

She took a step to the left, giving them both a little distance. There was a disturbingly sweet tone that Loki seldom used except for special occasions. It was a tone that they both knew and dreaded. Hela used it now and caused apprehension to grow for both of them. “I heard that your first encounter was less than amicable.”

Thor crossed his arms over his chest, answering stiffly. “Loki knows that-…”

Hela cut him off by making a slicing motion with her hand. “Loki told me nothing. But he and I share the same past, uncle; your reaction is too predictable.” Her head tilted a little, studying him. Odin was as predictable as Thor. Predictable enough that he would have had all five of them take the same vows. “You swore similar oaths to Odin, did you not?”

“Aye.”

Gesturing grandly. “If you would be so kind as to stand next to your fellow warrior.” Sif and Thor stood shoulder to shoulder, glancing at one another in confusion a second before they both pitched forward as if they’d been cuffed smartly to the back of the head by an invisible hand. They both spun around with snarls, pulling back at the deadly glower Hela was sporting. It was common to see her eyes flash green with anger but this time was not the case. They were black as pitch. “Hurt Loki again and you will find out exactly what I do to guests who visit me in Niflheim.” Something unsaid passed back and forth between the three of them. Hela nodded once in satisfaction that her threat was being taken seriously.

Sif took a step closer, outrage suppressing her fear. “Who told you we made vows to the All-Father?”

Anya was useful for more than just keeping the courtiers in line. Giving Sif a toothy grin as the black faded from her eyes. “Wouldn’t you just love to know?”

“Yes, I would.”

Hela crossed her eyes and sighed. A truly pitying look crossed her face. “Thor, the two of you deserve one another. I pity Asgard but it’s practically preordained. Although I do pity the children that would be produced with their lack of intelligence, impossible tempers, and short attention span.”

“Niece, occupy yourself with your own pursuits and leave me to mine.”

“If you were to step forward I might consider it.” He frowned again, not understanding her point so Hela elaborated. “I thought you were to one day be king.”

“Aye.”

Snapping at him sharply. “Then act like it. A king does not allow one’s younger brother to do all the work for them.”
Thor’s jaw firmed as he explained why he hadn’t tried to interfere. “Loki has his plans--…”

“You both need to find a way to work as a unit. As the older brother, it should be you that proposes such.” Mischief sparked in her eyes, her tone pleased as she changed the course of the conversation. “I don’t guarantee grandfather won’t have a lecture waiting for both of you upon arrival to Asgard.”

Thor’s confusion deepened as he asked, “Why would father lecture?”

Hela’s lip curled, her tone now sly and slippery. “Ah, you think he doesn’t hold a high regard for vows.”

Thor blinked in surprise. “Father is aware that sometimes I lose control over restraint.”

She just gave him a look and rolled her eyes. “Of course, and he no doubt approves of such displays from a future king. A king who is an oath breaker.” Glancing at Sif and sneering. “A warrior who holds no respect for the royal family.” Both Sif and Thor shrunk. Hela grinned nastily. “As I was saying, prepare yourselves. He may speak behind closed doors but if holds even a shred of honor a one-sided conversation will take place.” She disappeared in a swirling mist of green.

Tony whistled, leaning against a wall and looking wistful. “Damn, what I wouldn’t give to be a fly on the wall of that conversation.”

Both AEsir looked thoroughly confused at Tony while Bruce walked over to the inventor with a sigh, taking his arm and pulling him out of the room. “Come on, Tony, let’s go look at something before Thor dents the wall with your head.”

The mutants were still alive because he needed them but he was not happy. Loki spun around as soon as both of the mortals had followed him into an empty conference room. A flick of his wrist and the door closed behind them. He didn’t step closer and he didn’t have to, giving Charles a narrow-eyed glare. “Even attempt to trespass in my mind again and I will hand you your lungs.” The nasty smile that followed guaranteed Charles would still be alive during the extraction.

Wolverine tensed but Charles took the threat for what it was. He nodded slightly, unruffled. “As I had explained to your significant other, my actions were not meant as an attack. But you do have my apologies for them and they will not be repeated.” Time stretched where no one moved until Charles chose to break the silence again with a question, “May I inquire as to how we may be of assistance?”

Wolverine resisted the urge to shudder. He had no idea what this tall alien freak was about to do but he didn’t like it. “Why am I here for this voodoo?”

Midgard’s mother was connected to these ‘mutants’ differently than other mortals. Different was very useful to Loki right now but this particular mortal was not the best critical thinker. “I would attempt to explain but by the time someone of your intellectual capacity would comprehend my small children would have children of their own. And do keep in mind my race takes nearly a thousand years to reach maturity.”

“So that makes you…what? Five hundred?” Loki slowly lifted an eyebrow in amusement at Logan.

Charles pushed himself further into the room. “Gentlemen, if we could focus on the matter at hand?”
Loki shrugged lightly, choosing a chair away from the center table and getting comfortable. “Your gifts make you unique. When the mother of a realm favors a child, that child is typically bestowed with a gift. It is that closer connection to Midgard that is useful to me. Through you, I will contact her.” Now that he had protection against this mortal and any other being who thought themselves clever to slip inside his mind his confidence had more than just returned, it had increased.

“Great.” Logan glanced at Charles and sighed. “We don’t have to hold hands and sing campfire songs, do we?”

“Logan.” Charles spoke with gentle reproach, before gesturing to the chair at Loki’s right.

Slowly, reluctantly, Logan sat down. A devious little smile curled Loki’s lip as he held out his right hand and batted his eyelashes. Wolverine’s scowl deepened. “Hell…” He grabbed Loki’s hand, tried and failed to increase his grip enough to actually hurt the demi-god. “Now what?”

Loki’s lip was twitching in devilish delight. “You should probably close your eyes. Unless you are a magician yourself you will most probably vomit without doing so.”

Logan sighed heavily, glanced at Charles once, before complying. Charles had moved up to Loki’s left and held out his own hand. Loki smirked and shook his head, clearly toying with the man on his right. Charles turned to cough to at least partially disguise a soft chuckle. Loki focused on his magic, centering himself before projecting outward and using the pair of them as a magical tether.

IN BETWEEN

“Logan.”

Wolverine opened his eyes and jerked around in a quick circle. They were in a space with no end and no ceiling, just fog and mist. “Huh…” Then he gave the normally paralyzed professor a second look who was standing next to him with an amused expression. “Neat trick.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet, mortal.” Loki walked out of the mist, strutting in a way that he hadn’t since he was just a prince of Asgard, looking no different here than he had in the room with them. He pointed in a direction. “She’s this way.”

He started forward, the other two trailing behind him. Logan glanced questioningly at Charles. “She?” Professor X just shook his head slightly, just as intrigued.

The mist rolled back to reveal the landscapes of the world. Desert to the east. Oceans to the west. Behind them was an endless jungle and in front of them rolling plains. Not all of the different variety of lands on Midgard, but some of the most common.

“I don’t remember getting high but this is damn trippy.” Loki slowly turned to give Wolverine a strange look. “What? Never heard of drugs?”

Loki frowned, curious about such a strange mortal habit. “Why would I wish to muddle my senses?”

“You don’t—--you know what, forget it.”

Turning back around before smirking. “Forgotten.” Loki walked and they followed, up to a cascading waterfall in an oasis. It was otherworldly, pure and untouched, light from nowhere just dim enough. Or bright enough.
Leaves were disturbed and a lithe figure appeared. Skin rich with color, she walked slowly into view. Beautiful, large eyes of seeming innocence, she was ethereal in her own element. But there was a predator grace to her steps and a lion like quality to her face. She was both predator and prey.

Logan’s eyes roamed over her appreciatively from head to bare toe. “Whoa.”

Loki closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. He should have left them behind. He hadn’t needed to drag them along this far. This was what he got for showing off. Her eyes, so many colors blending together there was no true description for the color, moved over each of them in turn but lingered on Loki.

Her voice rumbled like thunder. “You are not a child here.”

“No,” Loki answered in agreement.

She had sensed him before. Time was of no importance so there was simply before and now. He brought destruction and death with him before. Yet even now the scent of power and death surrounded him, intertwined within his spirit. But there was something else within his soul, almost hidden. A strength and a humanity that had been missing. It made her curious. “Why have you sought for me? To kill me as you killed the other mother?”

Loki didn’t allow himself to flinch, but he should have known. The nine mothers were strongly linked together but it would make sense that they would be aware of the other living realms. Realms like Skrullos. Keeping his tone even. “I am not here to kill you.”

The Skrull were not her children so she was not angry. Her tone continued to be curious. “You do not deny that you crushed her? Destroyed her and her children?”

“No.”

Logan raised a hand. “I’m not following this crap.”

She turned, the corners of her lips tilted slightly in amusement. “I am the mother of this realm. The heart that beats through all of you. The embodiment of your inner selves.”

Charles stepped forward in intrigue. “I had no idea the world was so…sentient.”

She nodded slightly to him. “I am a reflection of my children. The billions of you that walk the world on two legs…and the untold others that do not.”

“Huh?”

Loki rolled his eyes at Logan. Dumber than a box of rocks, in his opinion. He and Thor would probably get along famously. He spoke slowly as if speaking to a child. “She is what keeps your planet alive. She is a reflection of your race, but also of the billions of other creatures. She is, in essence, Midgard.”

Logan jabbed a finger at him. “Hey. I may not understand this mystic crap but I’m not an idiot.” Now Loki lifted an eyebrow in amusement.

“You destroyed a planet?” Charles asked the question quietly, privately horrified.

No point in denying it because he honestly didn’t care what this little man thought of him. “Yes.”
Shaking his head slowly, never able to understand such acts. “Why?”

Loki sighed, not about to start that discussion. “What does it matter?” Loki turned his attention to the heart of Midgard. “I am here to try to save you.”

“I am one of the ancient nine, Discord. I am not so easily conquered.”

Charles looked from one to the other. “Why would you call him discord?”

“I am the God of Chaos and Mischief, titles bequeathed by Asgard. The heart of the realm translates most things literally.” With a shrug Loki focused back to her. “You are mighty but you are also defeatable. A creation the children from one of the other nine call a world eater will be here within the day. You will be consumed from above, your atmosphere obliterated along with your children.” Charles and Wolverine both jerked back in surprise. Pressing his palms together, Loki simplified his words to the more basic concepts that magic stems from. “I can use the essence of Yggdrasil to smite this threat but in this way my body is as fragile as theirs. I need your assistance to channel this much power.”

She studied him for a long moment as if she could stare into his soul and pick apart his every motive. He wouldn’t be surprised if she could, the heart of a realm unlike anything or anyone else. “You have not the heart to see this through.”

He kept himself from running a hand through his hair in frustration. Why does no one ever listen to me? This was why he resorted to lies and misdirection because direct honesty never worked. But Loki desperately scrambled for patience. “I’m trying to help—…”

She shook her head slowly in amusement. “You are a small, selfish child who will not put the lives of others before your own. In the heat of battle you will flee. Your power and command are mighty but here…” Loki sucked in a sharp breath, about to protest until her words registered as she pointed to his heart. “…you are weak.”


Words he’d heard for the whole of his life. Some were said to his face in supposed gest but others were whispered behind his back. But it all meant the same thing. Less. Not since he’d learned of Odin’s deception had he been this angry. They all looked down as the ground beneath their feet rumbled. It should have been impossible since this place wasn’t physical, but they all felt it nonetheless. All but Loki who just continued to stare at her.

There was a choice to be made but out of spite he didn’t want to make it. But if he didn’t make it Midgard would be consumed and Yggdrasil would snap. The higher realms would tumble into the underworld and they would end. Ragnarok. The end and the beginning.

Even if that wasn’t the case, the preservation of a dream kept him fighting…even if it was a future he wouldn’t be a part of. He drew himself up stiffly, gave her a mocking bow and pivoted on his heels. He was done with this.

“Loki?” His stride didn’t pause at Charles’ voice as he disappeared in the mist. He didn’t need her. It would probably kill him, but he’d do it without her. Charles glanced back at her in concern. “If what comes is as terrible as he says we will perish without him.”

She took a step, a knowing glint in her eyes. “I know of what he speaks and it is true. Something that destroys and devours. It has done so before. It will continue.”

Wolverine shuddered. “Sounds to me that we should join forces with him if he knows how
to stop it.”

She wasn’t as revered as the other nine. Her children weren’t as respected as the others. But she was hardly innocent. There had been magical beings here before, those children leaving strong imprints since there had been so few of them. Her eyes held the wisdom of Merlin. The knowledge of Morgana La Fey. “I know the spell he wishes to use, child. It is nothing you can assist him with. He does not understand what he must do to succeed.”

Charles frowned thoughtfully as he asked, “What must he do?”

“He has to be willing to offer himself to the will of seidr, magic, without hesitation or reservation. He must allow himself to be controlled, which he fears the most. Should he attempt this spell and resist, none will have an opportunity to fear an external enemy.” The two mortals glanced at one another, as the fog thickened and this strange world they’d tumbled into faded.

MIDGARD

Loki didn’t retreat far, just back down to the corridor that housed the light elves that had journeyed with him. Trax wasn’t among the ones before him, the elf preparing those that would remain hidden and protected. The ones that were all grouped around him had all been trained to fight. They could feel it in the air, those that had served in Alfheim’s legions sensitive to the jitters and anticipation of war. One of the guards bowed to him. “We wish to fight, prince.”

Most of them were men, but not all of them. Unlike the AEsir, light elves weren’t as opposed to enlisting female soldiers. And though they could use all the help they could get, there was one question that had to be asked. “My spell will pull me away, can you maintain your instincts without me?”

One of the soldiers nodded knowingly. “You will kill us if we don’t. We understand the risks.”

Loki nodded in return. It was all he could ask. “Thor will be strategizing placement topside, which will most probably around the base.”

The elves nodded and walked to the elevators to take them to the command center, Azni and G’dath hanging back. Neither would be fighting, they having a much more important job. They would be staying behind with those not trained to fight, protecting two of the most important people in the universe. Two young rugrats ran to him, hiding their faces against his legs. He pulled them both up, carefully lifting chins and staring into their innocent eyes.

This was why he was here. To spend what time he could with them before a battle had to be fought to protect them. He wasn’t worried, the necklaces around their necks assuring him Hela would keep them safe.

He smiled after a moment. “Do you remember the stories I’ve told you about Valhalla?” A question his own father had asked him as a small child; he and Thor clinging to his legs before he would go off to battle. Then he and his brother would hide within the comforting folds of mother’s dress and wait anxiously for his return.

Indel and Talia both nodded silently.

“When this battle is over I will be one of two places. Here to pick you up and reassure you that everything is alright…or in Valhalla to watch you grow up under Hela’s protection.” They both leaned forward to hug him tightly. He wanted to be practical. Letting them cling to him would only
make the parting harder for all of them. But his body wouldn’t obey, his arm wrapping around them just as desperately. “Don’t be afraid, little ones. Warriors fight so little ones like you won’t grow up afraid.”

“Don’t go.”

Loki wasn’t sure if one or both of them had made the request but he blinked away the sharp sting to his eyes. He moved his body in a slight rocking motion, refusing to allow his eyes do more than burn as he replied, “I have to.”

“I love you, dada.”

“Love you, papa.”

Loki couldn’t imagine feeling braver, bolder, mightier than in that moment. He whispered love into their ears and hair, kissing them and staying with them as long as he could.

______________________________

Author's Notes:

It's all starting to come together now. **rubs hands**

Next:

No more waiting
Chapter 68

MIDGARD

Loki took it upon himself to alert the warriors to head for the command center. He teleported into Volstagg and Hogun’s assigned quarters, but he didn’t appear right away. Instead, he stayed invisible in one position and silently watched Volstagg who held his battle axe with both hands. The older warrior’s hands flexed around the grip, sitting on his bed alone and eyes staring distantly at nothing. Loki appeared in front of him, leaning back casually in the bunk that Hogun normally slept in. “You disappoint me, Volstagg.”

Volstagg startled a little in surprise. “Loki.” Then he tried for a bit of humor and a weak smile. “I did not hear you enter.”

“It seems this is my century for uncovering lies.” Loki was in no mood for ignorance. Not today. He had a point to make and he was going to make it, whether or not the dense man in front of him ever understood.

“What lie do you speak of, my friend?”

Loki sneered viciously and spat the word back at him. “Friend. What a strange word to pass your lips.”

Volstagg blinked rapidly several times as if shocked by the vehemence behind the retort. “I-I do not know what you mean.”

But then Loki reconsidered and supposed he was behaving oddly. How many centuries had he just left things as they were? Their recent reunion wasn’t the first time hypocrisy had filled the air with its stink. He was certain it wouldn’t be the last. He wasn’t clear whose influence was behind this, whether it was Jane or G’dath, but he was tired.

Then he realized what it was. He didn’t need them anymore. He was no longer alone. No longer was he the despised and mistrusted outcast of AEsir society, willing to accept the scraps Thor and the warriors threw his way. He had what he had longed so long for: friends who accepted him, a mate who supported him, and a family who loved him. His conversations with the others had been things he’d kept to himself for too long. “There was a time when I respected you…believe when I say that time has passed.”

“You respected me?” Volstagg was blinking at him owlishly.

Loki refrained from rolling his eyes as he recalled why he had respected the older warrior. “I was told the stories of the Vanir war you fought in.” There were many battles fought between the AEsir and the Vanir over thousands of years. This had been a smaller feud over a piece of land. “The battle was bloody and gruesome, but you waded through as any loyal son of Asgard. Until your unit came across a small village up in flames. In defiance of your lieutenant and your commander you protected two Vanir girls, children, from your own shield brothers. You were cursed a coward and a traitor, dishonorably discharged, and forced into exile because you refused to leave them behind.”

Volstagg looked pained, silently listening and remembering only too well what Loki was speaking of. He didn’t regret his girls. He would never regret them.

Loki smirked sadly to himself with just the thought of her. When mother had learned of this the matter was quickly rectified. Volstagg was invited to return, with the girls as his daughters,
into the inner circle of a king’s confidence. Thanks to her he was permitted to befriend Thor and have been at his side ever since. The sadness faded but not the smirk. “Pity that it was lie.”

The rotund warrior blinked twice more before nodding slowly to the trickster. “That was no lie. Matters occurred as you describe.”

Loki’s voice turned saccharine as he asked, “But how can that be? The man in that story not only understood the AEsir concept of honor, he followed it. Lest my foe be a warrior, I shall never cut down another.” It was a vow that every AEsir gave before their proving day.

It took longer than if this had been Hogun, but Volstagg finally grasped the real topic being discussed. He swallowed once, thickly, before trying to excuse his actions towards Indel. “You have to know I wouldn’t have followed through.”

Loki stood up stiffly, glaring down his nose at the other man. “You standing to the side in inaction is just as criminal as those who wield a blade to cut down a child purely for his heritage. You not acting is approval because you have the power to act and refuse to do so.”

Volstagg didn’t stand to try to match his height, asking the trickster slowly, “And what of your actions against Jötunheim, Loki? If I am a criminal for not acting, what does that make you?”

“A monster.” Volstagg frowned heavily at the conviction in Loki’s voice, his eyes silently saying he disagreed. Not that Loki noticed, already focused on AEsir beliefs he didn’t share. This was why he didn’t believe in their concept of honor. “If a poorly worded edict allows you to kill a child and your honor doesn’t break, it means nothing.”

“Your father—…”

Loki was well aware of what had happened, even if he hadn’t read the law himself. An edict that would have been written just after his mother’s death. “Rules can bend like a reed in the wind.” Father had not been in his right mind when that edict was signed. Loki knew exactly how Odin’s anger worked. “A law is fallible because no one, not even a king, is perfect. Honor is forged like Uru, an absolute.” Words that were drummed into every warrior of Asgard. Words that Loki didn’t precisely adhere to. A vow that he meant, he kept. That was about the only absolute concerning his honor, which is why there were only a few oaths he would ever offer anyone.

With a slightly dismissive gesture of his hand, Loki turned to exit, hearing Volstagg speaking to his back. “No monster understands honor.” His steps stumbled, not because of what Volstagg had said. He stumbled slightly because he heard what wasn’t said. That he couldn’t be a monster because he did understand.

Loki paused at the doorway without glancing over his shoulder. “We gather in the mortal’s war room. It is time to end this.”

The command center was a bustle of activity, the agents preparing their technology and all of them continuing to shake their heads that there was no change. Loki doubted that but he didn’t say anything. Not yet.

“Prince?”

Loki turned around slowly, arms crossed over his chest as Volstagg and Hogun approached him. “And suddenly I am prince to you?”

Hogun didn’t look apologetic, but then he wasn’t called Hogun the Grim for nothing.
Volstagg was another matter entirely. “We go into battle today.”

Loki nodded slowly. They did, with the reality that some or all of them wouldn’t walk off that battlefield. Not so long ago they would have smiled and laughed in the face of such danger, feeling so immortal nothing would ever fell them. But none of them felt like those ‘children’ anymore.

He wasn’t one for magnanimous gestures so if they wanted something they were damn well going to have to ask for it. Volstagg seemed to fumble over something but was at a loss for what to say. He’d been around each of them long enough to know them.

Sif was a jealous, bitter bitch and had been for almost as long as he’d known her. Add to that the perceived slight that he’d committed against Thor by making him grieve and her temper was even more slippery than normal. Especially if she believed he was withholding more truth. Hogun had issues with the Jotnar even worse than he did. He was raised to see them as monsters. Hogun had lost enough family to them to believe it. He was also a man who believed in edicts and laws over anything else, who would only heel to what Thor commanded. Volstagg. The large man wasn’t known for using his brain but Loki had never known him to follow an edict blindly. Out of any of the warriors, it was Volstagg’s actions that had surprised him the most.

But then the last couple of years hadn’t seen him at his best, either.

Mentally he sighed. Sif and Fandral came out of the elevator side by side, Fandral bowing to him slightly by way of greeting. He nodded in return. Sif just kept her arms crossed tightly, lips pressed together firmly and refusing to look at him. He let her sulk, thankful at least she was quiet.

An echo of his father’s words touched his lips and he found himself smiling just a little. “We enter this battlefield as individual men…and women. But we face a common enemy, a common goal.” Both Volstagg and Hogun looked up before listening fiercely. Sif didn’t shift but he knew he had her attention and Fandral was already nodding. “Words have been exchanged. Slaights have been committed. But they are a different enemy and cannot follow.”

Volstagg nodded. “Actions have been less than honorable.”

Hogan’s face grew even grimmer. “Words said best left never said.”

Sif huffed, her back becoming ramrod straight as she pushed her own feelings about the trickster to the side. This was a battle, headed by they: the warriors of Asgard. That was the focus. “Tempers have slipped beyond control.” She met his eyes now and glared. “And lies have been told.”

Loki’s lips twitched. “I do not regret trying to smite you on Midgard.” Something dark in his eyes told them quite plainly he wouldn’t stop himself from destroying them if they came near his children with ill intent again.

“But then the last couple of years hadn’t seen him at his best, either.”

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“Every warrior who enters this battle on this day is an AEasir warrior.” They turned as one as Thor took a few steps closer, Mjolnir on his belt and looking every bit like the king he would soon be. Odin’s words in a previous war blended together with Thor’s own. “Whether their ancestors can be traced back in time to Asgard. Vanasheim. Alfheim…or Jötunheim, it matters not. Respect is owed to all who enter as ally and so we, the men and women of Asgard, fight for glory. For honor. For Valhalla.”

Loki smirked. “That is one of my favorite speeches.”
Thor nodded, his hand briefly squeezing the back of his neck. “Mine as well, brother.”

Tony knuckled away a fake tear as he walked around them. “Man, that was too bro-mantic even for me.”

Loki spoke without looking at him. “So says the man who wept watching that cinematic event with the coveted piece of jewelry.”

The inventor immediately whipped around, protesting loudly, “I did not!”

“Then proceeded to watch it again from the beginning.” Loki merely lifted a single eyebrow and anyone watching was left with the impression that he wasn’t lying.

Tony glared and jabbed a finger in the trickster’s direction. “It’s called Lord of the Rings, asshat, and I’m never telling you anything ever again.”

Loki just calmly crossed his arms over his chest, clearly unimpressed. “As if you confided in me on the matter. I would expect you did so with Barton since he was shedding tears alongside you.” Clint didn’t even think before pulling out his crossbow. Loki boredly caught the arrow between two fingers and sent his classic ‘bitch, please’ expression back at him.

“Barton!” Loki didn’t even glance at Fury, knowing the director was objecting more to projectiles being unleashed indoors than for any concern for his wellbeing.

Hogun looked to Thor before asking, “Do we have a strategy?”

Thor glanced at Loki. He knew he was going to have to force Loki to yield some of the planning and set his jaw stubbornly to do precisely that. The trickster surprised him with a smirk and nodded. “Plan to your heart’s content. I’ll be too focused to assist you directly.”

Thor almost fumbled over the word before catching himself. “What will this t-…spell of yours do, Loki?”

Again Loki was impressed. It wouldn’t last, Thor just couldn’t help himself. His brother had a good heart, but he was tactless. It was the fact that Thor was trying that made forgiveness easy. Smiling wickedly, having been vague from the beginning on purpose. “I have no idea but it sounds impressive.”

That hadn’t been a lie either. He knew the theory, but the reality on a foreign world could be vastly different. Still he was using something this extreme for several reasons. This planet would never survive a drawn out fight. Not with the world eater thrown into the equation. Even if all focus was thrown to the Chitauri weapon first, there was still the possibility of Skrull or the Other slipping away. It could turn a short battle into a lengthy war that there was no time to indulge. Not with Thanos as a looming threat. Asgard couldn’t afford to have its attentions divided between two battlefields.

Every AEsir groaned, well used to hearing that since Loki rarely explained his spells. Every mortal looked horrified. “You’re going to-…”

Fury whipped around, demanding a response, “Is he kidding??”

General moaning commenced before Thor raised a silencing hand. “My brother has been a master of seidr for over a thousand years. If he feels this spell will help I trust him.”

Natasha gave him a curious look as she asked, “Did you trust him when he tried to kill
“No. But then I know better than to trust my brother when we stand on opposing sides.” Amusement tugged at Thor’s lip as he and Loki shared a reminiscent look. “Will you commence your spell in our midst or at a distance?”

“A distance.” Loki glanced at the map on the screen and pointed to a small set of hills. “There should suffice for my purposes, leaving here safe for the rest of you.” He sounded much more confident than he actually felt but he pushed his doubts to the side. Doubt and magic were never a good combination.

Thor nodded. “Then we should group together above the grounds.”

Loki nodded in return. “I can generate one shielding spell around the compound. It will provide your forces a few minutes to gather yourselves.”

Fury blinked. “A few minutes?” His voice rose in outrage steadily. “That’s it? You want to coordinate—…”

Thor cut Nick off, his voice ringing with authority. “A few minutes is as long as an AEsir warrior needs, son of Fury. You mortals may assist as is convenient for you but we will be ready.”

As heads bent to coordinate, Loki inclined his head to show the elves the corridor and lift to the outside. His attention was diverted as the elevator opened and Jane stepped out. She gave him a brave smile as she stepped to his side and took his hand, her thumb rubbing against the scar there. She looked up into his green eyes as he turned easily with a quirk of a smile. He was roaming over her face, cherishing and memorizing it. He reminded her softly, “Don’t forget.”

Jane pulled in a slow breath before exhaling slowly. “I know. When your shield falls I fall back, barricade the entrance with as strong a shield as I can make, and stay with Indel and Talia.”

He cupped her face with one palm, thumb brushing over her cheekbone. She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch. He could see the necklace Hela had gifted her, with the same runes and knew what mattered most to him would be protected. Reaching up for the lapels of his armor, Jane dragged him down and kissed him hungrily. They ignored Tony’s whistle and a few good natured chuckles from Thor.

Parting, panting against his lips. “Come back to me.”

Loki smirked and nuzzled her temple. “There is nothing to fear. This spell is easy enough and this battle will be over in a matter of minutes.” Seeing that there was still worry in her eyes he tried his best to reassure her. “I will return.”

He pressed a gentle kiss against her temple and with a last smirk turned. He walked up to a few elves, pointing out ideal positions for them. Jane just silently watched him for a moment, a tear tracking down her cheek before she quickly wiped it away. Sif and Natasha exchanged looks, standing to the side and waiting for the planning to conclude.

Loki was a master at deception, but Jane had grown just skilled enough to figure out when he was lying. His last few sentences, including the very last, had been a lie. Jane whispered as she continued watching him, wishing she was wrong when she knew she wasn’t. “…liar…”

Jane followed them up, Pepper right next to her and the SHIELD agents still clustered like lost sheep since there wasn’t anything to fight yet. Loki was mentally counting down in his head,
Jane holding on tightly to his hand and almost plastered to his side. They all looked up and out, Jane with dread as a very familiar shape could barely be seen in the distance and the air started to churn with static. “Oh God…”

Loki smirked at her. “Yes?”

Jane snorted and lightly smacked his arm. Pepper stepped closer to Jane as she asked, “What is that?”

Loki lifted an amused eyebrow in Pepper’s direction. “That is the source of your planet’s destruction if we fail.” Nothing pithy came to mind so Pepper settled for shooting him a dirty look.

The warriors had their eyes up but Loki was focused out. His sharp green eyes narrowed as a station wagon speeding through the desert, a trail of dirt and dust flying behind it, came to a crashing stop. It hit something, but it was a something that couldn’t be seen. Hissing, he walked forward a few paces as he opened his hand for Jane to release him. She stayed behind, not wanting to get in the way as he created the shield. “Thor, they’re already here. Get ready.” Thor nodded gravely.

Jane squinted, not able to see as far as Loki could. “Is that…Loki!?”

He glanced back at her, able to read from her expression what he should do as opposed to what he wanted to do. Grinding his teeth together in annoyance at the idiocy of the denizens on this planet, he threw a projection at the hapless mortal family.

Tony let his HUD fall in place, focused on what enemies he could find. “Great, I’ll see what we can see.” He shot into the air, sweeping in a circle around the compound. “JARVIS, give me readings. Movement. Anything.”

“Sir, I am detecting heat signatures but no visual confirmation.”

Tony chewed on the inside of his lip and did another circuit, watching the Avengers take position. Talking into the comms the others always wore into battle. “Huh. Guys, I think we got Klingons…and they’ve deployed their cloaking devices.”

Steve and Bruce shared a look. “Klingons?”

In the distance father, mother, and daughter staggered out of the wrecked station wagon. The interstate had been backed up for miles. A last minute decision to detour through the desert to cut down on travel time had come to an unexpected halt. “This way.” The mortals whipped around at Loki’s voice, the father stepping in front of his family protectively as the woman screamed. With the internet and news media, this may not be New York but it didn’t have to be. Loki’s armor alone was going to be recognizable for at least another decade. Loki sighed. “Do shut up. If you want to live, run.”

A clang of impact from behind caused the father to stutter forward a step, looking around wildly. “Wha—…”

Appearing behind them, snarling at them menacingly. “Run. Now.”

Instinct took over and all three of them surged forward. The skies darkened and churned and the sense of urgency increased. Loki knew the world eater had just arrived. He kept his projection moving, urging them on as a second clang filled the air behind them, kicking up another layer of dust. By now the family was running full tilt and Loki recalled his double to concentrate on the shield.
It all happened too fast for anyone to follow. Yet it was as if time had slowed down, a matter of seconds infinite. Those still wary were watching Loki closely, the demi-god with eyes shut and arms extended. A green field of magic crept outward to cover them like a dome. Bruce flinched as he looked around, the beginning of a scream in his throat and skin turning a rapid shade of green. Wolverine’s instincts sharpened, his adamantium claws appearing as his eyes darted to pinpoint what he was sensing.

Tony, face set and jaw tight, dove when what his sensors were reading made sense. He couldn’t say what made him decide to fly in front of Steve. Perhaps to show off. Perhaps just to irritate the soldier. As he did time moved from one act to the next. As he sped by a projectile shot through the air from nothing that could be seen, piercing the arc reactor of his suit…

…he had already landed on his back, staring upward as the casing fractured and an explosive force of energy from the reactor escaped upward.

There were several dead and many more injured SHIELD agents on the ground, the one projectile that felled Tony only the first of many. The magical force field locked into place as entire legions of Skrull soldiers dropped their camouflage and surged towards the mortals, stopped by Loki’s magical wall of protection. It wouldn’t hold for long. A few minutes at most and it certainly wasn’t powerful enough to shield them from the world eater. It was buying them enough time to gather themselves.

But then something happened that shouldn’t have. The energy from Tony’s reactor bounced off the field and returned to the origin. Pepper screamed and tried to fling herself forward, Jane quick to catch her friend and pull her back as the Avengers converged on Tony.

No one knew where she had come from, Hela was just suddenly there. Her green eyes moved as she tracked the continuous path of the energy established from start to the field and back again. Fandral blinked in surprise and softly breathed her name. Hela was oblivious to him at the moment, focused as she murmured to herself, “Clever, father. Very clever.”

“She’s?”

She didn’t look back at Thor as the Avengers moved to surround their fallen comrade. “You know my capabilities do not extend to those destined for Valhalla.” She had the power to maintain a soul in a body as Goddess of the Underworld, but she didn’t have the foothold in Valhalla like she did in Helheim and Niflheim. She would need the assistance of the Valkyries or one of the honorable dead to have any influence on Tony’s soul.

Thor’s face set in a combination of pride and grim acceptance. Medics pushed their way through the huddle, Hela’s hand clamping down on the nearest wrist. Another doctor ushered in a gurney, professional mask firmly in place. “Ma’am, please back away, this man needs urgent medical care.”

Hela slowly lifted an eyebrow. “Ma’am?”

A second Hela appeared next to the doctor, causing him to stumble back in surprise. “Do not presume that you can begin to grasp what has or is happening.”

Steve was pale but composed. “He saved my life, ma’am; please let them save his.”

Another Hela walked in front of Steve with a smirk. “I am saving his life, soldier.”

With a roar Hulk charged forward and Hela flashed in front of him. He didn’t pause except
to push her to the side. Hela dodged under his arm, grabbing his forearm and pushing back. He
growled and aimed a large fist at her head, she catching that wrist easily and smirking. He snarled
and forced himself forward, twin tracks digging into the ground from her feet. She whispered and a
small wall of her own magic appeared behind her as her skin flushed blue and her true strength
emerged, stopping their progress as she stood on said wall and pushed him back.

Hela snarled at him. “Are you trying to kill him?”

Hulk scowled at her. “Kill badness.”

Scowling back at him. “After Stark lives.”

Natasha knelt down in front of Hela who was still hovering over Tony, the citrine gem
around the trickster queen’s neck glowing. Hela had found many uses for the gem of reality. In this
case, she was using it to make her doubles as real as she was. Romanoff’s matter-of-fact tone
wavered enough to betray her regret. “He can’t live without his reactor.”

The queen looked up and smirked at the red-haired assassin. “And yet he isn’t dead.” Her
free hand traced along the metal edge. “The energy should have dispersed, his heart stopping and his
soul free to join the honorable warriors of Valhalla. And yet the energy is contained in a loop from
point to point.” Glancing up at the doctors. “Moving him will change the angle of impact, resulting in
a break in the loop and an instant death.”

Natasha looked up. “So when Loki created this he inadvertently saved Stark’s life.”

Hela’s smirk widened. “Magic is a part of us. Whether by intellect or by emotion, nothing
is done purely by accident. There are side effects, of course, but not for a spell such as this. Stark is
alive because Loki doesn’t want to let him go.”

Death was inevitable. It came for everyone eventually. It was a harsh truth that every
warrior learned from an early age. Good men, brave men fall in battle. A victory is hollow, built on
the bodies of the fallen. The fact that humans were mortal should have made the inevitable easier to
accept. It doesn’t. Not since Loki was a child had he freely, actively sought out a friendship. Those
of Alfheim he was friends with had been they seeking him out. Tony had been different. And now
was apparently his due time. Death was inevitable but Loki didn’t accept anything as inevitable.

Through the chaos he sought her out. A feisty, strawberry-blond siren being held back by
his beloved. Like water over land Loki moved, whispering softly to her. “You cannot pretend to be
surprised.” With an unrestrained scream Pepper turned, her palm flying towards his face. Loki caught
her wrist effortlessly, his expression unchanging. “The question becomes…what are you willing to
do to have him back?”

Words flew recklessly from her. “Anything!”

A smile of amusement curled his lip. “Anything? Such bold words.”

Jane was watching him closely, but she knew that look. He’d already decided. Tony Stark
was going to live and he would tug Pepper in whichever way it took to get her cooperation. But she
didn’t interfere, watching and listening as Pepper continued to speak carelessly to a man who could
magically hold her to her word. “And I mean them. I will do anything.”

Loki lifted an eyebrow in a pantomime of amusement. “Even remain at his side for the
remainder of his life?”

“Of cour--…”
Flicking a glance at Jane, indicating the longevity that she had signed herself up for when he’d freed her magic. “All 5,000 years of it.”

Pepper froze to stare up at him in shock. She’d never wished for that kind of longevity, in all honesty. She didn’t consider herself vain in that regard, to wish for eternal youth. But this was for Tony, and suddenly the hesitations were swept to the side. Slowly she nodded. “Yes.”

His hand reached out to hover over her head before casually pulling a strand of hair off her face. “You have but a thimble full of potential, little witch…but it is enough. You could probably exist on Midgard, blend in with the mortals…ahh but not Tony.” He couldn’t help the smile of amusement at the thought. “Your enchanter would more than just stand out. He would become as distant from humanity as I and Jane are. Would you do this for him? Would you swallow your fear to save his life…even if that means leaving Midgard behind?”

He was offering her a choice. But he’d also stolen the choice from her because she couldn’t let fear be the reason Tony died and Loki knew it. She squared her shoulders and sent him a firm look. “I’m Pepper Potts, Loki; there isn’t anything I can’t handle.”

Jane had such a long life ahead of her partially because of their connection, but also because with her magic free her well was simply that deep. Pepper was a drop in a bucket compared to Tony, who Loki could see outliving most AEsir. She had more personality than potential, but it would be enough to balance them. They would unlock each other’s potential and the inherent long life that went with it. He wouldn’t share a bond with either of them…he was just showing them the way.

Technically this was all Pepper’s choice because what he was doing didn’t need Tony’s approval. He led her over, Jane following at his heels anxiously. Hela looked up with a quirked turn of her lip before standing. She stopped long enough for two gestures. One stripped Stark of his suit and a second reinforced the shield before she faded from sight.

“Loki…we don’t have time.”

Loki’s lips quirked at Thor as he sank to his knees, Pepper doing the same above Tony’s head. With one hand he splayed his fingers carefully around the arc reactor and the other hand cupped the back of Pepper’s neck. “Just how many people do I call friend, brother?” Thor blinked in surprise. “I am making time.”

“You have lost, Jötunn runt.” Heads turned, the army parting for the Other to walk up to the barrier in slow, measured steps. Loki ignored him, closing his eyes to concentrate. “Your magic will wane for it will not last forever.”

Thor stepped forward, Mjolnir in hand. “Mind your tongue when addressing my brother.”

The army laughed and the Other sounded amused. “You must be the infamous thunderer I have heard this cowardly traitor utter so much about.” Sif stiffened but knew better than to say anything about her personal feelings on the matter. She also didn’t trust this creature not to say things just to spot a weakness.

Thor narrowed his eyes. “I will show you Mjolnr’s might and we will see who remains standing to laugh.”

Loki could feel more than just the connection Pepper was establishing with Tony. Through them both he could feel the thrum of the center of this world like a heartbeat. The earth was so alive, so protective. She was protective of her children and he now felt that protectiveness sweep through
him. Even as he guided Pepper soft power rose up from far beneath them, magic healing Tony in ways he was still centuries from learning.

Tony gasped, eyes shooting open before he sat up sharply. His hand came up to grasp at his chest, looking down in shock to see no reactor, just skin. Pepper threw her arms around him a second later and Jane laughed behind her hands. But Loki didn’t open his eyes, not noticing. Even with Tony healed Midgard was still there, reaching out to Loki and tendrils of her very essence wrapping around him.

Hela appeared behind Thor, leaning forward to whisper in his ear. “I’ve modified the shield not to shatter when you run through…you just won’t be able to return until it collapses.” She disappeared again as Thor slowly nodded.

Loki stood, surprise on his features. He had been certain Midgard’s heart wouldn’t aide him. That he would walk onto this battlefield and perish. But she willingly shared her fortitude with him to vanquish this foe and protect the multitudes. He could feel them all through her. Walking. Running. Breathing. Living. Billions of people scattered across the globe, so many of them ripe with potential and all of them so unknowingly, intimately connected to the mother here. But Jane was a beacon of amber light, set apart from them. No longer mundane and limited. She was ethereal. A goddess.

He didn’t feel Thor and the Avengers. Sif. The warriors 3. SHIELD. The light elves. All that he was aware of was the moment. This was right. These mortals were but children in need of protection. This was the point. Why he was here. Why he would fight. It was a glorious purpose…but it wasn’t a burden. It was a choice.

He could feel magic all around him, moving and tugging him. Ordinarily he was its master who exerted will over it, but now he understood this spell was unlike any other. He was magic’s instrument, not the other way around. His eyes glowed green and deepened, right hand lifting as magic manipulated his body. His hand formed a cupping position, fingers hooked into claws. His left hand moved to mirror its twin, the green of his eyes swirling and intensifying and he blew softly in the space between his fingers. As if blowing on kindling, a small flicker of green weakly winked into existence.

The teenage girl that was sandwiched protectively between her parents, all of them crouched behind a jeep, pulled out her phone and started the video.

Thor’s brow furrowed in confusion to see the small speck glowing in Loki’s palm, even as he glanced at Jane. “What is that, brother?”

“Call in the thunder…I will need it for the storm.”

At Loki’s soft command Thor took Mjolnir and aimed it towards the skies, the air thick with a storm as the clouds darkened and thunder rolled. “Surely you do not expect to vanquish them with a flame not even befitting a candle.”

Tony frowned, his arms around Pepper. “No offense, Locks, but it is kinda tiny.”

Loki’s voice sounded strange to his own ears, a blending of his voice with others. “It’s not the size. It’s how you use it.” Tony snorted.

“You will die, runt, for Lord Thanos’ pleasure…”

Thor didn’t even think as rage swept aside reason, beyond hearing as he charged forward.
The barrier offered him no resistance. The Other was surprisingly agile, nimbly flipping out of the way as the thunderer tore through the army. The warriors and Sif all gave battle cries and followed into the fray. Hela appeared next to Hulk and winked as the double in his way faded. With a feral grin and a roar he leapt to the attack. Wolverine took that as his signal and charged, plowing into the nearest Skrull. The elves stood their ground, calmly waiting to act as a barrier. S.H.I.E.L.D. agents were nervously in position, weapons drawn and waiting. Jane kept one eye on the shield. She would run when it fell, but she was also watching Loki closely.

Loki turned to focus on the Other, no one noticing Charles Xavier’s eyes widening as he heard and understood what no one here ever would. He could hear the heart of this world speaking through the trickster. A million voices, more, all speaking as one. “You have been judged a threat. You and your army will be vanquished, your numbers obliterated and your weapon destroyed.”

The Other bared his teeth, ignoring the fighting going on around him as he walked forward until the barrier stopped him. “And you, the Liesmith, would pretend to embody the mother of an entire realm. I am surprised you have not been struck down for your impertinence.”

A crooked smile curled Loki’s lip, a definite feminine tone to his voice as he slowly walked forward. “Foolish seer, do you understand nothing? He is the first child of a different mother to ask for my assistance…and I do enjoy his spirit, so much like my own. How could I refuse him?”

Thor launched himself into the air, bringing Mjolnir down with all his might. The ground shattered in a spiral pattern. Like a tidal wave, a rolling mass of dirt and debris sent hundreds of Skrull flying through the air. Either they bounced off the shield, were batted around by Hulk, or plummeted into a crater opening up around the thunderer.

The warriors all laughed, Fandral crowing as his sword worked for him. “Just like old times.”

Thor whipped his hammer around to launch himself. “Indeed.”

Loki’s left hand fell away, the tiny spark of green swirling and growing in size and brightness. A crash of thunder and the rain started to fall. But it wasn’t water than fell, pained hisses filling the air as Skrull armor started to burn from acidic drops of liquid. The Other pulled in a pained hiss through bloody teeth, his head moving from side to side as if to see what he still failed to understand. The spark grew and pulsed and they could feel a definite gravitational pull to it. There was weight and power to this spark. Lifting his right hand above his head. “And I, just as any good mother…will never turn away a child in need.”

As soon as he flattened his palm the spark exploded into an enormous funnel 3 miles wide, powerful winds scooping up the dirt and throwing it hundreds of miles into the air. Unlike any other tornado on earth before it, an endless darkness fed the top of the funnel, drinking in everything sent to it as if pulling water down an endless drain.

A few agents panicked and fled. Many more just stared upwards or outwards, shielding their eyes as they realized they couldn’t feel anything other than the accumulation of dirt in the air. They could feel the vibrations of the ground being churned by the winds, hear the nearly deafening sounds but the wind and rain didn’t touch them.

Volstagg ducked his head before slamming his axe around into the nearest Skrull. “By Odin’s beard this is worse than the fog he summoned!”

Thor whipped around, Mjolnir still pulling him and plowed through first one ship and then the other. Sparks and explosions were left in his wake, yet even in the midst of the tornado the wind
didn’t tug at him. The dirt made his eyes sting and the sheer power was deafening but this was no normal storm.

The Skrull were in a panic, trying to survive but losing traction. Many of them tried to flee but it was far too late. Nothing in its path could withstand the force, the winds unlike any seen on this planet before. The Other screamed at Loki. “IMPOSSIBLE.”

His eyes shifted between green and red as he retorted. “This Jötunn runt is the God of Chaos. Far be it from me not to live up to the title bequeathed by Asgard.”

In small groups, the army was swept away. Not even the Skrull could withstand the fury of chaos itself. Abandoning his staff the Other clawed at the ground to keep from being swept away, screaming. “Thanos defeated you once and he shall be victorious! I have seen it! I see your death, Liesmith!”

Loki’s arm whipped forward, passing through the shield but not shattering it, gripping the Other’s wrist. The Other cried out in pain, the trickster’s touch burning cold even though he was still AEsir pale. Loki’s mouth moved, words escaping softly. Yet even through all that was happening the Other still heard him. “Foolish seer. You understand nothing of the order of the universe. You have willingly blinded yourself, bastardizing your own gift so that even with eyes you cannot see. He is special.” The Other bared his teeth, swearing and screaming but he was ignored. “He is a gift. A gift to the nine from Yggdrasil herself, as all mages are. You have harmed that which the world tree treasures. There are severe penalties for such transgressions.” The Other was picked up off his feet, his only tether Loki who seemed unaffected by the strain. “You will be condemned to eternity in Niflheim as punishment for your crimes. As it is willed, so shall it be.”

Loki’s hand opened, releasing the Other who spun out of control through the vortex. Loki hooked his fingers and made a slashing motion. Usually only Thor could harness the power of the storm but this was not by definition Thor’s storm to control. Lightning descended from the center of the vortex and cut the Other in half, his screams cutting off sharply. The pieces were picked up along with the remnants of the supposedly unstoppable army. Thor and the warriors all shared proud grins as the last of the wreckage was swept away.

Loki looked towards the world eater with glowing green eyes, the funnel moving to engulf it. Currents of wind whipped the clouds into a frenzy, grasping and pulling and tugging at the weapon of destruction. The wind twirled and spun faster and faster, making it smaller and smaller. Then the funnel was gone. Suddenly. Impossibly. Twenty feet in front of Loki, a metallic rock hit the ground as his shield disintegrated. It was all that remained of the Chitauri created weapon that had never known defeat.

Clint’s jaw dropped as he stared at what little remained of the world eater. Somehow the storm had crushed it with more efficiency than a trash compactor. “Holy shit balls!”

Steve’s head jerked around as the skies just cleared. One second the tornado was there, the skies oppressively dark and the next it was all gone and the sun shining merrily. “Did you see that??”

Natasha shook her head and muttered under her breath in Russian. “We’re fortunate he’s on our side this time.”

“Son of a bitch…”

Each and every nerve in his body, physical and mystical, was screaming. Loki wasn’t surprised. He’d channeled more power through his body than he ever had before. Actually he was surprised he’d survived and hadn’t exploded when it released. He had no doubt if not for Midgard’s
heart he would have.

It all became a distant din of noise and movement. But he didn’t see it. He didn’t feel it. His entire being was focused on the metallic rock not more than twenty feet in front of him. In a clinical way he knew his body was struggling to compensate from the strain. A strain that could still kill him but he didn’t care. One last enemy to destroy was the only thought running through his mind, heart, and soul.

Thor came up to Loki’s right, a spike of concern going through him to see how unsteady Loki was on his feet. “Brother?”

Jane didn’t move closer. She knew what he needed without having to see his face. Revenge. Justice. Closure. They needed to be destroyed and he needed to do it. She glanced at Thor and spoke softly, “Give him your hammer.”

Tony was making a show of checking that he had all of his digits and limbs attached before asking, “Did that seriously happen?”

Thor didn’t turn in Jane’s direction as he spoke, continuing to watch Loki worriedly, “Lady Jane, only I can lift it.”

Sif dusted herself off, sheathing her sword and walking up to them. “He has to be worthy to wield Mjolnir, Midgardian.”

“Sif.”

Jane’s eyes flashed as she glared at Sif, but addressed Thor. “Let him try.”

Loki felt more than heard someone step to his right but he only had enough attention for the metal remains. A calloused hand lifted his arm slightly and he felt a handle slide along the palm. Brow furrowing slightly, on reflex he closed his hand around what was in his hand. It had weight, but it wasn’t really burdensome. The hand moved to his shoulder as if to steady him as the weight of the hammer increased slightly.

Gasp.

He glanced down to see that he was holding something and his fingers twitched to get a feel for it. There was weight there. Strength. His eyes moved back to the metallic rock, not even realizing he’d moved until the hammer was coming down with a feral roar. It made his throat hurt and his ears ring but there was something so satisfying in the act. He did it twice more because he could.

“Kid has a good yell, I’ll give him that.” Logan had already pulled out a cigar, taking a slow inhale.

Charles rolled up next to the other man, sounding amused. “Actually, Logan, he does remind me of you a little.” Wolverine looked back down and just stared at Xavier.

The teenager who had been recording this entire time whipped her phone around, talking excitedly. “Totally hot God of Mischief saves Earth—bite my ass, Allyson, this totally tops your vid of your cat.”

Clint still had his bow in hand, making a face. “Dude…that rock is bleeding.”

Tony made a very similar face when he saw what the archer was talking about. “Oh,
Loki staggered back, letting whatever was in his hand fall to the ground as he clutched at his stomach. Strong hands grasped his shoulders to keep him on his feet. A petite form stepped against his chest and wrapped arms around his waist, her scent identifying her effortlessly. *Honeysuckle. Jane.* He returned the gesture and ducked his head to touch hers.

Sound was becoming muddled and distorted. Detachedly he knew what was happening and it was just as he said, he didn’t trust SHIELD and certainly not without his magic to protect him. He teleported the pair of them down to the rooms granted him, knowing he was going to pay the price for it. Jane gasped in surprise but he didn’t bother to explain. He wouldn’t be helpless in front of them. Jane was safe. Jane would protect him.

His knees buckled and the world went dark.

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**Author's Notes:**

*Yay, good guys are triumphant. Now, don't think I'm gonna rush to the second battle. Not my style. I promise it won't be another 60 chapters to get there but way too much strings to have the Thanos show down just yet.*

**Next:**

*Consequences of magic; Politics*
MIDGARD

Hogun and Volstagg stood side by side, staring out into the quiet desert of this mortal world. They had both seen many things and followed Prince Thor onto battlefields faithfully from the time he was old enough to be acknowledged as an AEsir warrior. Yet neither of them had seen anything like that before. They’d seen magic before. They’d fought magic users before and had never been impressed. Now they were. It brought into question everything that had ever been said about magicians.

Might would always be greater than magic. Magic was a decided woman’s art and an unworthy, cowardly skill for an AEsir warrior. Words that had been said on Asgard for generations. Lord Odin held both, and was revered as one of the greatest warriors because he had entered battles and contests of strength and defeated his enemies without it. Loki was incapable of the same.

Loki had always stood apart from Asgard because he wasn’t strong enough. His sword work wasn’t as fluid and his tactics were always aimed to slip from a forward attack to the more sly skills. He was different. Unique. There had been no prize brought forward for the other warriors to see and acknowledge him as a warrior. His status had been acknowledged by the All-Father without it, and so there was still doubt.

Mjolnir contradicted that doubt. Mjolnir would select none but those worthy of the throne of Asgard, and no AEsir would ever believe that someone worthy of the throne would not be an AEsir warrior. It had not escaped their notice that Fandral had clearly come to a decision concerning Loki without them. He had disappeared into the human facility as soon as the battle had concluded and they could only assume he remained at the mage’s side.

Volstagg nodded slowly. “We should celebrate our victory.”

Hogun’s expression remained grim. “It does not feel like our victory.”

Smiling and chuckling softly after pondering for a moment. “Nay, it t’was. It was Prince Loki’s and so we shall celebrate his accomplishment.”

The grim warrior’s expression didn’t shift. “He is no longer a prince.”

Volstagg shrugged after a moment. “He is found worthy of kingship. Even if Asgard never acknowledges him again I shall.” They both knew AEsir society wouldn’t acknowledge anything not declared by the throne. But then neither of them had ever thought very highly of that part of Asgard.

His grim expression lightened slightly as they both turned. “Aye.”

Thor watched his comrades walk away, he presumed to feast. He nodded slightly. It was a magnificent victory in his opinion.

“What was that about the whole ‘he must be worthy to wield it’ thing?” The question Tony asked lightly even if the topic was much deeper than that. Turning, Thor sent a curious look to Tony as the inventor stepped up next to him. The cleanup was remarkably minor compared to what they were expecting. One shell-shocked family to shuttle back home. Fifteen agents dead and another twenty with injuries. Considering Fury had been anticipating a slaughter it could have been a lot worse. As soon as the dust had settled SHIELD got to work while Tony continued to preen at his
wonderfully solid chest. But Tony’s mind was currently focused on that big jaw dropping moment
with Thor’s hammer that he just wasn’t getting. To him it was just a hammer. Shrugging at the
thunderer as he asked, “What does Locks have to be worthy of to hold your hammer?”

“Ah.” Thor looked thoughtful for a moment before putting his hammer on the ground.
“Try to lift it, but do not be surprised if you cannot.”

Tony didn’t move. He didn’t even consider it. Thor was crazy strong and built like a
Buick. Loki may be as skinny as a toothpick but he wasn’t a light weight either. Gesturing to his
currently suit-less body. “In my suit I might be able to match you guys in strength but not like this.”

Thor waved his hand slightly. “Nay, it is not muscle that allows for those worthy to lift it.
Try, metal man.”

Rolling his eyes, Tony reached down and tugged, not at all surprised when it didn’t move.
It felt like he was trying to lift a stone monolith. “There. See.”

Thor nodded again, more understanding in his blue eyes. “Aye, I do.” Neither of them
noticed Sif standing at a distance, watching and listening. He put the hammer back on his belt as if it
weighed next to nothing, deciding to reveal to Tony his discovery since the mortal claimed his
brother as a friend. “Mjolnir is enchanted by my father.”

“Dude with the eye patch.”

Thor’s face grew grim instead of amused. “I do not suggest saying such to his face if you
intend to accompany us to Asgard, friend Stark. My father is not a man who forgives easily.”

Tony snorted, remembering all the subtle and not so subtle stories Loki had told him. Even
indirectly, it was easy for him to hear the part Odin had played in festering the bitterness and self-
doubt that plagued his friend. “At all, you mean.” But it was also Tony’s impression that big daddy
didn’t have a whole lot of respect for humans so maybe being unforgivably rude was expected.

But Thor was already focused on getting his point across. “Father found me unworthy of
the throne and for my actions of starting war with Jötunheim I was exiled to Midgard.”

He knew that name. “That’s the frost giant world, right?”

“Aye.”

Tony blinked in surprise, his head jerking around. “Wait, didn’t your bro try to destroy
them right after you?”

Thor nodded again slowly. “He tried but did not succeed.”

He felt a bit bad for Loki. Daddy issues on top of more daddy issues. One dad was a
popsicle who was a real piece of work, the other one apparently born with a frozen heart. “Hmm…
sensing a pattern here.”

Thor ignored him. “Until I proved my worth, I was mortal in my exile and could no more
wield Mjolnir than you can.”

Tony cocked his head slowly, “Your dad must think everything with you guys is solved
with a time out.”

The thunderer blinked blankly for a moment before nodding as if he understood what
Tony meant. “He was right, I was unworthy.” Flipping the handle over, running his fingers over the runes engraved. “The enchantment states that whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor.” He may not be able to use runes the way that Loki could, but like his brother he was forced to learn them. Releasing it again. “Mjolnir found my brother worthy.”

Tony shrugged as he asked, “Which means what?”

Looking at the distant sunset, feeling pride blossom in his chest. “That Loki is as worthy of the throne of Asgard as I am.”

Tony’s eyebrows went straight up. That was news to him. Not the worthiness part, he’d figured that out a while back with the whole saving-his-life-in-Miami thing. That Thor figured that out for himself surprised him. “Whoa. Go Reindeer Games.”

Thor’s brow furrowed as he looked at the mortal again, tone perplexed. “Why do you continue to mock him?”

Shoving his hands in his pants pockets and grinning. “It’s a nickname, not mocking, Pointe Break. I give everybody nicknames.”

Thor’s tone turned grave with warning. “You should be cautious.”

“Cautious?”

Again Thor nodded slowly. “Loki is not under Asgardian rule at the moment, for he has not decided if he wishes to remain one of us…and I now understand why. Less he were to declare open war on Midgard or threaten subjugation again, father has no power over him should you offend him enough that he challenges you to combat.”

Tony wasn’t worried. Thor may have known the trickster longer but he was comfortable in his friendship with Locks. Sure, the demi-god had buttons that could be pressed just like anybody else, but the man had a damn good sense of humor about it most of the time. Still… “What the hell does that have to do with me calling him Reindeer Games?”

“If I assume that it is an insult, how do you think Loki views it?”

Tony rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to tell the thunderer exactly why Loki would grasp a concept Thor wouldn’t, cut off by a feminine voice behind both of them. “Tony. When I said we needed to talk, I meant it.”

Stark grimaced as Pepper walked calmly out of the elevator and held open the doors. Thor nodded to her slightly in respect. “Lady Pepper.”

Pepper diverted her attention from throwing Tony a death stare to bowing. “Prince Thor.”

Tony grimaced and ate up the distance, following her onto the elevator. No way was he going to start doing that to the thunderer. “Yeesh, Pep. Stop. He’s Thor. Mighty Thunder. Go Hammer. Don’t start doing the bowing thing or I’ll have to start doing it.” Pepper just sighed but let him shoo her onto the elevator.


Jane sighed at G’dath, the two women standing in the opposite side of the bedroom, speaking softly. The elven healer was less than thrilled with Loki but the deed was done. Jane had
shifted her focus to doing whatever they could to make him as comfortable as possible. “Why did I look forward to that title once?” G’dath turned to cough a chuckle into her palm. Turning her brown eyes to look at Indel and Talia hopping quietly next to one another before asking, “Yes?”

It wasn’t late yet, which is why she wasn’t about to budge about bedtime. These two needed the schedule Loki had established and she was going to follow it. Indel chirped hopefully, “Can we stay up?”

Jane shook her head. “No.” She didn’t explain further and she knew by now she didn’t have to.

Talia pouted before inquiring softly, “Can we sleep here?” Indel started nodding rapidly in agreement.

Jane knew why. They wanted to share with Loki because they were worried. A smile of understanding crossed Jane’s face, knowing she certainly wasn’t going anywhere until Loki finally woke up. “Okay.”

A knock at the main door caused everyone to stiffen as the elves all hissed. The door opened a second later without pausing for a reply and a figure entered the living room. Thor paused in the bedroom doorway mid-step as he assessed the room. It wasn’t the expressions on their faces that caused the horror to spread across his face.

Loki was gaunt, worse than when he appeared on earth to attack New York. Deep, dark circles lined under his eyes, his cheekbones were prominent over his sunken cheeks and he looked so very fragile. Unconsciously Thor’s voice softened. “What--…”

G’dath understood magic better than any of them and wasn’t as surprised to see him in this condition. She was pissed off, but unsurprised. Magical backlash was a bitch, especially when one doesn’t disperse a spell properly or tries to use a spell beyond their limit. In either case there was always a price to be paid. In this case as he naturally absorbed back what little magic his body could withstand, his physical strength was sacrificed to resist over absorption. His current state wouldn’t kill him, but it was going to be a very slow process for him to regain what was lost.

The elven healer blinked back her instincts first, finding enough will to give the thunderer an amused look and asked, “Did you expect Loki to just walk away unscathed from such a response?” Thor made no further comment but then she noticed something she had overlooked. He wasn’t surprised. In fact, if she was reading him correctly, he’d expected and feared it. She realized this prince wasn’t as ignorant concerning the possible price of magic as he pretended to be.

“Are you our uncle?” Indel’s voice caused Thor to look down at the small child peering back up at him.

Thor took note that Indel definitely had Loki’s eyes. He nodded slowly, his mind acknowledging this little boy was his nephew. “Aye.”

Talia peered cautiously over Indel’s shoulder. “Did you let papa sleep in your bed when he was a fox?” He was curious why Hela didn’t mention, even in passing, his little niece. But then Thor could readily acknowledge that Hela would eternally remain a mystery to him.

Jane tried desperately to keep her lips together, swallowing a tickle. Fenris lifted his head from his post guarding the bed where Loki slept, as if curious to the response. Thor nodded again. “Aye, as a child your fader enjoyed shifting his form.” It was unconscious, the use of the AEsir word for father had just slipped in.
Talia slowly frowned as she asked, “You called his magic tricks?”

Indel’s frown matched hers. “And said he wasn’t an AEsir warrior?”

“And ignored him?”

“And big sister?”

Thor looked desperately at Jane who just crossed her arms over her chest and raised a single eyebrow. She was not about to defend him, having wondered each of those things over the past few years. Seeing there was no help in that corner he nodded reluctantly. “Aye.”

He jolted slightly in surprise as both children leapt, landing on each of Thor’s feet before scurrying behind Jane, hiding. Indel peered back out with a scowl and stuck out his tongue before hiding again. Jane almost felt bad for the hurt look that crossed Thor’s face. Almost. She shouldn’t encourage it, but she knew if Loki had been awake he would have clapped in delight.


Indel pouted up at Jane. “If we have to.”

She smiled a little at him. “You have to.” This time they both pouted as they obeyed, pulling out a pair of pajamas SHIELD had been kind enough to supply.

Thor immediately looked to the healer for clarification, “Will he need to rest long?”

G’dath arched an eyebrow. “Considering that spell should have killed him I should think weeks.” Not that she thought he would be unconscious for that long, but she thought he might be bedridden for that long. Thor jerked sharply, blue eyes moving with more concern over Loki’s still form.

Jane could read the self-chastisement and headed it off, reassuring Thor softly. “You couldn’t have stopped him, Thor. His mind was made up.”

“If I had known…” He trailed off on his own, at a loss with what he wanted to say.

Her lip quirked slightly but there wasn’t bitterness there. Loki was without boundaries unless he chose to heel to them and she’d learned to love that about him. He could and would do what he wanted when he wanted to do it. There was no stopping him, especially if he chose to hide it. “I didn’t figure it out until it was too late, he didn’t tell anyone.”

Thor’s voice remained mystified. “I do not understand why Loki handles matters in such a way.”

Jane understood but she wasn’t about to say it, not to Thor. Likely she would never tell anyone. Loki still was and probably always would be wrestling with insecurity of his own self-worth. A choice of someone he loved or himself, it was an effortless choice. She looked back down at the little imps staring back up at her. “Come on, let’s get you two tucked in.”

Indel shot a questioning look over his shoulder, “Is he staying here?”

“Shh…” Jane picked up each one in turn, helping them crawl into the bed. Fenris got up and moved around to not be in the way, sitting down and staring up at Thor. The half-grown wolf pulled his lips back to display an impressive set of teeth but made no sound. Then with a ‘whuff’ he lightly leapt to the end of the bed, getting comfortable over Loki’s feet.
G’dath exchanged a subtle look with Jane who shook her head slightly, telling her without words that they’d be just fine. The elven healer nodded and took her leave, pausing in the hallway outside of the quarters to look to the right. Fandral raised his chin slightly but didn’t move an inch, his self-appointed task obvious. Until his prince was back on his feet he wasn’t moving.

Back inside Thor seemed to be considering something before nodding slowly. “I will carry him, then.” Jane looked up slowly even as he continued speaking. “Now that our foe has been vanquished Asgard must be prepared for what comes next.”

Jane could only imagine the meltdown Loki would have if she allowed that to happen. She kept her voice quiet, tucking each rug rat in bed. “You can go back to Asgard anytime, Thor, but you are not moving Loki unless he agrees to it.”

Surprise flashed across Thor’s face. “I cannot leave my brother behind, Jane, but Asgard needs preparing.”

She just shrugged and pulled up a chair for herself. “Then send one of the warriors. He’s not moving.” She didn’t have the opportunity to sit, Thor’s words freezing her.

“Jane I have known my brother for a thousand years—…”

She stiffened as she turned, arms crossed over her chest. “If you’re about to go into a speech about knowing him better you can stop right there. If even a quarter of the stories I’ve been told are true…and trust me, I know they’re all true…then you don’t know him at all.”

“Tales?”

She glanced at the two children meaningful. “Tales I’m not going into here.” She shifted her shoulders a little. “Loki would be beyond pissed if you muscle your way into this, assume you know best, and take him to Asgard without letting it be his decision.”

Thor assumed her concern was to Loki’s safety. “I will protect him, Lady Jane, I vowed it and I meant it.”

Lifting a single eyebrow, unconsciously mimicking Loki. “Last time I checked you can’t be in three places at once.”

“What do you mean, Jane Foster?” He asked as his brow furrowed.

“I mean…” She pointed to Loki, then Indel, and then Talia in turn. “You can’t promise all of their safety at the same time. That was the vow you made, correct?”

Thor seemed almost reluctant to admit that she was right, but after a moment he sighed softly and replied, “Aye.”

Keeping her tone firm but neutral. “Either you stay here and send your friends to take care of Asgard. Or you go instead. Until he’s awake I’d even fight Hela trying to move him.”

“Glad to hear it.”

They looked over at Hela, Thor’s voice colored with frustration and his expression pained. “Niece…”

Hela waved him off, crossing the room in a few paces. As if she would side with him over another female. Kneeling, she reached out with a tentative magical probe and recoiled sharply with a
flinch. Anyone else would be dead. As it was she wouldn’t even be able to spoon feed him magical donations without causing excruciating pain and mystical damage. This she hadn’t planned for. As much as she loved to believe she was prepared for every eventuality, something always happened to surprise her. It happened too often to Loki as well.

She considered the matter very carefully. There was always a way and Loki was resilient, she just had to find the right answer. Fenris lifted his head to ‘whuff’ at her. Hela tilted her head slightly, giving him a thoughtful look. She looked back down at Loki before a devious look crossed her face. It would work, it would just take careful planning.

Jane frowned slightly. “Hela?”

Hela turned before smiling brightly. “I will return in a few hours. I’ll need to borrow Mischief then.”

Blinking slowly, knowing it was never good when Loki did that. “Um…okay.”

“Who is Mischief?”

Jane glanced at Thor distractedly. “Loki’s imaginary friend. Creating Mischief now won’t hurt him, will it?”

Now Hela pouted the slightest bit. “Jane…you know me better than that. Mischief will be fed my magic, not Loki’s. I simply need the…hmm, blueprints from Loki, as it were.”

Both of Jane’s eyebrows rose as she asked, “You can do that?”

Hela grinned and winked. She was doing quite a bit more than she was admitting to Jane but that was what the gem of reality was for. A decision had to be made and since she wasn’t going to listen to Loki later whining about not consulting him she was taking this approach. She pushed herself back up, pausing after a considered moment. “Do not let the little ones give him any of their magic.”

Indel pouted from the covers, sitting up. “Being without magic hurts.”

Hela was almost matter-of-fact in her explanation. “If you give him magic before I can fix him it will hurt him more.”

Now Talia sat up, worry on her face as she asked, “Papa’s broken?”

Hela held her index finger and thumb an inch or so apart. “Just a little bit. Mischief can help me fix him, I just need to take care of a few things first.”

“Oh.”

Effecting a stern expression before speaking to both of them. “I need you both to promise me not to give him your magic.”

“You promise.” Indel spoke the words and Talia nodded silently.

Hela was thoroughly unimpressed with a promise like that from these two. Mentally they could be promising anything, so it wouldn’t be a lie. “You promise what?”

Indel tilted his head slightly as if he were confused. He wasn’t and Hela knew it. “We promise not to give him magic.”
Again a very vague response. ‘Him’ could be any male of their unspoken choosing. Thor. Fury. Fenris. Hela did admire this little one’s intelligence, though. He would rival Loki in that department one day. If Loki did decide to return to Asgard Odin would be horrified that there were now two of them. Her eyes narrowed at Indel who was trying to look innocent and not like the mischievous sprite he was. “I want you to repeat this exact promise to me: tell me your name, then say I promise not to give any magic to Loki until Hela says I can do so.” Two lips stuck out before reluctantly both of them obeyed.

“I’m confused.”

Hela rolled her eyes and slipped past her boulder of an uncle, asking over her shoulder, “When are you not, uncle?”

Thor turned, frowning. “Niece, was that truly necessary?”

Hela turned in the doorway that separated the living room from the bedroom, leaning against the frame and arching her brow at him. “Would you accept Loki making that first promise to you?”

“No.” The thunderer didn’t even have to pause to consider before answering. He knew enough of Loki’s sly nature that if the promise wasn’t specific it was as substantial as a cloud.

She shrugged as if her logic was obvious. “Then why would you accept it from his son and daughter?”

He nodded after a moment of consideration. “A valid point.” This time she made it to the living room before Thor’s question paused her again. “Who is this Mischief?”

Hela turned and smirked. “I will answer that on the condition that you give Jane a detailed explanation for why you were in the healing rooms for a month when you were 402.”

Thor’s eyes widened before he practically fled in panic. Hela grinned brightly and cackled softly. A mischievous spark ignited in Jane’s eyes, commanding the trickster queen softly. “Spill.”

Hela gave Jane a startled expression before shaking her head and asking, “Spill what?”

Jane hid a laugh in her palm, knowing that particular turn of phrase went right over the other woman’s head. “It means tell me.”

Giving Jane a mystified look by tilting her head. “Why would ‘spill’ mean speak?”

Jane shrugged before answering. “I didn’t make it up, I just repeat it.”

After a second of thought Hela shrugged as well. “Ah. Unless he annoys me I plan to save that story for a special occasion…like his name day celebration. Oh! His coronation feast would be perfect.” Grinning evilly Hela vanished.

ASGARD

Typically the court of Asgard was held during the day, ending well before sunset but these were special circumstances. The palace would be hosting a large feast, filled with courtiers, nobles, and warriors. Among them would be the visiting queens of Vanaheim as an introduction of the new Queen to Asgard. Since a feast always led to a great deal of drinking, court was held prior to the event.
Odin thumped his staff against the floor, sitting on his throne regally and those assembled quieted. “Asgard welcomes Queen Sigyn of Vanaheim.”

Sigyn nodded to Odin in turn, her crown a subtle band of copper to identify her new position without being considered extravagant. “Vanaheim greets the All-Father of Asgard.”

He didn’t know much of Sigyn yet, but he greatly approved of Larnvidia’s replacement just at a glance. “Before court is dismissed for the day, so that Asgard and Vanaheim may celebrate this occasion, there is one final matter to settle before the eyes of Asgard. We have all fought many wars. Warrior against warrior. But we are AEsir warriors, and so a battle must be met with honor. As a matter of honor, there is a line of distinction between a warrior of a race and a denizen.” There were soft murmurs of agreement, the warriors all silent and listening closely. “One edict created does not honor that line, and so it will be altered appropriately. From thence forward, no child or non-warrior of dark elf decent will be held culpable for the crimes of those that came here and attacked without honor. They will be brought peaceably before the throne as is right for all who enter our great realm.” Word would spread quickly through the ranks of the guard. Their personal feelings on the matter were of no consequence. Failure to follow the corrected edict would meet justice before the throne…and Odin would be unforgiving. Standing up, his voice carrying. “Let us feast!”

A roar of approval filled the air; Asgard never needed much convincing for such events. Soon food and wine flowed through the feasting hall. Rather than sit at the high table by himself, Odin walked amongst those here.

Not even an hour into the evening and the Queen found him. “Lord Odin.”

He nodded to her in echo of her greeting. “Lady Sigyn.”

She held a goblet in her hand, filled with water. “I was idly curious but…I did not see your sons present.”

Odin gave her his full attention. “Sons, lady?”

A very subtle smirk pulled at Sigyn’s lips, eyes amused. “You have not officially announced Prince Loki is alive but it is known through Alfheim…and your people talk much after enough mead loosens their lips.”

If she had said it was known through Vanaheim it would have made more sense to him. But there was no denying that she wasn’t asking for verification. She knew Loki was alive so there was no point in playing such games. “My sons are settling a matter for Asgard before returning.”

She nodded, glad politics were being set aside. She had a point in approaching him and she would rather get to it and retire from this ‘noise’ as soon as it wouldn’t be considered impolite. “I see. Will there be need for Vanaheim’s assistance in the future?”

That surprised Odin enough that he asked almost without thinking, “To whom have you been speaking with, Lady Sigyn?” Not that the question would actually betray his thoughts, his expression carefully schooled.

Her eyes moved in a sweeping gesture. “A few of the noble here…and your granddaughter.” The edict that locked Hela out of Asgard applied to Asgardians alone. Sigyn could have said Hela’s name without breaking the spell as a Vanir but as with most dignitaries, she attempted to follow the laws and customs in place even if she didn’t agree with them.

Odin held in a sigh. Of course Hela was involved. If it wasn’t Loki involved in a scheme,
it was her. He was curious as to why Hela would take an interest in a Vanir queen. “She is known to you?”

Sigyn nodded in affirmative and took a sip. “It was her assistance that allowed my current success. I am a light elf, even as I am Vanir, we repay favors owed.”

Indeed they did. It was perhaps the one trait that light elves and AEisir shared. Neither of them abided being in debt to another and sought to settle the matter as expeditiously as possible. But her question wasn’t an idle one. She knew Asgard was about to go to war and was offering their aide to settle the debt. “Asgard may need to call upon Vanaheim’s warriors in the future.”

She nodded graciously but was very specific in her reply. “We are at Prince Loki’s disposal.”

Again he was surprised, asking softly, “Only my son’s?”

Sigyn studied the other monarch silently before clarifying. Vanaheim and Asgard were in a constant state of flux between war and peace. It was not often that they joined forces on the battlefield, they as with all the other realms preferring to handle their own affairs. “The favor is owed to his daughter, who has graciously gifted it to him.” She paused to let him absorb that before nodding to him again. “Lord Odin.”

He nodded in reply, a clear signal between the two of them that the conversation was concluded. “Lady Sigyn.”

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Author's Notes:

Before Hela can focus on Loki, she has some unfinished business to deal with. I wonder who.
((Looks innocent))

Next:

Conversations of contingencies: Lady Death deals with a couple of thorns in her side
Chapter 70

MIDGARD

“Tony.”

Tony didn’t turn at Pepper’s voice, still busy preening in front of a mirror. It had felt like decades since he had last considered himself a whole man. “Whatever it is, I didn’t do it.” Then he paused to frown slightly and corrected himself. “Well, I probably did but I’ll pay to fix it. There, problem solved.” All but ripping off his shirt, turning with arms spread wide. “Will you look at this chest?!”

Pepper had seen Tony shirtless a thousand times over. And that was before they were even dating. Yet she couldn’t help the brief flush that made her cheeks burn. Tony Stark was obscenely confident in his attractiveness, but it was a well-founded confidence. “Tony--…Tony!” He grinned wolfishly and stalked towards her, she immediately moving to keep the sofa between them. She fled and he followed, a merry chase ensuing around the piece of furniture. It didn’t take him too long to catch her, he dragging her close. She braced herself with hands against his chest. “Tony stop!” He was still grinning, pleased he’d won. She frowned just a little, almost curious. “Did you even wonder how that happened?”

He shrugged and felt like crowing. “Hey, it pays to have a God of Mischief in your corner.”

“And you don’t think there might be some kind of catch?”

That paused him for a moment. But only a moment before he shrugged. “When sleeping beauty wakes up I’ll ask him.” He remembered Loki mentioning once in passing that big spells required a big nap afterwards. And judging by AEsir reactions, that was a monumental spell. He snagged her wrist, pressing her palm against where his arc reactor used to be. She had been the only one he trusted near his reactor. “Come on, Pep, feel.” Instead of taking the invitation to take this to a lustful scene Pepper tugged firm enough that Tony obeyed and let her go. He watched her walk towards the couch, her expression somber enough that he didn’t even offer a typical innuendo. “Okay I’m pretty sure this makes me look hotter…” She sat down and he frowned. “Pep?”

“Tony--..please sit down.”

“Mood: effectively dead.” Then with a sigh he shrugged and sprawled next to her on the sofa. “Alright.”

Pepper wasn’t quite fidgeting but it was close enough that it had his attention. “Okay…you know about Jane’s increased longevity thanks to Loki?”

He wondered if it was wrong that he was turned on when Pepper started saying long, formal words like longevity. Shrugging since Jane’s future immortality with Loki wasn’t any of his business. “Uh, yeah.”

She spoke quietly, hesitantly. “We have just as long now.”

Tony blinked blankly for a moment, his left hand brushing across the place where his reactor used to be before his eyes turned distant. “No…”

Pepper winced, struggling to find some way to explain why she had to do this without
getting his permission. “Tony--…”

“I get a title!” His excited cry had her whipping her head around.

“What??”

Jumping to his feet, Tony started pacing and talking out loud. “Something catchy. Something awesome, like me. Something like…Tony Stark: God of Tech.”

She looked up at him, stunned as she watched him move. “You’re not mad.”

Tony gave her an incredulous look. “Why would I be mad? Hundreds of years of people falling over my awesomeness.” He started talking faster as his excitement increased. “It’ll be great. Can you imagine how much I can do with Stark Enterprises in a thousand years?” That had been his one worry. That he would die before he could repay what he felt he owed the world. He’d have enough time to settle accounts a thousand times over. It wasn’t even a subtle grimace that crossed her face and it wasn’t a pretty look on her. It froze his pacing as he asked, “What was that face for?”

She winced now. “That would be the catch.” Tony’s expression remained patient, waiting as she continued. “We can’t stay here.”

“Well I wasn’t planning on bunking with Nick permanently.” Her expression didn’t lighten any. Now a full frown followed as he demanded, “Who said what?”

Pepper looked down at her hands. “Loki. He said we would need to leave earth.”

“Locks is a cool guy but I’m not moving in with him.” Tony shuddered, but not for the obvious reason. “Stuck up in Asgard for the rest of eternity sounds like hell since those guys really don’t like smart, awesome peeps. Not to mention they practically live in the renaissance age. I’d go crazy inside a week without tech.” Gesturing almost wildly. “And what am I supposed to do about JARVIS and Dummy and-…” Pepper didn’t look any more hopeful and with a sigh Tony took her hands and pulled her to her feet, holding them between his palms. “Look, Pep, once Locks wakes up I’ll get the lo-down and go from there. Until then let’s, I don’t know, enjoy it?” A slow smile curled her lips.

It was some minutes later when heavily involved lips parted in surprise. “Wait, did you say we?”

HELHEIM

Sif moaned and sat up, her head pounding. She blinked and threw herself to her feet, ignoring the pain and vertigo as she looked around in confusion. She had no idea where she was or how she’d gotten here. “Where the--…”

“Did you mourn him?”

She knew that voice. The warrioress pulled in a slow breath and turned around, dread filling her even as she realized where she was. Stepping solidly on her fear as she addressed Hela who was watching her with veiled amusement in her green eyes. “What?”

An eyebrow arched as Hela held out a hand, a ghostly servant filling her goblet before disappearing through a wall. “My words were simple enough. Loki. When you believed him dead did you mourn him?”
On reflex Sif reached down for her sword, jerking down to look at her empty sheath. She looked back up as Hela lovingly caressed the blade resting on a table next to her throne with her skeletal hand. Growling up at the queen. “What does it matter?”

Hela’s lip twitched, well used to defensive fools. “That means yes. Yet instead of being relieved to find him living you seem angry and irritated with that fact.”

“It was a lie!”

“Ah, so you would prefer him to be dead then.” Hela tilted her head slightly when the reply confirming that didn’t immediately spring forward. In fact, Sif grimaced. “No. You don’t want him dead but you’re not happy with him living, either. I will tell you what such conflict makes you, Sif.” Hela rose to her feet, slowly stepping down from her throne in measured steps. “A bitter, jealous, petty little bitch that I would rather kill than allow near the throne of Asgard.”

Sif refused to show weakness, refused to betray that she was always on edge around the trickster queen because the other woman made her feel like she was in perpetual danger. “Are you certain you do not describe yourself?”

Hela studied the warrior woman and slowly circled around her. She ignored the insults, her mind already set on her course. She respected Sif’s skills…and that was about all she respected concerning her. “You have left me in a very precarious position, Lady Sif.”

“How is that your concern?”

Irritation flashing in Hela’s eyes. She appreciated Tony’s lack of formality because he was amusing. For the rest there was a very short list of people that she allowed and even encouraged candor. Sif was not on that list. “You don’t like me and I fully embrace that. The only reason you are before me is because of Thor’s feelings for you as I have considered other, more worthy candidates as Asgard’s future queen.”

Sif sounded as confused as she looked. “How is that your concern?”

Hela smiled a small, secret smile with the living side of her face, ignoring Sif’s question. “Anya has the heart and would be unafraid to defend her beliefs. As a commoner she knows the people, but it is also her weakness. I do not think she has enough time to blossom into the kind of strong-willed queen Asgard needs.”

“Anya? Loki’s servant??”

As if titles truly mattered to her. Or to Loki. Hela had more respect for Anya than she did for most of the people with titles including Odin. “Yes. She is remarkably insightful. I also considered Amora.”

Sif snarled the question, “The Enchantress?”

A breeze disturbed the curtains and with a wave of her hand Hela shut her out. Amora was a distraction right now. There was a point to bringing Sif here. “She was remarkably selfish but for something she believed in she would have fought for it.”

“What?”

Amusement fled Hela’s face. “She died, Lady Sif, show some manners and do not speak ill of the dead.” Sif’s jaw firmed. She may not have liked Amora but it was deeply ingrained in AEsir society to respect the departed or to remain silent if one could not. “There is a new queen of
Vanaheim now. An ambitious light elf who isn’t willing to sacrifice another’s life through selfish gain. She and Thor have not compatible personalities for such a match but she would be a truly great queen.” Now Hela turned to face her own throne, hands behind her back. “And then there is you. A true AEsir warrior. A respected woman amongst men and women for it…but completely spineless.”

Sif felt fire flare in her eyes. She was an acknowledged AEsir warrior. She’d never run from a battle in her life. “WHAT?”

The skeletal side of Hela’s face turned towards her and Sif shuddered. “What true man wants a woman who won’t challenge him when he’s wrong?”

Blinking, caught by surprise. “Thor is my prince, it is not my place to challenge his commands.”

Hela turned, arms crossed and speaking softly. “You have no qualms in challenging Loki, who is also a prince.”

“Was. He was a prince.”

The trickster queen nodded but didn’t acknowledging Sif’s insistence to focus on that. “And you carried a barbed tongue with no filter around him for centuries.”

Sif hissed furiously. “He is not a proper warrior of Asgard.”

Hela grabbed Sif’s throat, skeleton fingers wrapping around the soft skin and ignoring Sif’s struggles. “He was your prince. Had Odin allowed him to not train as a warrior he would still be a prince. You had no right to treat Thor any differently, unless you are as without honor as I suspect.”

Shoving her backwards, Sif screamed as the ground beneath her feet collapsed. She sealed her mouth as she slid down a tunnel, instinctively rolling as the tunnel ended and rising smoothly to her feet. No longer a vertical slide, the tunnel before her was mostly horizontal and tall enough for her to walk easily. “HELA!”

The ground rolled and bucked Sif off her feet, Hela’s menacing voice echoing around her. “I cannot imagine why Loki allowed your familiarity and disrespect for as long as he has but I assure you I will not. I am the Queen of these realms and I suggest you remember that or you will never leave here…”

Screaming at the ceiling of rock and dirt, thankful she wasn’t claustrophobic. “You are not the guardian over Valhalla, why should I fear you?”

“…alive.” Sif shivered. That had not been a bluff. She glared and hid her fear, but there was little point in denying it. Hela continued speaking, her voice calm and instructive. “There is only one way out. Forward. You will follow a series of tunnels and caverns. Each cavern will replay an aspect of your past. It will play as it has, you will be unable to alter your words or actions.”

Games. Riddles. Shadows and tricks. Hela was just like Loki, both of them tricksters to the core. Sif wasn’t surprised, she was disgusted. “You expect me to find regret in offering Loki much needed truth?”

There was a dark smirk in Hela’s voice and Sif shivered again. “No. That would be far too reasonable of you. Which is why the brothers will be reversed. Every insult. Every harsh criticism. Everything you have said to one, you will now say to the other. Enjoy.”
Tony walked almost casually into the scientist’s space, freezing to see the normally calm and collected man almost scowling at the display. “What’s up, Doc?”

Bruce spoke evenly, muttering more than anything. “My blood pressure.”

The inventor lifted both eyebrows and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Is that a warning to run?”

The scientist didn’t reply at first, taking careful breaths before seemingly finding enough inner calm to glance at Tony. A glance that didn’t have the Hulk lurking beneath the surface. Asking softly, “Are you familiar with contingency plans?”

Tony stayed still for a millisecond before shrugging casually and walking to the other man’s side. “Sure. It’s about the only thing SHIELD and Locks have in common.” Then he frowned slightly as he gave Bruce his full attention and asked, “Why?”

Bruce’s mouth was set in a grim line. “Did you know that SHIELD has contingencies in place for the Avengers?”

Tony knew immediately what Bruce was talking about. Contingencies. Plans to defeat if not kill each of them should they go off the grid. His lips pursed ever so slightly. “Nope. Surprised? Also no.” SHIELD was founded to protect the planet. He’d known from the beginning there was enough of a military influence that they would make the decisions and cross the lines that the Avengers wouldn’t. Then Tony made a show of rolling his eyes. “These are the guys that thought it was a brilliant plan to blow up New York.”

“The Council decided that.”

Tony gave Bruce a disgruntled look, slightly irritated that his science bro wasn’t seeing the big picture. “Well yeah but some blind SHIELD assholes carried it out. A leader can only go as far as his minions will allow him to.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder as if Nick were right behind him. “That’s why Fury and I will always clash. I don’t follow orders. I never will.”

Bruce turned and tapped against the screen. “This is what Loki was worried about. All it took was a blood sample.”

Tony came up to the scientist’s side, frowning at a small vial filled with a sickly yellow liquid. Unconsciously he matched Bruce’s grim tone when asking, “What does it do?”

“A neurotoxin; engineered specifically for Asgardian constitutions.”

Tony nodded slowly. He could think of the why quite easily. SHIELD during their stint of rabid paranoia would have been working double time to combat all possible scenarios, such as a war with the AEsir that would probably never happen. Since Thor had been so kind to donate, it made creating this reality all too easy. “How much do they have?”

“Enough.” Another tap showed an entire canister filled with over a dozen vials. Then the image panned back to show a container filled with hundreds of canisters. Tony shuddered as Bruce continued. “The director gave orders to have it sealed and stored, but he wasn’t fast enough to stop a small container from being misplaced.”

“Because having it destroyed would have made too much sense.” The grimness of the situation finally hit Tony. Asking carefully about their mercenary problem that Fury was supposed to
be solving, “By our Florida jerks?”

Bruce’s lips were pressed into a thin line. “That’s my suspicion.”

Tony pulled in a slow breath, using air quotes. “How long ago did it ‘go for a walk’?”

The scientist met his gaze. “Three days ago.”

“Aww man, this is bad.” His mind was already spinning in different directions of just how bad this could be. Not just one, but both sons were on this planet. If anything happened to either one of them, Asgard would respond. “We need to keep this on the down low and get the thunder cats out of here.”

The scientist took off his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose. “There—there may be a problem with that.”

“What? Why?”

He was hesitant to say more. He hated breaking promises, even if this was more of a bend of them since Tony could be trusted. “Loki is in no shape to go anywhere.”

Tony blinked quickly twice before shrugging dismissively. Loki had given him a breakdown of how his body reacted to impressive spells. “I know. He just needs a nap and all better.”

Bruce tilted his head ever so slightly as he asked, “Is that what he told you?” He shook his head a second later, not waiting for an answer. “I think you were misled slightly.”

“That prick.” Tony didn’t say it with any heat. In fact, he wasn’t shocked in the slightest. “No surprise there. Besides, what will hurt the Ass-gardians won’t hurt him.” Bruce turned to just stare at him and Tony shrugged easily. “He’s a different species from them. Adopted and all that. I thought you knew.”

“Hmm…” Bruce glanced back to make certain the door was closed. He was just thankful the surveillance in this room didn’t work. “I think we need to keep that to ourselves.”

Tony could easily agree to that. As far as he was concerned it wasn’t any of SHIELD’s business where Loki was born. “Time for E.T. to phone home.” Tony rocked up and down on the balls of his feet. “So…a certain petite someone who shall not be named whispered in my ear about a field trip to Asgard. You coming?”

Bruce’s mouth shifted somewhere between a grimace and a frown. Jane had mentioned it to him as well, he leaving her with the understanding that he had to think about it. This was a whole other realm, it would be bad if he lost control. Not that he was afraid of dying. In reality, if the AEsir decided to put him down it would solve a lot of problems. He worried what that would mean for relations between Earth and Asgard if that happened. But it was a once in a lifetime opportunity to see what inspired Jane Foster so strongly. And it was to save the universe. If his being there made the difference between success and failure then he couldn’t be selfish in deciding not to go. “I’m considering it.”

Fury sat in his chair, silently thinking to himself. During New York, in the dozens of scenarios he had entertained, it had occurred to him Loki might have been a puppet with someone pulling his strings. But something about Loki just made him want to dislike him. Maybe because he fit the slot of ‘villain’ so easily. Maybe because in spite of all of his powers, his strength, and his
immortality he had just been a pawn.

Or maybe because the trickster was more sly, insolent, and unpredictable than Stark.

He didn’t understand how a guy like that did a 180 in just a couple of years. They’d all known he was crazy and now suddenly he wasn’t. This guy was more than just powerful. He was dangerous and his sanity lended itself to that danger. He was more than just strong now; he was terrifying. That was why Fury didn’t like him. The demi-god unnerved him. It was a useless, pointless reaction that got people killed. Although it was more than just that. He was afraid for his planet and his people. Loki may no longer be a puppet but Nick’s impression was that the demi-god saw SHIELD and the Avengers as his pawns, which only served to piss the director off.

Fury watched as Agent Romanoff knocked before entering, standing calmly on the opposite side of the desk. There was nothing in her expression to give away her thoughts. “What is it, agent?”

“I’m updating my reports now that SHIELD is no longer under Council purview.”

Files he knew she wouldn’t touch unless she was putting information in them that they had ordered to be removed. With a frown Fury tapped a couple of keys on his computer before asking, “Something you wanted to bring to my attention?”

The assassin nodded once sharply. “Yes, sir.”

Fury nodded and seemed to almost stop breathing for a moment before giving her his full attention and asking, “Current intelligence?”

“Yes, sir.”

He leaned back in his chair but he was too tense for a gesture of relaxation. “I’m all ears.”

Her eyebrows creased together the smallest amount before smoothing. “My report at the time requires modification concerning one of our guests. Sir.”

Nick nodded once as if the answer was obvious. “Loki. New York.”

“Yes, sir.”

He gestured slightly with one hand again, the other hidden from view. “Tell me what would be in these updates, Romanoff.”

Her green eyes seemed to almost flash. “My initial profile was correct, but updated intelligence indicates he was being controlled by a third party.”

“The Other.”

Natasha nodded her head slightly in agreement. “And through him another creature called Thanos.”

“What else?” Her head tilted slightly in question and he continued. “I assume you’re here because there is something pressing you want to point my attention to.”

She didn’t move, the barest beginning of a smirk tugged at her cheek. “You would be notified to an active file being modified. I’m simply saving time, sir.”

“Mmm…” Nick seemed to ponder something for a moment. Since she was here he might
as well gain as much information as he could. “That rather impressive weather trick of his…was he capable all along or is this a new trick?”

Natasha didn’t even pause. “Based on the reactions of the other AEsir, I would venture he was fully capable.”

Shaking his head, thinking back two years to the hours Loki spent lounging in the Helicarrier without doing a damn thing besides delivering cattish threats. Even after that. He left all the fighting and destruction to his army while doing little damage himself. “Then why the hell didn’t he flatten us?”

Annoyance seemed to spark in her eyes, her tone not giving away her personal feelings. “Sir, from the beginning he did just enough to guarantee we would hunt him down. His approach was practical and efficient.”

Growling softly. “Amoral bastard.” Natasha didn’t even react to the name calling, waiting for the next question or a dismissal. Naturally Fury didn’t disappoint. “Any thoughts on those elves with him?”

Her lips pursed ever so slightly for a millisecond. “A high predator instinct…they would destroy us but they seem to defer to him.”

Making an almost silent noise of confusion. “Why?”

Her tone brisk, perhaps even slightly annoyed. “Intelligence, sir. Their culture has respect for intellect and powerful seidr. His display of power showcases that he has both.”

“Do you know what I find interesting, agent?” She lifted a single eyebrow as Fury continued. “I’m talking to Natasha Romanoff, using words like seidr since I have no idea what the hell it is, when my computer logs indicate she’s actively in her files one level up from me.” Natasha just blinked once while Fury’s hidden hand moved slightly down. Two seconds he could have a gun in his hand. Barking at whoever this was. “Who are you?”

The trickster smile that spread across Natasha’s face was all wrong, then she shifted form into the Goddess that did fit that smile. “Does it matter?”

Fury nearly jumped out of his skin. He hid it of course, but it was a gut reaction to the walking embodiment of death that was on the other side of his desk. By appearance it was just a beautiful woman with long, ebony hair and dark green eyes. The same unidentified woman that Stark called Gorgeous. But the pale, pale face and the haunting way she stared through him left him with no doubt she could have killed him with barely a flick of her finger and cared even less.

He’d seen her before, but there was something subtly different now. As if the veil that hid her true nature had been torn away. He lifted an eyebrow to imitate cool irritation. “It matters. I like to know who I’m dealing with and Gorgeous doesn’t cut it with me.”

She flicked out her fingers casually. “Names aren’t really important, nor are your games so we will dispense with them. I can taste your terror and rightly so… few mortals do not when in the presence of death.”

He blinked rapidly twice when she said she could taste his fear. Such an odd phrasing, in his opinion. Idly he wondered if she really could. “How would the grim reaper like to cool her heels in the cells for a few hours? How the hell…”

He hadn’t seen her move. She was suddenly behind him, her nails now long and hooked
like eagle talons, poised at his jugular. She purred against his ear, her breath cold as ice and he shivered. She chuckled. “So…” She cut him off effortlessly. “And saved billions. Repeating the same tired phrase will not convince me. In fact, it only convinces me you have no other reason to dislike him.” Idly Hela wondered if she would ever meet someone who would see the value of Loki without needing to see the proof. Then she realized she had. Their respect had simply grown after seeing that proof but the light elves as a people had always had respect. “He is a prince and brother of a future king—…”

“My impression is he lost that title when he went on a killing spree.”

She laughed coldly. “I do not speak of Asgard. He could be a king if he chose. I would gladly step down if he requested it.” Her smirk was just as cold. “Besides, do you truly believe he has no sway over Thor?”

“Thor is an Avenger—…”

“I will tell you what Thor is.” She left out the ‘now’ portion of the sentence. It was a long time coming, but Thor finally seemed to have gotten his priorities in order. He wasn’t perfect in his defense of his brother. But then neither was Loki. “Thor is a brother first, a prince second, and an Avenger third.” Her smirk only grew as she spotted a flicker of uncertainty in his dark eye. “How significant do you feel now?”

“I don’t see Thor leaving us to our fate.”

She didn’t either. But she did see a battle on both realms leaving Thor so divided it could get him killed. Not that she or Loki would ever let that happen. Instead of addressing his observation, she decided to bring him back to reality. “I will tell you what truly is. Your people are standing on the precipice. If Loki fails, Thanos will destroy the nine realms with one wish and all of this will come to a tragic end. Push your ego to the side and make the best choice for your people. Why should he fight for you, Director? What has Midgard ever done to earn his regard?”

“That man brought a war to my planet and you think—earn it??”

She gave him a bored look. “You are a small man with small ideals. You picture that only a hero is worthy when it is the blood soaked anti-thesis that is the savior.” Fury frowned ever so slightly. He didn’t buy into the ideology that only a hero could save the day or three-fourths of the Avengers wouldn’t exist. “He is not a paragon of virtue and he does not pretend to be. He is a force of chaos and change that now can be pointed in a direction to benefit you. Why should he care about a world not his own who cares nothing for him and at the moment is little more than a truck stop bathroom on the road to somewhere else?”

“Why should I trust him?”

Fury leaned forward. “No Director, that isn’t the question because he doesn’t need you.” A look of frustration swept over his face and Hela considered that his question had simply been a poor choice of words. Speaking softly, “He didn’t have to save you. He could just as easily have waited until the world eater was in the process of obliterating your atmosphere before smiting
them. Your species wouldn’t have survived but the task would have been easier if he had.” A sly smirk curled her lips as she asked, “Perhaps the correct question is: how can you not trust him?”

Nick deflected and damned himself when he saw her smile. “Why are you here?”

The human director knew they needed Loki a hell of a lot more than he needed them, he just stubbornly didn’t want to admit it. She knew all about pride so she didn’t force a confession. “To give you fair warning. Right now, you are an annoyance.” Shrugging lightly. “Either you will become something useful or the obstacle will be removed.” And she was gone. No sound or smoke; she was simply gone.

Author's Notes:

I soo want her powers.

Next:

Hela helps; Loki wakes up; Sif's therapy session commences
Chapter 71

IN BETWEEN

The way to speak with Midgard’s heart was even easier for Hela to walk than it had been for Loki, just as it had been to speak to Alfheim’s heart. Her hand tugged Mischief along by the wrist as he looked at everything in childish fascination. He was Mischief, but he was more. With the Gem of Reality she had melded together the child and the man. He identified himself as Mischief, yet he felt as if he were Loki. Just as before Midgard stepped into view from a secret place beyond the waterfall, her strange eyes sweeping over both of them.

Midgard gave Hela a second look, her tone curious. “You embody two of the nine.”

There was no other way to truly put it. She was the Queen of both Helheim and Niflheim, both of them realms of the dead. There was no living heart, only her. Not that Hela had told Loki that or ever would. Then she frowned thoughtfully at Mischief who was looking around but she knew was listening fiercely.

DAMMIT, was all she could think. Loki was going to be insufferable. Hela nodded to Midgard with a soft huff. “I do. And I live for one’s pleasure.”

Midgard nodded slightly in agreement, aware of the strong emotional bond between Hela and Loki. “The child whose scent is pine and snow.”

Hela nodded and identified him by name. “Loki.”

Midgard looked around as if seeing the living realm before her and not this in between place. She stepped away from her waterfall. Soft grasses sprouted under her bare feet as she walked. “My children thrive with little cost, his spell successful.”

Hela thought about how to phrase her words carefully. “A cost that he absorbed.” Time was not a concept any of the realms understood, save perhaps the effect it had on the life here. “And for that enemy, yes, there were few deaths. But there is one more perversity to be defeated. The mad titan. Loki’s skills are vital for success.”

Midgard gave her a look as if her worry was foolish. “His magic will return.”

The trickster blinked twice before a description came to her. “Your realm will grow cold, what your children call winter, before he is strong enough. This enemy will attack and destroy long before then.”

Midgard turned her attention to Hela’s companion, Mischief now looking up at her curiously. The realm of earth tilted her head ever so slightly before asking, “An echo?”

Hela hedged a bit since it was true, Mischief was an echo of a much younger Loki. He was simply so much more now Loki probably didn’t even realize how close to real his playmate was. Her left hand twitched towards the gem of reality against her skin, hidden under her clothes. With the gem she could do so much. She gave this boy another glance. “Somewhat. A mystical connection that I can sustain for Loki.”

Taking this as an invitation, Midgard stepped up to Mischief who stiffened and shot a worried look at Hela. The trickster just smiled thinly, watching as earth’s heart gently cupped his face and looked into his eyes. And through his eyes Midgard followed the connection to assess just how
badly Loki had been harmed in the backlash. Hela smiled just a little, mesmerized by the beautiful contrast of light skin against dark, until Midgard’s words pulled her from her thoughts. “The damage is both mystical and physical. One can be healed or the other. Not both. Whichever is left undisturbed must heal itself.”

It was exactly what Hela had thought would be said and it was everything she feared. She’d just hoped she was wrong. “If the focus healed his magic what would become of his body?”

Midgard considered the words her children used before speaking. “It would be beyond the time of snow before his body would recover.”

Hela pulled in a slow breath as Mischief stepped back and looked between the two of them. “And until then?”

Midgard addressed the alarmed boy. “An initial healing would grant a medium mystic capacity and a child’s frailty.”

Mischief turned to Hela, tone demanding a clear translation. “Hela?”

Hela shrugged at him as if the answer was obvious. “She can either heal your magic or your body.”

“I understood that part.” He wanted to know the limits. How weak or strong. The details.

She hated details sometimes. After a moment she sighed in regret. “If we focus on magic, you’ll have as much magic as a sorcerer, with more as time progresses...correct?”

“Yes.”

Hela shrugged again, tone tinged with sorrow. “But physically you’ll be weak and I won’t be able to use magic to solve that problem. Only time.”

Mischief huffed and defensively crossed his arms. “We already are.”

Clarifying so there could be no argument later that he hadn’t understood. “As frail as a human.” He flinched violently. “Their stamina, I should think. You might carry some of your natural speed but I doubt it.”

There was no inflection in his tone, in shock. “So I’ll be as physically strong as Jane.”

Hela’s lips quirked automatically. It was no insult intended to Jane, but she was a scientist as well as female. Jane wasn’t a prime example of human strength. The trickster queen considered an equivalent male. “Or perhaps Tony.”

Muttering softly, eyes distant. “That isn’t making me feel any better.”

“Only you may tire more easily until you regain at least some strength.” With Midgard’s analysis Hela had every confidence he would eventually regain what he’d lost, but it would be months from now.

Sounding hoarse. And afraid. “And the alternative.”

“The reverse.”

Mischief nodded as he paled and looked sick. “No magic but physically normal.”
“Essentially.”

Mischief blinked away sudden tears in his eyes, his voice rising in distress. “Why even bother to ask? The choice is obvious.” He knew he was useless with strength and no magic. Magic was his weapon, shield as well as sword.

Hela moved now. He may want to retreat but she didn’t let him, pulling him into a tight hug. He struggled for a few seconds before collapsing against her, hiding his face as he shuddered. She murmured softly, soothingly as she stroked light fingers up and down his back, until he stilled. Midgard watched but said nothing, waiting for a decision to be made. Her children were protected and safe because of him. Her aid was the least she could do.

A silent exchange passed between Hela and Midgard as their eyes met and held. An infinite moment that moved soundless information back and forth. Midgard nodded ever so slightly and Hela felt her lips quirk as she focused on settling the boy-man in her arms.

Only once he had calmed and logic started to settle did Hela answer him. “Because we know one another and neither of us likes a decision like that made without at least being consulted on the matter.”

Mischief nodded and swallowed. That was why he felt like ‘Loki’ right now. This was as much of his adult self’s decision as it could be without Hela actually attempting to bring him here, which couldn’t be done in his current state. Slowly he exhaled and hastily scrubbed the tears off his face before taking a step back. “Whenever you’re ready.”

MIDGARD

Very slowly Loki opened his eyes, trying and failing to silently swallow the soft whimper that escaped. He’d never felt this weak in his entire life. Falling from Asgard and through the abyss that had opened up and swallowed him, only to slam into rock and ash had hurt. His magic had been drained and his nerves on fire for months later. Even without the torture, physically he was not in a good place. This was worse.

He knew why and through Mischief he’d agreed to it but it still didn’t make the reality feel any better. Thankfully there were some plusses he was currently enjoying that hadn’t been his before. Indel. Talia. Fenris. Mischief. Jane. They were all cuddled on top of him like a pile of puppies and though it should be uncomfortable and suffocating it wasn’t. The second was his head pillowed against Jane’s rather delightful chest, her fingers running soothingly through his hair.

He turned to bury his face against soft skin, breathing her in and trying to distract himself from the nerves of his body pulsing with fiery determination. She kissed the top of his head, whispering against his hair, “Does everything hurt?”

Slowly, reluctantly he nodded. There was no point in lying about the obvious. Not to her. There also wasn’t anything she could do with magic, his body too sensitive at present. So he was surprised when she reached for some tablets and a glass of water off the night stand. Her lips quirked slightly. “This helps the muggles out there.”

His eyes narrowed at her, his voice rough and throat parched. “I am not a muggle.”

“Nope, you’re definitely not, Mister Potter.”

Muttering and taking the pills from her. “You should be punished for that one.”
She hummed softly, the sound vibrating against his ear. “Promises, promises.” After carefully swallowing and taking a few sips of water he closed his eyes and pressed closer. He kept hold of the glass stubbornly, slowly forcing more water down until it was gone. She took the glass from him, her fingers returning to his hair to continue petting him. Slowly he was lulled into a drifting state, the pain quieting with the mortal remedy running through his system.

A few soft knocks roused Jane and she carefully slipped from under him, closing the bedroom door most of the way before hurrying to the main door before whoever it was could knock again. She knew it wasn’t Thor, the thunderer barely remembered to knock before entering. She also knew it wasn’t a danger. Fandral would never let a threat near the door.

Jane opened the door and felt her jaw drop a second before she was wrapped up in a strong hug by a very excited brunette. “I knew you were still kicking, boss lady!

Her eyes huge before moving to hug the other woman. “Darcy??”

Darcy Lewis rolled her eyes affectionately. “Duh. Of course. You jump back from the dead, who else is gonna bust a tit to see you?”

A second voice from the hallway, dry with humor, gained Jane’s attention. “As you can see, some things never change.”

Jane reached out to hug Erik Selvig while Darcy ducked under their combined hug and started exploring. “Erik!” He patted her back even as she pulled back from the hug, looking surprised. “How did you know?”

Darcy had found one of Loki’s gauntlets and was currently playing with it as she answered. “The dude with the pirate motif and serious attitude problem flew us in.”

Erik sighed and nodded even as Jane reached over and took it from her. Loki would be less than thrilled that other people were handling his armor. “I’m relieved you’re in one piece.”

Jane smiled at Erik’s expression of fatherly affection, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. Darcy speaking to someone else stopped her from responding. “Hey there.”

“Hi.” Erik and Jane both turned to see Indel in the doorway greeting Darcy back before focusing on Jane. “Mama, can I have the green book?”

Darcy’s eyes bugged and Erik pulled in a surprised breath. Jane ignored both of them. “Let’s wait on spells until we’re sure they won’t hurt him, okay?”

Erik started blinking rapidly, sounding faint, “Spells?”

Indel pouted before sighing. “Okay.” Hopping and asking after a second of consideration. “Do we have any stories?”

“You were preggers?”

“You adopted?”

Jane sighed but didn’t answer either Erik or Darcy as she crossed to her messenger bag, pulling out two books and looking over the elvish script carefully. “Um…dragons or…trolls.”

Indel still hopped, now excitedly and white hair swaying. “Dragons!”
She gave her bag a considering look before passing Indel the whole thing, ruffling his hair. “In case Mischief or Talia wake up.” Indel grinned and slipped soundlessly back into the bedroom.

“Jane?” Erik’s voice was soft, full of questions and curiosity.

Jane pulled in a deep breath before turning back around. There were so many ways she could tell them, some of them true and others that were close to the truth. Biologically was Indel her son? No, but that didn’t matter. Was Loki officially more than her boyfriend? Not exactly but she’d signed up for a lifetime commitment and would fight tooth and nail for it. Not that she would call him that to his face. She knew he was less than impressed with that particular identifier.

She looked from one to the other. “It’s complicated.”

Darcy sat on the sofa with a shrug. “How is it complicated, chicka? Either you popped one out or you didn’t.”

Jane grinned even as she cringed. Leave it to Darcy to make things simple and vulgar. “I wasn’t pregnant. Alfheim recognizes them as officially mine, just as they are…their father’s.”

Soo close. Erik was going to freak out. How bad of a freak she wasn’t sure but brain melting seemed likely. Yet she’d told Loki yes knowing this. She didn’t want to lose them, either of them, but if it came to that choice she’d already made it.

Erik was frowning thoughtfully since he’d only seen one little boy. Darcy looked around in confusion. “Elf-him? Them?”

Erik was more practical, and more suspicious. “Who is the father?”

She was going to ease them into it. Take the time to set up the circumstances so they would understand she was happier than she’d ever been in her entire life. But of course Loki had other plans. “I am, Erik.” Loki sounded as normal as always. His appearance hadn’t changed, as if the previous day’s events hadn’t even happened. Jane could barely see the outlines of an impressive glamour that was hiding the dark circles under his eyes and his gaunt features from the alarming amount of weight he’d lost in such a short period of time.

Selvig whipped around, horror etched on his face. He looked like he was seconds away from a panic attack. Darcy gave Loki a head to toe check before shooting Jane a not so subtle thumbs up. Loki leaned back casually against the wall and crossed his arms, disguising his trembling limbs and unstable balance with aloof dismissal.

Jane closed her eyes for just a moment to contain a sigh. But the disaster she was anticipating didn’t occur, Erik finding the strength to change panic into anger. Erik stiffened, his accent thickening. “You kidnapped her.”

“No.” Loki saw no reason to lie to him. He wasn’t going to defend himself to anyone but he owed this man the truth.

“And I’m supposed to believe that?” Erik asked the question, voice filled with disbelief.

Jane stepped in between the two men. “Believe me, then. He didn’t drag me away from earth. He’s done nothing but protect me since he found me.” She shot a smile over her shoulder at Loki before reaffirming her attention on Erik, shrugging a little. “Actually I found him.”

Erik took a step towards her, lowering his voice urgently. “You can’t trust him, Jane.”
“It’s funny but I actually can.” At one time, she would have thought anyone who trusted Loki crazy. Now it was the exact opposite. She was amazed every time someone seemed incapable of extending the demi-god just a little bit of trust.

He pointed at the demi-god over her shoulder, his eyes not leaving hers. “After what he did—…”

Jane shook her head, ready to defend Loki. “He’s not—…”

“What did I do, Erik?” Loki pulled everyone’s focus with his question, not flinching from the anger and accusation in Erik’s eyes.

“You used me.”

The trickster nodded once sharply in complete agreement. “I did.”

Erik waved his hand to indicate the skies they couldn’t see. “You brought those monsters here.”

Loki’s lips quirked since he just couldn’t help himself. “Technically you did that.”

“You forced me.”

Loki shook his head slowly, having experienced the Tesseract’s pull almost as strongly as Erik had. “Now, now, Erik, you cannot tell me I had to try really hard to get you to utilize the Tesseract. She clearly has a will of her own.” Jane turned with a raised eyebrow, hearing that identifier. From what she knew of the Tesseract it was just a glowing cube of uncontrollable energy. Loki spoke as if it were sentient and Erik certainly wasn’t disagreeing.

Erik’s voice rose as he spoke, “You killed those people.”

Shrugging loosely at such a predictable response. Erik was smarter than this and Loki was already getting bored. He had regrets of course, but he saw no point in lamenting in what already happened. He certainly wasn’t about to do so with this human. This man was important to Jane but he had far too much pride to sacrifice it for a peaceful coexistence. “They were a means to an end. Was it a plan that succeeded? Yes. Would I use something like it again? No.” Loki pushed himself away from the wall even though he shouldn’t, pulling every scrap of strength he had together.

“Weaklings and children ask for help, Erik. It is what I grew up believing. I have learned since then my understanding was in error, for most realms do not follow it. The only reason I would not change the act is simply because I do not regret my current outcome.”

A purely sappy smile spread across Jane’s face. Darcy blinked. “Girl you’ve got it bad.” She gave Loki a second head to toe glance and fanned herself. “Not that I blame you; boyfriend here is HOT.” The perky girl jutted out her hand in Loki’s direction. “Darcy Lewis.”

Loki didn’t uncross his arms, giving her an amused glance. “Loki.”

Shrugging, Darcy let her arm fall back to her side. Then she paused with understanding. “Ooh, you’re that brother.” Her eyes swept over him again and gave Jane a look. “Not that I blame you; boyfriend here is HOT.” The perky girl jutted out her hand in Loki’s direction. “Darcy Lewis.”

Loki gave Darcy a startled look while Jane turned red and covered her face with her hand. “DARCY.” He tipped his head back to laugh hoarsely a second later. Darcy preened a little at the joy that lit Jane’s face as she watched Loki laugh.
Erik pulled at the crook of Jane’s arm, destroying the moment with his question, “Jane, what were you thinking?”

Jane didn’t look at Erik, her eyes only for Loki. “I was thinking I love him.” Darcy knew beyond a shadow of a doubt the older woman meant every syllable.

“And you believe this creature is capable of loving you in return?”

Loki’s jaw tightened, irritated with the name calling. “Careful, Erik.”

Jane closed her eyes and slowly exhaled. Partly to control her temper but also because since she didn’t know how Loki’s body would react to magic she didn’t want to injure him by accident. “Erik…” Jane jerked her arm out of his grip and turned around, arms crossing stiffly. “It’s great seeing both of you, but comments like that are going to make you unwelcome really fast.”

“I can’t apologize, not to him.”

Loki took another step until he and Jane were beside each other. “You are only human, bad behavior is expected.” Erik went back to glaring. Loki gave him a dismissive shrug. “But in the interest of maintaining your friendship with Jane, civility would do no one any harm.”

Darcy fanned her face, intentionally trying to break the rising tension. There was clearly an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ thing happening. “I could listen to him all day long. Damn, I gotta get me one.”

After a silent moment of glaring Loki broke eye contact to smirk playfully at Darcy. “A pity Thor broke the mold after they made me…to guarantee there wouldn’t be another.” Jane’s expression softened as she glanced at Darcy. If Loki was making playful jokes he considered her not a threat. It remained to be seen but he might even like Darcy.

“Prince?” Fandral stepped into the doorway, having listened long enough to know matters could get out of hand.

Loki muttered under his breath. “Now I know why Trax gets irritated with titles.”

Darcy looked Fandral over. “Y’know, shave the mustache and I’ll date you.”

Fandral turned to half bow graciously in a flourish. “Alas, fair maiden, I am spoken for.”

Loki made a production of rolling his eyes.

“Quickie?”

Everyone ignored her. Loki raised an eyebrow at the AEsr. “Fandral?”

Fandral thought quickly and realized he still had the king’s edict to hand to the prince. It was the perfect excuse without shaming Loki. “Might I have a private moment with you?”

*Why in Hel not.* Loki inclined his head to indicate the bedroom he’d slipped out of earlier. The warrior followed, glancing at the children occupying the bed as Loki closed the door behind them. “This is as private as my day becomes, Fandral.”

Fandral nodded, well used to Volstagg being constantly surrounded by his children at home, and pulled the parchment from his armor. He held it out as if he were an official messenger. “From your father, prince.”

Loki felt his eyes widen just the slightest. He controlled his hands to keep them from
shaking and the gasp of surprise that wanted to escape. Breaking the seal, he unfurled the parchment and looked at the contents. Slowly a smile spread across his face but it was unlike any smile he’d ever made before. It was perfect and beautiful, full of childhood innocence long thought to be gone. It was the kind of smile that would bring tears to Jane’s eyes. It was his vow, unaltered, and signed with a flourish by his father’s hand.

Loki had begun to assume that Odin wouldn’t sign it. Or would require that he return to Asgard first before good faith could be exchanged. An olive branch. A very real gesture from his father as proof that Odin truly wanted him to return home.

There were still matters to iron out, but they were small details at this point. From three choices the alternatives shifted to one. There might be reasons they couldn’t remain on Asgard after Thanos was defeated since Indel would not grow up scorned but for now he could go home. “Inform Thor that the humans need to be warned about Thanos. Then inform him we must make haste for Asgard with the Avengers to prepare for war.”

Fandral had been awestruck at the smile that had swept across Loki’s face. It reminded him of the childhood friend he had once known. He shook himself a little before asking, “We, prince?”

“Aye.”

Like water escaping a cracked bowl he could feel his strength waning. Loki kept it together until Fandral had nodded and left to follow his orders. As soon as he was out of sight the trickster collapsed, his glamour shattering. Hanging his head, on hands and knees he panted and tried to summon enough muscle control to crawl into bed but he couldn’t budge.

A symphony of voices were calling his name, circling around him with worry but he was too tired to respond. A gasp was his only warning that Jane was in the doorway before she knelt in front of him. She tried to help him, but even though he was weak his bones still had Æsir density. Activity halted as another figure entered the room. There was a pause for several heart beats before arms stronger than Jane’s wrapped around him and together they helped him to his feet.

They half dragged him back to bed, wrapping him up in thick blankets. Jane pressed her lips against his ear to whisper, ensuring no one could hear her. “Are you in pain?” He shook his head slightly, not even attempting to try to keep his eyes open and within moments he was asleep.

Jane pressed a light kiss to his temple before crawling back into bed, glancing at Erik who returned to the doorway. After a silent moment of studying the strange family, he left.

HELHEIM

Sif was not looking forward to this. She was stretched out on a healing bed, in what appeared to be the healing rooms of Asgard. All of the warriors were. In the distant past Thor was on the bed with them, singed around the edges. Loki had been standing several feet away, the only one not injured. Only this was Hela’s changed version. It was Loki that was singed and bundled up in the bed with them while Thor stood at a distance.

Thor stood with his arms loosely crossed, a mixture of emotions flitting across his expressive face. A face that she had centuries of experience in deciphering. Exasperation, a touch of smugness…and guilt. His voice was filled with these emotions as he spoke. “Brother, far be it for me to point this out—…”

Loki was frowning heavily from the bed, puffing himself up to act stern. “Then refrain
from doing so.” Sif was never going to get used to that, no matter how many more of the hells she was forced to endure. Loki was Loki. To see him acting like Thor was so very wrong.

Thor gestured slightly with his free hand and ignored Loki’s order. “But I told you this was a bad idea.”

Sif felt her own face shift into a scowl as she stared at Thor, accusing him. “I see you survived unscathed…as always.”

Irritation and hurt flashed across Thor’s face, snarking at her. “Learn to duck.”

Her scowl only deepened as she retorted. “Learn to fight.” She saw the hurt deepen and realized that was a more direct hit than she had originally believed. It was part of the reason she kept pushing at Loki long after she should have stopped. Something in her desperately wanted him to feel guilty for the things he did. To show remorse.

Loki sighed softly, his expression closed off whereas Thor’s expression had shown irritation and affection. “Brother—…” Thor shot Loki a wounded look, interpreting the begun sentence as a chastisement for defending himself.

Sif heard the defensive tone in Thor’s voice. “If you had listened when I stated confronting the dragons of Muspelheim was a fool’s errand none of this would have happened.”

Fandral huffed groggily. “Can you all please desist?” Volstagg didn’t even twitch, heavily unconscious. Hogun was silent, staring at Thor and dark eyes accusing.

Sif blurted out for first thing she could think. “You alerted them of our arrival.”

She blinked in surprise to see the guilt on Thor’s face deepen as he lied most unconvincingly. “I did not.” It had been a small suspicion at the time since it was impossible to tell when Loki lied. It was shocking to have it confirmed. Now she was left with a thousand questions and it was all wrapped around one word. Why? She wondered why Loki would alert the dragons of their arrival.

The words from before tumbled out of her mouth. “They knew of our arrival. Explain this.”

Thor’s face turned red, his gaze shifting slightly in Loki’s direction before retorting with a question, “Why should I explain myself to you?”

“Sif…”

Sif turned in Loki’s direction. “Admit it, Thor, you suspect it as well as I.” She blinked as she watched a shift in Loki’s expression. Thor of the past hadn’t altered his expression. She was seeing his suspicion that echoed her own along with an exasperated affection. As if he knew but dismissed the reason behind it as unimportant. The words from her own mouth continued though she tried desperately to stop them. “He would do well to remember his place in comparison to you.” She really wished she could swallow those words, more so when she saw the way Thor’s expression had changed.

It darkened with a soul-wounding pain. It felt like a punch to the gut, to know that she had been the one to cause Thor’s hurt. He spoke softly, but it was filled with that pain. “…and you should know yours.”

At the time she had taken Loki’s words and blank expression as a threat. Now she
wondered if she was wrong.

Sif couldn’t gasp though she wanted to as Frigga breezed into the healing room as the queen she was. It was so painfully shocking to see the Queen here as if she were still living. That had been one of her reasons for jealousy. She had lost her mother when she was quite young, raised by her father and had looked to Frigga as a surrogate mother. She envied the Queen’s sons for having her. But since she wouldn’t allow herself to feel jealous of Thor it had all shifted on Loki. His actions that were less than honorable disgraced a woman like Frigga, in Sif’s opinion, and it just made her jealousy and irrational anger worse.

Frigga moved her hand to affectionately push back a lock of Thor’s hair. “Come now. There will be no raised voices.” Jealousy flashed in Loki’s eyes from his bedridden position, a reaction that Sif noticed. Frigga looked over each of them in turn, her gaze lingering over Loki. Sif saw the way Thor leaned into Frigga unconsciously as if to proclaim she was his and his alone. The look of jealousy in Loki’s eyes deepened. “Eir has assured me you are all on the mend; a fact I wanted to see with my own eyes.”

Loki seemed to puff himself up ever so slightly, trying to look like the strong warrior for his mother. “We rally as I speak, mother.”

Frigga smiled gently, as if completely unfooled by Loki’s slight posturing. “Excellent.” She looked at Thor with open love. “As you do so, I am afraid I must deprive you of your brother’s presence for a few tasks.” Disappointment flashed in Loki’s eyes and if Sif wasn’t mistaken the look that crossed Thor’s face was that of a scolded little boy. A little boy who knew he was in trouble with his mother.

The mist started to swirl, as it had with all the previous stolen moments coming to an end, but Sif was struck with a sudden realization. She was used to reading jealousy and irritation in Loki’s eyes. She was used to reading guilt, love, and all of Thor’s varied expressions. She had a sudden epiphany. Through the switch of positions, she was able to read the emotions she’d missed. Silently she wondered if the range of emotions that she was seeing on Thor’s face, had been what Loki was feeling but she failed to see.

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**MIDGARD**

Loki woke in the middle of the night, staying absolutely still. Everyone was sound asleep around him and he should be exhausted but right now there was only one thought on his mind. Loki had to know. Hela’s talk about the inevitable had been burrowing into his ear since she’d uttered those poisonous words. He would use this ability just once more, then never again. He had too much to live for to waste the years and centuries obsessed when his family would die. The spell to see a person’s due time required a mage’s touch, but even with his current limitations he would always be a mage.

*He wove the spell, his physical body recovering, and allowed his mystical self to walk onto smooth marble. The familiar double doors were closed but he just walked through them dismissively. This was merely a vision. A possibility. There wasn’t anything he could do to affect the outcome he was seeing. Not until the spell ended. Then he could affect what was about to happen.*

*Down the familiar path he walked, up to his father’s throne. The mighty seat had been thrown to the side, Thanos surrounded by technology and opposition. The warriors three. Sif. The Avengers. Thor. They were all surrounding him, fighting but unable to defeat Thanos. But Loki*
wasn’t here to see if this was Thanos’ due time.

Loki silently studied the prone figure on the floor yards away from the fighting, his heart clenching. Odin. His father. He felt bitter sadness well up inside of him, threatening to spill over. No. Thanos had taken everything else, not this. Not his. He stepped over to Odin’s side, seeing the great ruler was indeed gone. He looked to the right, seeing himself holding two staffs, Gungnir and a silver one he didn’t recognize, facing down Thanos with a vicious snarl on his face.

He glanced back down and jumped. It was his face. His body. There was no outward sign of injury, but again, it was obvious he was dead. There was that shining silver staff inlaid with gold at his own side, Gungnir no doubt back in his father’s grasp. He saw Odin now where he had stood, holding his staff and fighting with the others. And Loki understood what was being represented: one of them would die and a choice would decide the outcome.

It was just as Hela and he always said. There was no such thing as the inevitable. There was simply a series of ugly choices. He didn’t know what the choice would be, but he would figure it out when the time came. Logically he knew he had too much to live for to take Odin’s place but his heart never followed logic. He smiled bitterly as the vision faded because there was no choice. He would be going to Asgard, but that wasn’t what caused the smile.

It looks like he wasn’t going to watch Indel and Talia grow up after all.

Author's Notes:

Let me just check my list: Loki cuddles, Darcy talking about boobs, Sif pouting that she feels guilty. Yep. Mission accomplished.

Next:

Discussions for saving the universe commence
HELHEIM

Sif sat down in the middle of the tunnel, her head resting in her hands. She didn’t want to go any further. She had no idea how long she’d been here but it felt like years. Thor was an open book to her, his expressions easy to decipher. She felt harsh, critical, and cruel speaking to him in such a manner. Loki saying his plans and agendas, once proposed by Thor, had turned a challenging adventure into a dangerous trap. Yet she found herself agreeing eagerly.

She was horrified. She wasn’t sure if she was more horrified to agreeing to some of those adventures without voicing her opinions, or saying some of the things she said. She’d never lied to Loki, but she was left wondering if all of the emotions of hurt, anger, and frustration that she could read in Thor’s expressions had been felt by the trickster. Conversely she also wondered if the jealousy she’d ready in Loki’s eyes had been felt by Thor.

Loki had always been a source of confusion. Often times she couldn’t tell what he was thinking or feeling, his lack of expressions and sly tongue telling her nothing. Did it make her less honorable to have treated the two princes so differently? Everyone knew one day Thor would be king but she wondered if she was wrong.

There was something else that was weighing heavily on her conscience. If Loki had been feeling everything that Thor was expressing, then her need of seeing such expressions for herself made her cruel. Her irrational goal to heap criticisms and accusations on him until she forced him to feel remorse for his actions had done nothing except to turn her into something ugly. It wasn’t his fault she failed to see the signs.

“Even if you decide you were right and justified…” Hela appeared lying on her side, the tunnel cradling her. “…a man like Thor will appreciate a woman who has thoughts and opinions of her own…and voices them. Do our gender the favor of not falling into a stereotype.” Hela looked up, her tone full of affection. “Half of the reason Asgard is held in such reverence has everything to do with Frigga. A true queen for her people, even if sometimes Odin was stupid enough not to listen to her. Don’t be the reason Asgard falls.”

Sif felt a shaft of understanding pierce her heart, asking almost in wonder, “You’re not going to hinder Thor from choosing me, are you?”

“No.”

Now Sif looked confused. “You never were?”

Hela sighed softly. It would be a lovely thought, to force her opinion on Thor but both she and Loki knew better. They both had a wide manipulation streak, but neither of them would intentionally pair Thor with someone only for him to be miserable in the end. “Learn this lesson well, Lady Sif. I rarely prevent others from making mistakes they can learn from.” Sif felt disbelief contort her features. Hela gave her an unimpressed look. “You were a special case because it is not that you cannot learn…you refuse to. Unchecked you could pose a danger to Loki in the future.” She smiled thinly. “This is the alternative to an unfortunate accident befalling you.”

Sif shook her head quickly. “You just said--…”

“A danger to my family is an exception to all my rules. Your stubbornness is a reflection of
my own, and we both require a hard tap to the head to gain our attention.”

A little ghost child appeared and snuggled into Hela’s side, her head resting against her chest. Sif felt her jaw slowly drop open as she paled. The eyes, was all Sif would think.

Hela’s eyebrow lifted. “My dear Sif, you appear as if you’ve seen a ghost.” Freyja giggled and Hela snorted to herself after a moment. “I actually didn’t even intend that pun.” Snapping her fingers in front of the silent AËsir’s face. “Sif.”

Sif swallowed thickly before asking, “Who is that?”

“Freyja.” Hela shrugged as she answered, as if the reply was of no importance to Sif.

Sif appeared to be at a loss for words. It was on the edge of her tongue, but it was almost as if the words themselves did not want to be uttered. Hela continued to watch her closely, calculation in her gaze. She was debating something and had been for a while now. A test was what Sif needed. And though it didn’t have to be a matter of life and death to be a true test it did make it more interesting.

Her decision was made as Hela nodded to herself. “I am going to tell you a truth, Sif. It is a truth that if uttered would carry several results. This truth would hurt Loki. This truth would keep him from returning to Asgard, possibly forever. And…this truth will end all of the nine realms.” Sif blinked rapidly but Hela held up a hand, waving off the protests she could see piling. “That is the burden of being a queen….or at least being consort to a king. To carry such knowledge, such truths, and never utter them.”

Sif didn’t want to know. Suddenly she was sure she didn’t want to hear whatever it was that Hela was about to say. “Freyja is Loki’s biological daughter, smothered hours after her birth for one reason.” The way Hela’s hand moved to caress the light blue skin left little doubt what she meant. Only one race in the nine realms held such pigment and Larnvidia would have known the babe’s origins instantly. Sif had known the child was related to Loki. As soon as she’d seen the eyes.

Sif shook her head, the words out before she thought them through. “Loki would never do that.”

Hela tilted her head ever so slightly, intrigued by Sif’s instinctive defense. It was a start, in her opinion. Asking softly, “So certain of that?”

The warrior goddess pulled in a slow breath but still answered truthfully. “Yes.” She didn’t feel like she understood Loki any more than she had yesterday. It was because of the way he was so protective of not just Hela, but his youngest children. She just knew that no child of his had anything to fear from him.

The trickster queen smirked softly. “Interesting.” Sif blinked in confusion. She didn’t put too much thought in what she was saying. She also wasn’t seeing how this was universe ending news. It was horrifying, that a woman could be so cruel, but it wouldn’t end the nine realms. Hela ignored Sif’s puzzlement. “Thor is a good man with a great heart and love for his people. He is well intentioned in his actions, clever when he chooses to be, but doesn’t always consider the consequences of those actions. You and Thor share something in common. You’re both short sighted and you’re both quick to anger. Your anger rules you, as it does Odin. There cannot be two ruling Asgard with such weakness.”

Sif’s frown deepened. “I fail to see the connection.”
Feeling gracious, Hela filled in the blanks. “If you were to speak of this to Loki, the rage that would consume him would be focused solely on bringing Hel down on Larnvidia.” Sif sucked in a startled, horrified breath. She remembered that queen, and hadn’t liked her at a glance. She’d kept her opinion to herself, but she had liked even less that the Vanir queen would begin a physical relationship with a prince not even acknowledged as an adult.

Hela knew what Sif was thinking but she didn’t address it. Instead, she continued with Loki’s most likely reaction. “He would lose all sight of stopping Thanos or protecting the rest of you. You die. Thanos wins. The end.” Now Hela’s expression turned coy, amusement in her voice. “You now hold the power to determine the universe’s fate, Sif. What you choose to do with it is in your hands. Use this information for your own satisfaction or withhold it to protect all who matter to you.”

Sif slowly exhaled, realizing this was more than just Hela telling her shocking news. And she was shocked. She was more shocked that all this time had passed and Hela hadn’t told him. “This is a test.”

Hela rolled her eyes. “Of course it is. Life is a test. Each action reaps consequences, great and small. You chose to fly to Thor’s side, defying Loki’s orders when he held the throne, and lost all respect from both Loki and myself.” Sif grimaced before she could catch it. “You chose to express words of mourning, yet your every action now is bitchy and petty. To others, you seem grieved that he is alive.” Now Hela saw a flicker of shame but at this point she was irritated enough that she could care less. “You should feel pride. You’re becoming a greater liar than I am.” Sighing and gesturing, the shadows swallowing Sif before she could make a sound. “Do as you will.” The warrior goddess would find herself in her assigned quarters on Midgard.

“A good idea?”

Freyja’s question was innocent but this was a child of Loki’s. Innocent and naïve she was not. Hela thought carefully to herself. It was a gamble to give such information to Sif, which is why like with everything she created a safeguard. “If she attempts to utter the words to father, she’ll die.” A death spell was already woven in place, unlocked by intent. It would be fast and painless; a small mercy Hela rarely offered. Hela shrugged again. She never actively sought to cause Thor pain. It was his choice to make. But because of that choice it now put Sif in peril. If he was to truly choose Sif, whether she be queen or wife, she had to be worthy. “Either way problem solved.”

MIDGARD

Darcy grinned happily as she made a production of taking a seat next to Pepper. The coffee here was even better than Starbucks, in her opinion. “So…what’d you do to get on Jane’s shit list?” She asked without preamble and directed her question to the warrioress who was seated across from them, warily poking her eggs with a fork.

Pepper narrowed her eyes slightly, interested in the reply, while Sif blinked in surprise. Sif was just confused, unfamiliar with the colloquialism. She was also exhausted, having been deposited in her Midgardian quarters an hour ago by Hela. “Her—…”

Darcy shrugged, used to people not understanding her and explained. “Shit list. What’d you do to piss her off?”

Jane had entered earlier to gather some food together. An impressive amount of food since neither the kids nor Loki had followed her. She’d nodded politely to those present, even to Nick for the two seconds he stormed in to get coffee. Sif she’d made an effort to ignore.
Sif nodded in understanding. “Ah. Loki and I aren’t on the best of terms-…”

Darcy made a scoffing sound. “Yeah…no. Not buying it.” She jerked her thumb in the direction of the doorway. “Fury, the dude with the eye patch, and Loki aren’t on good terms but she’s still polite to him. You are like dog shit on her shoes.”

The warrioress growled softly in irritation. “This is none of your concern, mortal.” Darcy stuck out her tongue in reply.

“She struck him.” Thor’s reply was matter of fact, his face carefully neutral as he sat down next to Sif with a dozen pop tarts on his tray. Pepper’s eyes narrowed even further. Just from her limited interactions with him, she knew the trickster had probably done something to goad the reaction. Even knowing that, she still didn’t approve of violence as a solution to insults. Particularly against a man who had turned around and saved Tony’s life, as well as everyone else’s.

Darcy knew that would definitely have done it. Jane was willing to let a lot slide on her own behalf. But if that someone hurt a loved one of Jane’s, there would be hell to pay. Darcy studied Sif’s face for a little too long before throwing the question back to Thor. “Psycho ex?”

Sif sputtered in outrage. “We have never courted!”

The brunette nodded sagely. “Ah. So friends with bens. I get it.” Pepper desperately tried to control a snort but Darcy noticed Thor looked confused so she clarified for him. “She slept with him but they were never more than friends.” Thor glanced curiously at Sif when she sputtered incoherently but didn’t actually deny it. Darcy rolled her eyes. “Look, Xena, Jane’s a great gal. She doesn’t just hate somebody unless they’re mega bitches and deserve it.”

Tony sat down by spinning around and straddling the chair, staring at Darcy with interest. “Be still my heart. Blunt. Funny. Beautiful…and friends with Pepper. My red shoe diary fantasy come true.”

Darcy snorted while Pepper sighed into her cup. Tony Stark was definitely on Darcy’s handsome radar but she also could see he and Pepper were an item. “Sorry, she’s my type. You’re not.” Pepper made a choking sound and started coughing on her tea.

Stark nodded and grinned. “The force is strong with this one.”

She raised an eyebrow, not even pausing in firing off a retort. “Wow. Tony Stark is a Star Wars geek. I’m totally tweeting that shit.”

“Would anyone actually be surprised?”

Darcy shrugged after a moment of contemplation. “Meh, maybe. My neighbor’s cat probably doesn’t know.”

“Tony, no.” Pepper held out a hand, her arm in front of Darcy, and held the palm out to Tony’s face before he could get side tracked talking about ‘pussies’.

Darcy took another deep swallow of her lovely coffee and hummed happily, glancing at Thor. “So you guys going back to Ass-whatever to save the universe or something?”

Thor’s expression of curiosity remained. With his focus on Jane, he’d never even truly noticed Darcy beyond her rather strange behavior and the effect she had on Jane. “Would you care to see the wonders of Asgard, Lady Darcy?”
She didn’t even seem fazed by the offer. “Weak pickup line, but sure. I get to keep my phone, right?”

Steve approached with caution, having unavoidably heard the tail end of the conversation. He was holding onto his tray but not taking a seat yet. “Are you certain that’s a good idea, Thor?”

The thunderer glanced at the soldier, stating proudly. “Asgard welcomes emissaries from all the realms.”

Sif glanced away just a little and Tony jumped on it. “Okay Bond chick, lay it on us.” Sif looked around in surprise to see eyes moving to her. Tony continued, thumb jerking in Thor’s direction. “Obviously something thunder said isn’t right so let’s have it.”

Thor sent her a questioning look and after an indecisive moment Sif sighed. “There are realms that aren’t welcome in Asgard.”

Well of course he didn’t mean those not willing to maintain peace. “I wasn’t speaking of realms we are not on peaceable terms with, Sif.”

Tony narrowed his eyes slightly, curious. “But you don’t like mortals, right?” Because Loki’s attitude problem about humans changed so fast he had a feeling it was something he’d been taught instead of something he believed.

“My father will welcome you.”

Hogun nodded in agreement with Tony’s assessment, as grim as ever. “Some of the nobles might be another matter.”

Tony took in this new data and shrugged grandly. “Guess we’ll cross that bridge when we get there.” Then he smirked at his own pun. “Get it. Bridge. Cross—man, tough room.”

Steve frowned as he asked, “We?”

Explaining to the soldier as if it were obvious. “We’re part of Loki’s plan so I’m in.” It’s not like the Avengers had met in secret without Steve. One by one, they’d met each other in passing and they were all on board to go. “Same with the assassins and Bruce.”

“Is the Director aware of this?”

Smirking, glancing over Steve’s shoulder. “He is now.” Everyone now looked towards the doorway.

Fury did not look happy, arms at his sides and glaring. “I don’t recall relinquishing control of the Avenger Initiative to Thor’s baby brother.”

Tony grinned and took a big bite of his toast. “You didn’t. My bud needs me to go to Asgard so I volunteered.”

Nick didn’t react. “We’ll discuss it later.”

Stark shrugged and retorted around the food still in his mouth. “Nothing to discuss.”

Fury ignored him, looking around the room at those already here. “I’m calling a debriefing in 2 hours. Elves and aliens or whatever the hell else are invited, the Avengers are mandatory.” Narrowing his focus on Thor who had stayed silent through the exchange. “I suppose it’s too much
to ask to leave your kid brother out of it?”

Thor frowned heavily. “You would do well to desist insulting my brother. He is not a boy, but a man not to be trifled with.”

Stark started sounding like a kid, sing-songing his words like he was a tattle tale. “I’m telling Gorgeous.”

Nick growled and jabbed a finger in the inventor’s direction. “Stark, I don’t give a damn who you tell.” Refocusing on Thor. “I am not going to start monitoring every syllable that comes out of my mouth.”

Sif was studying her hands quietly. Hogun and Volstagg shared a look. Thor’s frown remained, feeling he had to make his stance clear. If the humans around him interpreted that he spoke for Asgard then all the better. “It is not the words, it is what you do not say that I hear. An enemy of my brother is also my enemy. Is this the choice you make for your realm?”

Fury firmed his jaw. “I’m not drawing the line, I asked a damn question. Invite the goddamn League of Shadows for all I care.” Refusing to betray his feelings on the matter, he turned and stalked away.

Erik entered the lab almost with reverence. Every piece of equipment he could ever have wanted was before him. He couldn’t imagine how many committees he would have to beg grant money from to obtain some of these tools.

“It is impressive, isn’t it?” He turned to see Bruce standing quietly in the doorway. “Dr. Banner.”

Bruce nodded and shook his hand in greeting, also familiar with Erik Selvig. “Dr. Selvig. Has SHIELD hired you for consulting or…Jane?”

Erik nodded with a small smile. “Jane.”

The two scientists made coffee and chose a couple of stools. Erik was staring into his cup as if he were observing the night sky, searching for the answers. Bruce took another sip, more than happy to let the other man quietly think for the rest of the day.

“I don’t understand why she’s with that monster.”

Bruce remained quiet and thoughtful, thinking of all the conversations he’d picked up over the amount of time the small family had been here. “I caught a glimpse of him when SHIELD caught him the first time. I said you could smell crazy on him.”

Eric gripped his cup a little tighter, words soft. “Not forgetting homicidal and sociopathic.”

The scientist ignored the other man. “I met him again after everyone thought he was dead. He was in disguise in Norway but nothing happened so I didn’t say anything.” Eric’s jaw dropped at Bruce’s soft confession. “I was a little…indisposed in Miami but I know he had a hand in stopping the earthquakes created by a mutant.” Bruce looked up, his calm composure hiding something in his eyes. Erik would have no way of knowing what had happened not even 24 hours ago. “I have never seen anything like what I saw yesterday. I saw unbelievable power and self-sacrifice. He stopped an army with a flick of his wrist…or whatever it is he does. He saved us, all of us. No one forced him
but he did it and I don’t really care why he did it.” And what he saw, Hulk saw. “I understand him.”

Eric frowned in confusion, not certain what the scientist was talking about. “You understand him?”

Shoulders rising slightly. “A little.”

“Please enlighten me.”

Bruce smiled but there was an edge to that smile. It was a topic touching too close to home. Loki was thought of as a monster, yet he was capable of so much good. What did that make the Hulk, whom he’d always seen as the monster that existed inside of him? “Monster is a harsh word and I find it inaccurate. He came here and did what he thought he had to do to survive. He came back and saved us from an army that would have destroyed all of us.” Erik’s eyes widened in surprise. “He reminds me of a leopard, actually. You wouldn’t describe a leopard as evil for doing what comes naturally.”

Erik’s anger started to dissipate, replaced by curiosity. “Except he’s not an animal. He should have a moral compass like everyone else.”

Bruce smiled lightly but drove home one point that no one seemed to remember. “He’s not human, Dr. Selvig. He didn’t grow up on earth. His moral compass isn’t set to our standards. He and Thor may look like us but they’re not.”

Huffing and grumbling. “All the more reason she shouldn’t be with him.”

Shrugging since that wasn’t either of their concern. “Is that really your call to make? From what little I know of Jane Foster, she’s a woman who knows what she wants. She’s smart enough to take care of herself and old enough that she doesn’t see a father figure making decisions for her.” Erik grimaced, realizing his reactions were a little too proprietary. He was concerned. As her friend. As a colleague. He held fatherly affection for her, as a former colleague of her father, but he knew a line had to be drawn. Bruce talking pulled him from his thoughts. “Although our trickster friend has one very distinct difference from a leopard.” Erik looked puzzled now. “I have never seen a fiercer father and God help anyone who hurts those children or Jane.” Erik didn’t know how to respond to that so he didn’t.

After a moment Bruce put down his cup and slipped on his glasses. “I will say this much, Dr. Selvig. We all have our demons; we all have a past. Based on the horrors I’ve seen humans capable of, I’m actually relieved she found Loki. Maybe that will help you sleep at night, maybe it won’t. It took me time to figure that out. I think that’s what you need.”

Erik nodded reluctantly, not sure what to think. He’d jumped to conclusions about Thor and the thunderer had proven him wrong. Quietly he wondered if this was happening all over again with his brother. Loki had used him, scrambled his senses until he wasn’t sure which way was up and which way was down. Time.

Frowning suddenly as he asked, not necessarily with concern so much as curiosity, “Is he always that thin?”

Bruce glanced at him cautiously. “Thin?”

“He seemed…” Erik shrugged to himself as his frown deepened. “…almost emaciated.” Bruce winced.

“Everything comes with a price.” The female voice caused both men to turn.
Hela sat down between the two men, a cup appearing in her hand which she latched onto with delight. Bruce put his palm over the top and she arched an eyebrow at him. “Do you have the same reaction to sugar he has?”

“No.” He just watched her steadily and after a moment with a grumble she batted his hand away and exchanged the hot chocolate for water. “Happy?”

“Ecstatic.” He deadpanned the response to her and she brattily stuck her tongue out at him. She liked this mortal even more than Tony.

Erik kept looking back and forth between the two of them. The little magic tricks didn’t escape his notice. Hela huffed and turned her head in Erik’s direction. “To save your species from extinction required a tremendous amount of seidr. Something had to be sacrificed so his body paid the price.”

“Will he need more pain killers?”

Hela produced a list out of the ether for Bruce. “These are the symptoms, I am unfamiliar with your Midgardian solutions.” Her voice dropped ever so slightly but Bruce noticed. “Whatever is provided, do not allow it to sacrifice his mental faculties.”

Bruce looked over his glasses. “He would rather be in pain?”

Magic required a lot of focus, which can’t be achieved with a mind deadened by pain killers. Not that she trusted anyone here enough to actually say that. Hela smiled thinly. “He would rather have a clear head than a numb body. He has a very high pain threshold and can abide it if no solution is available.”

Bruce nodded and mulled over the list. He was a doctor, but not that kind of doctor. Thankfully SHIELD procured for him anything he wanted and what they refused to get, Tony would. “Give me a few hours.”

Hela nodded, finished off her water and pushed herself to her feet. “That is agreeable.” She turned to look over Erik. “He’ll never apologize, not for a plan that worked even if it pained you. What remorse he feels for his past actions will not be expressed, at least not to you. He doesn’t expect friendship, he expects that you love Jane enough to not lose her by refusing civility.”

Erik’s voice was curious but laced with resignation. “She would really choose—…”

Hela leaned in closely. “Don’t make her choose, Erik. There won’t be a second chance. Jane follows her heart, but she is also practical. I. Loki. Jane. We all have an AEsir lifespan before us. Thousands of years compared to the few decades that remain to you. Do you truly think this is a difficult choice for her to make?”

With a smirk Hela casually strolled back out of the lab, leaving Bruce to his work and Erik to his thoughts.

Jane visibly stiffened, a current of golden magic whipping around her defensively. They were all in the corridor that would lead to the meeting room, begrudgingly invited by Fury. Hela had reassured Jane that her magic in Loki’s vicinity wouldn’t harm him. It wouldn’t even cause a twinge of pain, so long as magic wasn’t used to attempt to heal his body. Sif stood just a little taller, the reason for Jane’s defensive reaction, with her arms crossed. “Might I converse with…the prince?” Sif was almost able to hide her reluctance to use his former title.
Loki narrowed his eyes slightly. He’d never been afraid of Sif and he wasn’t now. He gathered she was curious about something, but her pride and habit of acting like a bitch were getting in the way. He nodded slightly and Jane swallowed her protest. Instead she shot the AEsir a warning glare, picking Indel up and taking Talia’s hand. Both children were doing a good imitation of an adult glare even as they let Jane lead them away. Fenris followed them down the corridor but Mischief stopped and turned invisible once he was behind Sif.

Mentally Loki rolled his eyes. He appreciated their concern but in his opinion this was getting ridiculous. Sif asking a question regained his attention. “How do I determine if you lie or tell the truth, snake?”

He couldn’t figure out if the last word was meant from her as an insult or some type of strange endearment. Which was quite odd. He was usually able to figure her out too easily. Perhaps because she didn’t even know the answer is why he was puzzled. “You do realize that’s not an insult to me.” Then answering her question as an after-thought. “My lips move.”

She scowled instantly as they fell back into the habit of a lifetime. “Where did you go to prove yourself a warrior?”

That made Loki raise an eyebrow, the conversation again skirting around something strange and unknown between them. “I tricked Odin into gifting me with warrior status.” Technically he hadn’t. He and his armor covered in the blood of the dead, he’d flat out lied and said he killed a phoenix. Since everyone knew there would be no body: a phoenix turning to flame and ash, and then reborn from that ash; there was nothing Odin could do except accept.

“Thor states otherwise.”

Thor was involved. Now that made sense to him. He shrugged dismissively. “You do not truly wish to know, therefore, I will not waste my time with you.”

She growled and stomped her foot, her voice ringing with frustration. “Why are you so impossible??”

Loki smirked bitterly. “Because I can be. Because your frustration amuses me as much as my pain delights you.”

Sif shook her head slightly, thinking of all those times Loki would be punished for one thing or the other before court. All the times she would smirk at him when he would glare at her. “I do not delight in your pain, I delight in justice.”

“I see…so it was someone else who laughed and mocked me when my magic was stripped from me.”

Her voice rose in protest. “You deserved it!”

He bowed slightly, done with this conversation. “As you say, Sif.” He didn’t even take a second step, stopped by the sword inches from his neck. He turned his head to smirk at her, sarcasm dripping from his tongue. “Milady?”

He felt Mischief brush against his side but his playmate turned protector didn’t reappear. They were both seeing it. She wasn’t smiling but she wasn’t glaring at him either. She was using the dull side of the sword to bar his way, not to threaten him. She looked like she was considering something she hadn’t before. When she spoke her words were slow with careful consideration. “You—...you do not speak of a pain like a child being denied the pleasure of your magical toys.
Such restrictions caused you harm?” She had been there for the sentencings. The All-father’s intent had been clearly expressed. Just a removal of Loki’s magic for a period of time so he couldn’t cause mischief. That had been the beginning and ending of it. He hadn’t been recognized into adulthood during those years. It wasn’t supposed to cause physical pain.

He gave her a measuring look. He didn’t know if he could ever trust her enough to reveal a vulnerability that could kill him. He wasn’t sure if he would ever trust his own father with that knowledge and it stung. He was certain he could trust Thor, which just made the sting worse. “And what would you do with such information, Lady Sif?”

She wanted to protest that he would ask such a question but she didn’t. “If they cause harm I would see them destroyed, as I am certain Thor would.”

He was surprised by her words but he didn’t allow it to show. Instead he stood still, his face blank before deciding what he would say on the matter. “The last time they were placed on my wrists, Hela threatened to never allow my return to Asgard. Take from that what you will.” Sif knew that was not a threat to take lightly. That Hela would make it meant she was concerned, not just about Loki’s comfort, but his life.

A warrior didn’t mock injury. An honorable warrior accepted that mistakes happen, in battle as in life, and did what was necessary to correct the wrong. There were many words of advice that her father had given her of honor over the years and it was those words that now washed over her.

She gave Loki a shrewd look which didn’t look as out of place on her face as he had expected it to before sheathing her sword, fist clenched over her heart and bowing to him slightly. A formal motion of sincerity and respect. “I apologize for mocking a pain that went far deeper than was justified.”

Loki could see that her words of apology were sincere for once. He nodded slightly in return, watching her warily and she was surprised. The young prince of a few years ago would have mocked her in return or dismissed her words. He had grown. Or perhaps, and she had refused to consider this until now, she’d never understood him.

She opened her mouth and was shocked by what came out. “You informed the dragons of our intended arrival on Muspelheim.”

He blinked slowly, his head tilting ever so slightly before a mischievous smirk pulled the corner on his lips. “Technically Hela was the one who informed them.”

Sif slowly shook her head. “Why would you conspire against Thor and the rest of us?”

Loki huffed, but he was happy to note she at least asked instead of assuming he had wanted them dead back then. “I told Thor. Repeatedly, I might add, that hunting for a dragon trophy was a terrible plan.”

She protested softly. “You never said you would defend them.”

He shrugged loosely. “No one listened. You were all too busy basking in the glory to come and chastising me for being a coward. Had one of you asked I would have made my position known.” He smirked impishly. “Until you made a comment about mating season and my loose preferences. After that I had no intention of telling any of you anything.” The tone of his voice shifted to something a bit more firm and passionate. “Dragons are not mindless beasts. The AEsir may have been foolish enough to hunt them to extinction on Asgard but I will not permit it on the
Sif blinked in surprise. She’d never heard Loki like this. At least not that she remembered. Feeling a flicker of genuine curiosity. “Where were your proving grounds?”

He’d never spoken of it because no one would have believed him. Thor believed him, it was enough. He gave her another assessing look before nodding to himself. “Helheim. I conquered the demons that had overrun the realm from Niflheim.” He turned and teleported away with Mischief, not staying to see her eyes widen incredulously.

Author's Notes:

I had intended to make this one chapter until I realized just how long this really was, so sorry. You'll just have to wait a tiny bit more for the juicy stuff. The bickering is about to commence.

Next:

Communication continues;  Fury learns not to piss off an elf
Chapter 73

MIDGARD

Pepper caught up with Tony walking down the corridor, they and others all answering Fury’s summons. She’d been tapping furiously onto her tablet for hours but now she turned with a perplexed expression. “Tony?”

He walked casually next to her, his hands in his pockets. “Yeah, Pep?”

She tilted the screen a little in his direction. “Have you looked on the web recently?”

He huffed in irritation, not even looking and refusing to get into this argument again. “I have no idea why that video keeps popping up but it was three **years** ago.”

Sighing, she showed him her tablet fully. His eyebrows rose to see a video of Loki kicking butt, not one of his more…memorable moments caught by paparazzi. Then the camera moved to a teenage girl’s face. **“Totally hot God of Mischief saves Earth--bite my ass, Allyson, this totally tops your vid of your cat.”**

“You-tube?” He tried to act cool but Pepper knew instantly he had a hand in helping that video get onto the internet.

Pepper just nodded without addressing it, focusing on the effect. “He’s gone viral.”

“Go Loki.” But then he saw what she was talking about. The video already had easily surpassed a million views. There were cartoons and parodies based on it. Teenage girls had recorded videos of themselves drooling over a bad ass in leather. Even mainstream media was commenting and questioning if this was an elaborate hoax or a new Avenger in the making. Tony blinked quickly, eyes distant. It was going to be leverage. Taking off like a shot, leaving a startled girlfriend in his wake. “Idea! Good idea…I need Fury.”

“Tony?”

Spinning to walk backwards before disappearing down the corridor. “Talking later, genius now. Fury!”

Tony found him, talking with Thor and skidded to a stop. He wasn’t going to jump in the middle of the conversation. Maybe. Okay if something came up he totally was. But for now he zipped his lips and listened to Fury talking.

“I’m not comfortable with **real power** attending a strategy meeting concerning threats to my planet.” Tony just shook his head silently.

Thor kept his features set, ignoring people walking around them. “My brother knows how to keep secrets.”

“He also knows how to exploit them.”

Thor couldn’t deny that was also true, which is why it was never wise to underestimate him when standing on the opposing side of him. Still, he had faith in Loki and he was more than ready to defend him. Sif spoke before he could reply as she walked proudly up to them. “Thor, you can hardly argue your brother’s virtues.”
“Sif.” Thor growled in warning to her as she spoke.

Nick turned to address her fully. He’d seen enough to know that this one and the trickster didn’t get along. Perhaps enough of a divide that she would willingly part with information concerning Loki. “I don’t believe we’ve been introduced, Director Nick Fury. I run SHIELD.”

Sif nodded stiffly in reply. “Sif. I travel in Prince Thor’s company.”

Thor glanced at Sif again before introducing her to Nick. “Lady Sif has been on many of mine and my brother’s adventures together.”

“So you’ve seen him fight.”

Making a scoffing noise, Sif was almost dismissive. But there was a warrior’s calculation to her gaze that Fury overlooked. “He is not an AEsir warrior.”

Neither one of them missed the glint that leapt into Fury’s eye. Thor’s tone filled with warning. “Sif.”

She seemed oblivious to the rising tension. “Do I lie, Thor? Loki is not. His sword work is not clean or accurate enough. Bow and arrow? He has not the stamina nor shield ability.”

Tony shook his head as he walked up to the small group. “Damn, and I thought I was a bitch.”

Fury didn’t turn his head, barking at the inventor. “Stark.”

“Oh, when does Locks get a nifty costume?” That caused heads to turn and Tony smirked at all of them, turning the pad in his hands around so they could all see. “Popular opinion seems to think he’s a new Avenger…I might help them come to that conclusion. Hell, I might invite him. Well, I guess it’s more Steve’s party than mine. Steve will totally cave. Or Pepper could. Everyone bows to the will of Pep.”

“Not. Now.” Fury spoke through clenched teeth, his jaw muscle ticking.

Tony shook his head. “You’re really this much of an idiot? Don’t you get how much of a win this would be to have him on our team?”

Fury closed off his expression. “Are you an Avenger because of a personal invitation or because you simply won’t go away?”

Giving Fury a cheeky grin to annoy him. “You’re never getting rid of me until I choose to be out.”

A calculated look leapt into Fury’s eye. “He doesn’t need my permission, any more than you do, to do anything he damn well pleases.”

Tony didn’t get the point of bringing himself into the conversation. And then he did and he marveled at it. He wasn’t one for taking orders. Neither was Loki. Tell him it was something he couldn’t have and it made him fight to have it, even if he didn’t necessarily want it. Fury wasn’t making this easy because he was treating Loki like he would Tony. Tony felt his eyes widen ever so slightly, feeling a little dazed. “Oh.”

Thor’s voice rung with authority as if the matter were settled. “My brother will attend or there will be no meeting for it is his information that you wish for to protect yourselves.”
Nick nodded once, sharply. “Then he’s attending.”

The thunderer glared at the warrior goddess before turning. “Sif.”

Fury and Tony watched them go, the inventor whistling through his teeth. Then Tony glanced back at Fury. “You do realize if he’s not competing with his brother for the Avenger position he could really care less?” Nick slowly looked at him and Tony gave him a toothy smile. “Just thought I’d mention that before you piss him off and he decides the universe is better off without any of us in it.”

Thor walked and Sif followed. Once they were a good distance away Thor found the first unoccupied room and stormed into it. Sif took the hint and followed. He shut the door carefully but firmly behind them, snarling at her. “Explain why you would betray my brother and myself.”

Sif lifted her chin defensively. “Nothing I said was untrue.”

Thor growled at her. “It did not need to be said. They have no right to know of his weaknesses.”

She made a scoffing noise, dismissive. “I hardly made him vulnerable.”

He took a step closer. “Explain.”

She pulled in a breath, refusing to be cowed and explained her strategy. “He is a warrior, just not an AEsir warrior. He is faster than any of us and his magic is more terrifying a weapon than any, save Mjolnir. Daggers. Throwing knives. I told the mortal what he wanted to hear so he perceives he has an advantage. They will focus on this, not knowing that Loki will always have the advantage.”

The storm of emotions on Thor’s face cleared, impressed. “I have never known you to lie, Sif.”

Her tone was defensive. “I didn’t lie, I just did not tell him the complete truth.” He just continued to look at her and she sighed reluctantly. “I learned that from your brother.” Thor’s expression of consideration deepened. “Why are you so concerned, Thor? Loki is well capable of defending himself.”

Thor paused for several seconds, as if he were debating whether to confide something to her. “Do you recall the tale of Tesla?”

Every AEsir child knew of Mage Tesla. A legendary figure of sorcery and accomplishment. She was a celebrated figure of respect, of the same caliber to King Bor and King Odin. “Of course, a legend during your grandfather’s reign.”

Slowly Thor shook his head, having seen her shattered pendant and ring preserved in the vault. “She was no legend. She was a mage who defeated an armada of Dire Wraiths with a spell so devastating it not only destroy her enemy but her as well. The knowledge was burned and lost so that such a loss could not be repeated.”

Sif opened her mouth to question what that had to do with the here and now, but then she saw the worry in his eyes. Loki’s spell had been impressive, but she didn’t have a measurement for knowing if this had been a spell of Tesla’s caliber. If not in the same realm then it had been close. And she could easily see the trickster hiding the effects it might have on his body with illusion. A strange, primal wave of emotions rushed through her as she nodded slowly to her prince.
The room wasn’t as large as it should be so it was a rather tight fit. There were SHIELD personnel. The Avengers. The AEisir. Charles. Wolverine. His family. Jane’s friends. And fifteen elves. Loki had his arms crossed over his chest, eyes moving back and forth as words and arguments slowly filled the space. His glamour was firmly back in place and the pills Jane had slipped him, apparently courtesy of Bruce, left him gloriously pain free without sacrificing his mental sharpness. The elves were assembled behind him, he the defining line that separated them from the mortals.

He’d expected there to be second glances from the elves at him, they unlike the mortals aware of the power needed behind that spell. He hadn’t expected each and every damn one of them to bow to him. Including Trax. He thanked the Norns G’dath and Azni hadn’t treat him any differently although the healer looked annoyed every time she glanced at him.

Indel and Talia were sitting behind him, playing a mortal game called Candy Land. He didn’t get it. But the giggles convinced him not to persuade them to play something else. Mischief was whispering something in Jane’s ear and he could almost feel the occasional glare Erik was focusing into the back of his head. At the moment all he could concentrate on was the steadily building pressure behind his eyes and the fact that they did not have time for this.

It was worse than children fighting over a toy. Fury wanted as much intelligence as possible without sharing any of his own and Trax was being possessive. Bruce was in the corner meditating because getting in the middle of this mess would be bad for everyone’s health. Loki glared at Thor, speaking to him in AEisir. “Perhaps you should gain control of the situation, brother.” Thor didn’t even glance at him, too distracted by all that was going on and it only served to piss Loki off. He hated being ignored.

Loki loved chaos but chaos of his own making. At this point his father would slam Gungnir into the ground and command focus. For once, he was in agreement. He clenched and unclenched his fists at his sides and slowly started to count. He would not lose his temper. He would not do it. He’d had five years of dealing with colic and diapers and temper tantrums and pouts and other children’s parents and Jane Foster pissed off at him. He would maintain control.

Indel’s eyes just got bigger and bigger, ignoring all the other grownups in favor of his father. “Uh oh.” G’dath looked down at him with a raised eyebrow and he whispered. “Dada’s about to get really, really mad.” She studied Loki’s blank face, not sure how Indel could tell.

Loki had found a zen-like state just before Fury’s supposed final word on the matter caused his temper to spike. “There might or might not be a world out there that needs help. This world is the priority and the Avengers aren’t moving when we have no way of knowing who is going to be attacked first.”

Tony snorted, talking over the din. “Don’t see Property of SHIELD tattooed on my ass.”

“Stark!”

Tony just gave Fury a look. “Do you know how repetitive you’re getting? I’m starting to hate my own name.”

Steve was frowning with disapproval, whether it was at Fury or both of them was left unclear. “The Avengers were founded to protect Earth but our purpose is to go where we’re needed, director.”

“Belay that, soldier.”

Thor was frowning heavily. “You may give your orders as you wish but I have a duty to
Fury’s gaze moved in Thor’s direction, something almost probing in his tone. “You gave your word to protect this planet.”

Thor raised his chin ever so slightly. “I did not do so at the sacrifice of my own.”

Fury seemed to nod as an unasked question had been answered. His hand moving as if to encompass the remaining Avengers. “They’re not leaving. Discussion over.”

Loki flung both hands to the side, a concussive jolt of invisible magic shocked them all to silence. Hands clapped over their painfully ringing ears, cringing. Tony whipped around to stare at Loki with wide eyes. At the moment Loki felt like he was dealing with children. “ENOUGH.” His lip curled up in a snarl, his tone ominous and just daring one of them to disobey. “SIT. DOWN.”

Whether it was in a chair or on the floor, rears found perches before any of the owners even consciously thought about it. Thor blinked in surprise. He hadn’t heard a ‘father’ tone like that since his adolescence when their father used to tear into the pair of them for whatever misbehavior they would be guilty of committing.

Wolverine slowly took his cigar out of his mouth. “Whoa.”

Loki ignored him, glaring at anyone brave enough to actually raise their eyes, which weren’t many. “I have a child who is barely five years old, and he acts more mature than all of you. Combined. Grow up.” Turning to look at Fury, he pointed a finger at him. “If you prefer you and I will discuss privately what your Avengers will and will not be doing in the morning.”

“Brother--…”

Fury stood tall and firm, no expression on his face giving away his thoughts. “What you have to say can be dealt with now.”

“Very well. You will comply, the Avengers will journey with us to Asgard, and plans will be made whether the battlefield will be here or Asgard.”

Still no expression as he asked, “And if I refuse?”

Thor winced ever so slightly but didn’t interfere. Loki spoke calmly and matter-of-factly. “If you refuse I will still bring a select group of humans with me, for I do not need your permission nor access to the Bi-frost to do it. Once in Asgard, before I present myself before the All-father, I will sneak into the Hall of Records and make alterations to the law of protection currently keeping the remaining realms at a distance from your world.” AEisir eyes widened all around, except for Fandral who seemed to be expecting this and just nodded silently. “With Asgard’s withdrawal of protection you will no doubt discover just how grossly ill-prepared you are, your remaining existence should be finite…and painful. Now, were you done speaking just to hear the sound of your own voice?” Fury paled as much as his dark skin was capable.

Tony was blinking at him owlishly. “Shit, bambi.”

Loki nodded once to Fury, ignoring Tony. “We will initiate a trade of information. If you desire something, offer something in return or shut the fuck up.” Rounding on Trax, tempering his snarl but only just. “That is our map but mine more so because it was my input that created it. Show him. Now.” Glaring at Thor who blinked at him in surprise. “Heir and future king of the throne of Asgard, you ass. If you cannot learn to control a group of mortals how in Hel are you going to put the Advisory Council in their place?” He’d chosen not to use Allspeak on purpose, more so that his
words would have a greater impact with his brother. Thor looked like he’d been slapped by mother. Sif and the warriors studied the ground, faces carefully blank. Glaring up at the ceiling. “I swear by the Norns if you do not fix these chairs and shut the Hel up what I did to the Skrull will pale in comparison to what I do to the rest of you.” Loki took a deep breath as Fury stiffly moved to retrieve files and Trax pulled out the map, tacking it to the wall. The others in the room hastily reassembled the chairs and sat down in quiet rows as Loki slowly backed up, turning to give his wide-eyed children a mild look. “You are not allowed to repeat any of that.”

Erik and Darcy were both bug-eyed with jaws on the floor. Bruce came over to Loki’s left and gave him a small thumbs up. Barton shook his head in awe. “That was awesome.” Natasha raised an eyebrow at him. “What? I can still hate him and praise a verbal bitch slap.”

Jane snuggled into Loki’s right side and he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. She had that look in her eye. That mischievous spark that he’d been encouraging. She leaned up to whisper in his ear. “Do you have any idea how hot you are?”

Evil, evil woman. He scowled at her when she giggled and kissed his jaw. Loki shook his head, leaning back and folding his arms. “I am simply fortunate my mother is in Valhalla or she would make a special trip to Midgard just to wash my mouth.”

Natasha’s other eyebrow raised. “But she would be alright with referring to me as a mewling quim?”

Elven ears weren’t just for show, which became evident when G’dath’s head jerked around in his direction. Her eyes narrowed and there was only one word running through his mind. Shit. He was dead and he knew it. Hopefully G’dath wouldn’t try to rip him a new one here. Loki grimaced, wishing he’d minded his tongue just a bit better. “No.” Pointing down again at the two rug rats watching him. “Another word you are not repeating.”

Indel nodded solemnly to Natasha. “Dada only swears when he’s really, really, really mad.” Jumping in excitement on his seat. “This one time, he-…”

A furiously blushing Loki put a hand over his son’s mouth and scooped him into his arms. “You are not supposed to repeat that.” Jane opened her mouth with a grin and he pointed a stern finger at her face, saying nothing and she sealed her lips with a smirk. His smirk. Damn, I need to stop encouraging her but she is far too entertaining.

Talia stood up and pouted. “But pa-apa…Hel is never going to freeze over!”

Loki tapped her nose with a finger. “Exactly right.”

“Excuse me.” Heads turned back to Fury. “Are we interrupting? Or can we concentrate on saving the universe?”

Whispering in his son’s ear once pointing and muttering continued at the front of the room. “If you promptly forget that story and never repeat it I will bribe you with a surprise.”

Indel grinned wickedly and whispered back. “Deal.”

Loki ruffled his white hair. “Most definitely my son.” Talia pouted again even as Jane took Indel so Loki could conserve his strength. Moving his arm so she could duck under it. “Yes, I will have a bribe waiting for you as well.”

Talia giggled while Jane retrieved several chairs, sitting herself and after a moment Loki followed her example. Trax stuttered and fumbled with the star chart, pointing out areas while Fury
kept firing questions and making the elf more and more nervous. Loki rolled his eyes to himself.

Crossing his arms, he closed his eyes and let his mind just drift, the magic around him swirling and singing. Midgard was so potent. Different than the magic of Alfheim or even Asgard, but in a way stronger. It wasn’t strict to just one way, it bent and flowed to the needs of the user. It was a song. A poem. It was beautiful.

“Loki.” Loki opened his eyes and raised an eyebrow in Thor’s direction. Fury was staring at the thunderer with an unreadable expression but Trax was staring desperately at him. “Perhaps you would like to take over.”

Green eyes looking over the stiff, bored expressions before his mouth formed a smirk. “No one here is interested in my input, brother.”

Tony sighed, having figured out for as much ego as Loki threw around the guy had some serious self-esteem issues. “Alright, Thor, quick question: did your dad call Loki the best tactician in the universe?”

Loki raised both eyebrows since he’d never heard that as Thor nodded with a smile. “The finest in the nine realms, aye.”

The inventor raised his hand. “I for one want to hear strategy tips from the guy the king of the gods recommends. Anyone else?” Fury didn’t vote, but there was a subtle flare of interest in his gaze. Everyone else slowly raised their hands, some faster than others. Tony made a sweeping gesture. “The floor is yours, kind sir.”

Reluctantly smirking, Loki nodded to Thor for the recommendation and unfolded himself as he stood and stepped to the front of the room. Moving the star chart, he waved his hands a few times, changing the color coding of the world eater’s trajectory before one more sweeping gesture filled in small squares where dark passages were located. He turned and affected the instructive tone he used with Jane and his children. “From green to red, this was the path of what AEsir call the Chitauri world eater.”

Tony nodded in understanding. “Right, the bleeding rock you flattened.” He smirked a second later. “That was totally awesome, by the way.”

Mentally Loki shrugged, thinking the inventor was talking about the source spell since he had no recollection of holding Thor’s hammer. “Notice the dead space from here to here, they made for Alfheim because of the dark passage that connected the moon to M-earth. There is another dark passage here that would flow to earth, and another here that would lead to Asgard.” Pointing to a space between the two. “This is where Thanos is.”

Fury was frowning heavily in concentration. “What the hell is a dark passage?”

Loki didn’t even glance at him, eyeing the two passages. “A doorway, if you will, from one point in space to another.”

Bruce frowned at Jane before asking, “A wormhole?”

Loki answered for her, turning and crossing his arms with a shrug. “Essentially, but unmarked and hidden. It offers no gravitational force so one could pass in front of it and never notice.”

“Then how do you know where they are?”
Baring his teeth at Fury. “Because I am magic, Director, I can see things you cannot. I spent much of my adult life following the paths, memorizing them, to discover where they led.”

Thor’s voice held a lot of chiding in it as he asked, “Adult life, brother?” He could remember their mother worrying herself grey when Loki would disappear for days at a time to explore these paths that no one else could see or find.

Loki rolled his eyes. “It hardly makes a difference to them if I was eight seasons or past my majority.”

Nick stepped in, wanting to keep things on track. “Thanos?”

Smirking evilly, knowing the director’s reaction before he even spoke. “The one you call Gorgeous is keeping track of him for me.”

Fury squirmed, just as Loki predicted he would, and Tony raised his arm. “Question-…”

“Answer.”

Tony grinned slowly at the trickster. “Nice. Why can’t she kill him for us?”

Loki and Thor shared a look before Thor sighed. “There are limitations to even her abilities.”

“Why?”

The trickster’s shrug was almost dismissive as he diverted away from the question. Hela had her reasons for Thanos’ continued existence. Reasons that he wasn’t even going to attempt to try to explain. “Thanos will either take the passage to Midgard, or to Asgard…considering your forces I would suggest making Asgard the more attractive target.”

The director’s eye roamed over the map before reaffirming on Loki. “And how do you propose I do that?”

Replying as if the answer were obvious. “Send your Avengers and the scepter with Thor to the golden realm.”

“With us, brother.”

Smirking at Thor. “Of course, with everyone going to Asgard. My way is just easier to say.”

Nick interrupted the two brothers. “And if he comes here?”

“She will lay out the bait to ensure he won’t, provided the Avengers are where they need to be.”

Nick’s tone turned more insistent. “But if he comes here?”

Loki slowly shook his head and Thor had never seen him look so grim. “Imagine a creature more brilliant than Stark when it comes to technology. More powerful than Charles with telepathic manipulation. He can use that technology to further enhance his skills to cause physical damage in sleep or grab conscious minds from realms away.” He shared a look with Jane who had paled at the reminder, her hand aching to inch up and protect her neck but she stilled the impulse. “Take such a creature and twist him by madness, who believes himself death’s lover and kills purely
for her pleasure. That is Thanos. If he comes to earth first your Avengers here or on Asgard will make no difference.” A shudder went through the crowd.

Fury was already shaking his head, memory honed in on what happened to New York. “I’m not giving you the scepter. Thor can have it, but not you.”

Rolling his eyes, Loki folded his hands behind his back and started crossing the room. He needed a break from Nick’s yapping presence before he turned him into a one-eyed Jack Russell terrier. “I already took the scepter but I thank you for your thoughtfulness.” Then he paused to smirk evilly over his shoulder. “Daughter, if you would.”

Hela didn’t have to be present to hear him. In this instance she knew exactly what he was requesting and allowed the spells that had been hiding the fact that the scepter had been taken to fail. Almost immediately alarms sounded. The elves all tensed and the SHIELD agent’s in the room were armed seconds later. Loki’s smirk just broadened while Jane fondly shook her head. Now this was chaos of his own design. Fury kept a look on his face that was a mixture of a glare and stern command. “Hand it—…”

Thor was in front of Loki, growling menacingly. The warriors had all stepped forward to flank either side of him as the elves stirred. “You will not threaten my brother.”

Loki blinked in surprise. AEsir protective instincts. Thor hadn’t done this since he’d officially come of age and the other warriors never had. But then again until now he’d always been able to successfully hide his moments of weakness from the others. Thor had seen him without the glamour, it was the only explanation that made sense to him. He wasn’t an invalid, but compared to a normal day he certainly looked like one.

The AEsir were not a warm and fuzzy race. They were warriors. Yet there was no denying the importance of the royal family. Warriors were trained to fight their own battles, but every AEsir was also trained to believe that the life of the royal family was more important than their own. Those tricky, violent instincts that rose to defend a vulnerable member of the family would also ignite in the presence of mortal danger to the king or prince of Asgard.

Not that a gun was lethal, even in his current state. He smirked and leaned his weight back on one foot, crossing his arms to watch. Just this once he wouldn’t protest when Thor’s big brother/mother hen complex reared its ugly head.

Fury’s tone was surprisingly calm. With one assessing look Loki realized the director had no intention of ordering lethal force. “Do you even remember what happened the last time he wandered around here with that damn thing?”

“Do you not remember he is also responsible for your lives being spared?” Thor shrugged. “If you were concerned of its power or your capability to contain it, it would have been prudent to have it destroyed.”

“Well said, brother.” Thor’s head jerked slightly, hearing Loki’s untranslated comment but not willing to take his focus off of Fury.

Tony snorted and made a sweeping gesture to include all of SHIELD. “These are the guys that will take my best stuff and ‘improve’ it. Overkill is practically a requirement.”

Loki nudged his way to the front, pausing when Thor put a staying hand on his chest. “Brother—…”
Lightly smacking Thor’s hand away, he gave the thunderer a look before addressing Fury. “Nicholas, do you understand the phrase warrior culture?”

“I’ve heard the term.”

He should just do nothing and laugh with wicked delight when Nicholas dropped to the floor and died. “I’m going to be generous, but it’s for the last time and I suggest you not squander it.” His green eyes moved to look at what had been overlooked. “Look to your left.”

Nick looked to the left and felt his heart jump into his throat. There wasn’t anything scary about a five year old child. His delicately pointed ears and curling white hair only increased the cherubic innocence of his face. However, his green eyes were glowing, his teeth bared, and he was holding a wicked looking dagger in one hand. Add to that the fact that he was crouched on the topmost part of the backrest of a chair and hadn’t tipped it over only increased the fear factor. That kid looks like a demon spawned gargoyle. Nick had enough sense not to say that out loud.

Loki took measured steps. He was Indel’s father but right now on an instinctive level he was perceived as ‘injured’. “Unlike an AEsir, as a dark elf his instincts will override his logic…and all elves are lethal.” Add to that the fact that he was half Jötunn and it guaranteed that Indel had powerful instincts and not the experience to control them. Talia was squirming in Jane’s arms, her teeth bared and proving that light elf instincts were just as primed.

“Who the hell gives a kid a weapon?” Fury’s tone was a strange mixture of mystified and horrified even as he ordered with another slight gesture for the weapons to be put away.

Loki and every other AEsir had been handling weapons since they were old enough to hold onto them. “I taught him to use a blade two years ago. He liked this one so much I let him keep it.” Fury shuddered and shifted to move. Loki held out his palm. “Do not move.” Nick froze while Loki focused on his son.

Instead of trying to take the knife from him, Loki carefully picked Indel up and turned to leave the room. A little time away from mortals and Indel’s instincts would calm. Nick still didn’t move because those eyes didn’t waver from him until the door closed.

The room as a collective took a breath once father and son had left the room. Jane nodded to G’dath as she picked up Talia and followed after them. Thor didn’t move, his jaw set and blue eyes hard. “Son of Fury. I tell you as the future king of Asgard…I will lead Asgard’s army to subdue my brother’s enemies.”

Everyone else jumped as the warriors that remained all chorused together. “Aye!”

Thor barely reacted, his tone firm and face set. “If Thanos chooses a different battlefield Asgard will respond.”

Fandral stood stiffly. “Which is why it is wise to follow the prince’s plan.”

“I’m in.” Heads swiveled to look at Logan who shrugged dismissively. “I don’t answer to SHIELD or anyone else. I’m in.” The elves all bowed to Azni and filed out carefully.

Tony nodded. “I think we need to figure out who’s not volunteering ‘cause it’s kinda obvious everyone else is.”

Nick’s expression was unreadable, addressing Thor. “You have that much faith in his plans?”
“We are a race of warriors, son of Fury. My father has fought in wars for thousands of years. In war Asgard has never known defeat, even as we have lost battles within that war. There is only one man who has never lost a battle he planned for, and that man is my brother.”

“Except New York.”

Thor’s smile was strange. Grim but also touched with a bit of humor. “My brother intended your victory.”

Nick’s head tilted ever so slightly in interest. “You know that for a fact.”

“Aye.” He’d been hopeful that was the case at the time. After considering the low death toll and Loki’s almost complete lack of spell usage he knew it for certain but that realization did not occur until recently. “I do not know the why but had it not been his intention, your defeat would have been assured.”

Steve nodded. “Good enough for me.”

Fury sighed before turning to glare at a SHIELD agent. “Somebody get ahold of Strange. We’ll need as much fire power on alert as possible…just in case.” He shot a glance at Xavier. “The X-men on standby would be helpful.” Charles nodded slightly in return. Returning his gaze to Thor, his focus now on preparing for what he did have control over. “Did he tell you the plan if Thanos attacks here first or do we need to reconvene?”

Thor nodded once, arms crossed. “He did.”

“Then I’m all ears.”

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**Author's Notes:**

*Like I said. Children. I think they all need a nap at this point.*

**Next:**

*Tony and Loki discuss the future;  Loki and Jane discuss the past.*
Chapter 74

MIDGARD

“Loki.” G’dath didn’t say anything further as she entered the small lab.

Jane’s lips twitched as she felt Loki stiffen behind her. Azni had agreed to look after the children so she could get a head start on the calculations screaming in her mind, begging to be written down. Loki hadn’t quite begged to go with her but he certainly hadn’t wandered. But physics in its mathematical form wasn’t of strong interest to Loki, except when she whispered those calculations in his ear; so suddenly his presence up to this point made perfect sense. He was hiding and using her as a human shield.

She looked up and watched. Every step G’dath took Loki countered, keeping Jane between them and his back protected. Almost as if he were afraid…

Jane swallowed a tickle in her throat.

G’dath paused, her head tilted slightly. Loki jumped at the opportunity her pause presented. “Before you say anything I wish to defend myself.” G’dath slowly lifted a single eyebrow but didn’t speak and didn’t move. Loki paused for just a moment before almost weakly saying. “I was having a bad day.”

“Mewling quim?” He winced. Jane grimaced. G’dath’s expression filled with rebuke. “And if one of your children started speaking in that manner?”

He looked more than a little affronted. “They would not.” Then muttering softer. “They wouldn’t dare.”

“They learn by example, Loki.”

Jane’s lips twitched again, using the digital pad Tony had given her to take the equations and move it to a grid for a more practical application. A tablet that was designed by the inventor with all the bells and whistles, including a massive hard drive and a nearly limitless power supply. She didn’t even glance at the elf. “G’dath, stop. You’re not that mad.”

The healer looked at Jane before sighing with a disappointed frown in his direction. “No, I suppose I’m not.”

G’dath watched with amusement as Loki gravitated towards the screen which had taken Jane’s calculations and turned it into a three dimensional model that could be manipulated. She nodded slightly to herself as she watched the pair of them turn the abstract into something that could be practical. She still felt Asgard was full of fools who would never fully appreciate what the pair of them could do together.

Loki speaking drew her attention. “We’ll be leaving just after dawn. How are the elven?”

G’dath smirked a little to herself. The children had adapted well. The only ones that were the most uncomfortable underground were the same ones that followed Loki topside to battle the Skrull army. “Those that were distressed by our present location have been taken to the surface by Trax.”

“If they go on a rampage I’m getting blamed.” Neither lady could quite figure out if he was
disgruntled or pleased.

G’dath shook her head slightly in the negative. “They won’t. They were made fully aware of the consequences of stepping beyond the perimeter.”

“What consequences?”

The healer smirked. “By Lady Death.”

“Ah.” Which was an answer that needed no further explanation. They knew defying Hela was an assurance of a quick death. Whether it was painless might not be a luxury she would grant.

G’dath watched silently as they moved around one another. Even as their attention seemed to be riveted to the 3D shape hovering before them as they manipulated it they also seemed to be dancing around the tablet less than a foot away. She watched as different shapes and calculations flashed across the tablet each time they pressed a button. Shapes that didn’t resemble what was hovering in the air, “I am not terribly familiar with these mortal methods but I do believe you are doing something they wouldn’t like.”

Both Loki and Jane looked up with nearly identical sparks of mischief in their eyes. Then as one they both placed an index finger to their lips. G’dath stifled a giggle and walked away.

“Is Nicholas still being difficult?”

Tony grinned for just a moment before shrugging at Loki, his hands focused. The debriefing had ended several hours ago, everybody getting ready to go in the morning. Talking over his shoulder. “Nah. He backed off about the field trip to Asgard.”

“As I thought he might were I to no longer be in the vicinity.”

“Something about you really chafes him.” Tony paused to glance at his friend with a wicked smirk. “Wonder what that could be.”

“Mmm…” Then a matching one spread across Loki’s face. “He is irritated I do not manipulate easily.”

“Maybe. I think he’s more irritated that you push his buttons on purpose.” Loki just grinned evilly. Tony laughed while shaking his head. “Thought so.” He manipulated a few wires before asking almost casually, “Soo…did you two get everything?”

Loki’s face went blank. “I have no idea what you mean.”

Tony’s lips twitched but he didn’t glance back, knowing that was an answer unto itself. He, Jane, and Loki had all decided to work together to steal (or borrow as Jane put it) as much technological information as possible from SHIELD without getting caught. Some of it could be helpful in the battle to come…or Tony might find it useful in bringing Asgard into the next century. “So, we get to go up there. I guess we have to meet big daddy first.”

Loki grimaced just a little at that nickname for his father. He delighted in it, of course, but the grimace was more because he could easily see Tony calling him that to his face. “Less you wish to be immediately ejected you are quite correct.”

Tony put down his tools and turned around, leaning back against the table and crossing his arms before asking, “Just how forgiving is the big guy?”
Loki refrained from grimacing again at his father’s idea of forgiveness. His father’s view was: a wrongful act followed by righteous punishment. Forgiveness was something one obtained after that person was punished enough. Which only served to confound Loki. How much was enough? It was a line still too vague for him to grasp the concept. Unless of course one were Thor. Then sufficient pouting was all that was required for father to forgive him. “In what context?”

Tony shuddered, knowing he and the old king were never going to get along. That he had to actually qualify a concept like forgiveness was horrifying. “I mean…I have a big mouth and saying highly inappropriate things is practically a requirement for my existence. Is he going to kill me for it?”

“Ordinarily inappropriate actions are punished severely…” Immediately the trickster’s mind went to the bracelets. Loki shivered almost subtly enough for the inventor not to notice. Tony froze for a moment, clearly debating the merits of staying behind. Which would simply not do because Loki had no intention of returning to Asgard if the inventor wasn’t around to entertain him. “…but the AEsr have a low opinion of mortals in terms of your sophistication. I would assume most offenses would be ignored.”

“But I’m not ‘mortal’ anymore.” Tony’s fingers hooked into air quotes.

“No, but you are human. At your age you would not even be considered a fully developed child yet, compared to an AEir.” Loki sighed when Tony still didn’t look completely sold on the idea. “I suppose if you overstep your position as ambassador to your world I will just have to save you.”

“Good to know.”

Loki came up to his left, looking down at the suit on the table with a frown before asking, “What are you doing?”

The inventor knew he’d be useless in a battle without a suit. “Your little magic trick made my old suits useless so I’m rigging a power source for them.”

“Ah.” Loki wandered away while Tony turned to refocus on his suit. The trickster stopped to stare with a strange expression on his face, looking at a computer monitor. “How did you do that?”

Tony turned to watch what he was watching. It was a video of the girl’s YouTube video, playing silently. “Simple data transfer. The kid you rescued had a camera phone; surprise, surprise. Kudos on making Fury even more nervous about you, by the way. After your little tornado she recorded you smashing the bleeding rock with your brother’s hammer. I was too slow to stop her from uploading it onto YouTube…and Buzzfeed… darn. Fury is gonna be so Fury-ous.”

Loki’s voice was hoarse to his own ears, ignoring Tony’s pun. “Only Thor can lift Mjolnir.” If he hadn’t seen it, he wouldn’t have believed it. He was seeing it and he still wasn’t believing it. He calmed with one thought: Jane. Jane wouldn’t lie to him. She would tell him the truth and help him make sense of it all.

“Pep says there’s a catch to all this.” Tony purposefully changed the subject. Loki was a friend but the look on his face called for a year of therapy and that wasn’t his forte.

After a moment Loki slowly nodded, knowing where the inventor’s focus had shifted. He was actually surprised the questions hadn’t been thrown his way sooner. “Relative immortality.”
“Besides that.”

Ah yes. The sarcastic inventor is even more desperate for control than I am. “You cannot stay here.”

Tony turned and assumed his preferred position again, arms crossed. “Yeah, run that one by me with an explanation.”

Loki glanced at him. “Time slows down to a crawl for you, but it rages on for all those around you. You’ll turn around and someone at twenty will be sixty.”

Shrugging casually, not impressed. “I’ve stood out my entire life, so what?”

“And when your children turn six, their little friends will be dying of old age.” Because this was more than just a gift for himself. This would be something that would pass on through the generations.

Now Tony snorted. As if he were concerned about that. “Not planning on having kids, Locks.” No way. He’d be worse than Stark Senior. No kid should have to grow up with a father like that.

Loki smirked knowingly. “Men like you and I don’t. But when it happens you are left wondering how you existed for so long without them.”

Tony’s expression said quite plainly that not even if Pep sold it to him was he buying it. “How about this: I’m going to Asgard. Save the universe and all that, go team. Let’s leave the future just out there for now and you can try to convince me after we win.”

Smirking with a shrug. “Agreeable. I would also suggest talking with G’dath about such matters.”

“One of the elves, right?”

Nodding slowly, knowing if he had as short of a life span as he suspected she would be the perfect person for Tony to have as a resource. “A clever woman and very skilled in magic.”

Tony studied Loki silently. There was something different about his eyes, a resignation and Tony didn’t like seeing it. But it was more than that. He looked freer, less burdened. Odd, was all he could think. He nodded to himself and pulled out a long case from a cabinet under the work table. Putting it on a table, he opened it up and smoothed his hands carefully over the adamantium. Shiny and new, flawless perfection and perhaps one of the greatest weapons he’d ever made.

“Hey, Locks, come here a second.” Loki raised an eyebrow but mentally shrugged as he walked to the inventor’s side. He looked over what was in the case, his magic singing to him. Tony glanced at him. “I was told you might be in the market for a scepter.”

Other eyebrow raising even as he slipped a hand in and gripped the middle, twirling the staff portion and admiring the twin blades that slid out on either end. He’d never felt anything like it. Like a part of himself had been missing and was now made whole, just by holding it. “Apparently you’ve forgotten the last time I was on this planet with a scepter of power.” Not that he was inclined to give it back.

The inventor shrugged to himself as he closed the case. “One big difference.”

Loki cocked his head slightly. “Which is?”
Tony made a show of shuddering. “I have no idea where you got that glow stick of destiny, but this I made specifically for you.”

Loki stopped twirling, feeling suspicious. “Why?”

“Because a powerful prince should have a powerful weapon.”

His voice was quiet, so many shattered dreams within this one sentence. “I’m not a prince of Asgard…anymore.”

Smirking arrogantly and ignoring the apparent emotional mine field he’d accidentally stumbled into. “It doesn’t mean you can’t be a prince of earth.”

Loki blinked slowly. “What?”

Tony grinned as if it was obvious. “You’re helping us destroy the bad guy.”

“Purely for my own interests.”


Loki sniffed and glanced at his fingernails. “Hardly. I outdate you by centuries. You are, sadly, only mortal…and very young.” Tony rolled his eyes but what Loki said next actually offended him. “From a relative sense you are only slightly older than Indel.”

“Ha ha, very funny asshole.” Loki glanced up, his eyes sparkling with amusement and burying his confusion for now. “Not anymore, smartass. And from what I’ve figured out you’re not much older than a teenager so watch it.”

Loki narrowed his eyes in warning. “You would be wise not to make mention of that.”


His eyes returned to the scepter, marveling at the precision of the balance. “I could just use the scepter your director had under lock and key downstairs.”

Ticking off the reasons that idea was a big fat NO on his fingers. “Okay one: I think we both know you hate that thing as much as we hate when you use it. Two: the Avengers will never let that happen. Three: see reason number one.” Loki chuckled softly. “Besides, and don’t kill me for saying this, but I know Thor getting that hammer was important and for reasons I don’t get you got passed over. So: happy birthday.”

Loki froze before snarling. “Mjolnir is more than just a name day gift.”

Tony accepted the anger eagerly over the tragedy that had been in his green eyes prior. “Yep, I get it. It’s a weapon of might and a symbol of Thor one day being king.”

“Close enough.” Loki sighed.

Nudging Loki’s shoulder with his own while asking, “But isn’t every prince supposed to get something like that?”

Loki scowled lightly and nudge him in return. “Only those worthy of ruling.”
And Mjolnir had just proved Loki was worthy, even if the demi-god had yet to accept it. Tony shrugged. “Then keep it.”

Loki smoothed his hand over the runes carved along one of the blades, frowning slightly. “I was not aware Midgardians knew this language.”

Tony shrugged again in reply. “I don’t. Hela told me to carve it. I got it right, didn’t I?”

Nodding slowly before his head jerked around in surprise. “You did--she told you her name??”

Grinning smugly, wishing he could rub Fury’s face in it. “Yep. And just saying…you have a smoking hot daughter.” Oh, if only looks could kill. Tony tilted his head towards the runes. “What’s it mean?”

Loki’s eyes flashed green. “Conqueror of Helheim.”

Raising his eyebrows, the significance lost on him. “Oh-kay.”

Smoothing his palm along the staff portion, feeling something stirring. An odd sensation. Almost living magic and yet not. “Something is at the heart of it.”

“Yep. She gave it to me…well, she actually put it in and said even looking at it wrong could melt my skin off.” Loki smirked evilly. “What?”

Rattling off a definition he remembered hearing once. “The conqueror of a world is able to wield the heart of it. As Helheim is the realm of the dead and given the height of the staff there must be a thousand demon hearts running through the center.” Maybe he was lying about that, maybe he wasn’t. In this case, Hela probably liquefied Helheim rock but Tony didn’t have to know that.

Face twisting as he took a step back. “I am so-o happy I didn’t touch it.” Smirking suddenly, not sure if it would help his buddy’s esteem issues but willing to throw it out there in the universe anyway. “I’ll never repeat it and I’ll probably never bow to you but you, Prince Loki, are worthy.”

Loki glanced at him even as his face remained unreadable. He flicked his wrist subtly while narrowing his eyes just a little, manipulating the alloy on Tony’s suit. The inventor probably wouldn’t notice until later, but he’d just increased the protective capability of the metal until it rivaled AEIsir armor.

Tony was oblivious at the moment, his mind skipping back to a conversation he’d had with Thor. Then mentioning this as almost an afterthought. “Oh, we both know you’re smarter than Thor…you do know nicknames aren’t insults, right?”

Loki turned his head slowly, face blank. “You have been insulting me?”

Holding up his hands and taking a BIG step back. “Whoa! I said nicknames are NOT insults, emphasis on the NOT of the statement.” Loki smirked suddenly, eyes sparkling with mischief and Tony started swearing. “Goddamn you are such an asshole!”

Jane found him lost in his thoughts, sitting on the sofa without his armor and eyes focused a million miles away. A scepter was leaning against the wall a few feet from him. She gave Azni a quick thanks for looking after the children, who just smiled and nodded before retiring to her own quarters.
She’d never seen the scepter before but she could feel it moving in sync with his magic. Because of their connection her awareness of his magic was always there in the back of her mind. But the scepter seemed to have a calming effect on what she thought of as his magical aura. She sat down carefully next to him, his scowl as he pulled her into his lap told her quite plainly there was only so much concern for his well-being he could stomach at one time.

It was late enough that the children were all asleep. Tonight it had taken poor Azni three stories, two trips for water and more than half an hour of cuddles before they would calm down enough to sleep. The excitement of seeing Asgard and their grandfather keeping them awake far longer than normal.

Jane swallowed a protest and leaned back against him. She didn’t voice her concern. She didn’t insist he drop the glamour hiding the current state of his AEsir form. Instead, she listened. Loki rested his chin lightly on her head, arms wrapped around her. “We travel to Asgard tomorrow.”

She nodded and lightly patted his chest. “You get to see your father.”

“Is he?” He whispered the question, almost afraid of the answer.

Jane played with the fabric of his tunic, frowning a little to herself. “If you are Talia’s father then Odin is yours. He may not be a very good father but most of us aren’t lucky enough to choose that.” Indel was his by birth but Talia was his by choice.

Swallowing once, mind flowing through all the possibilities. “There are so many ways this could all go so terribly wrong. What if this is all a ploy just to lure me into a trap?”

She glanced up at him. “You believe Thor, don’t you?”

A slight grin tugged at the corner of his lip. “Artifice is not Thor’s strength.”

Shrugging dismissively, as if the solution were obvious. “Then we go into this prepared for the worst but hoping for the best.” He stayed silent, eyes still distant. “Hey.” Loki blinked before tilting his head to look at her. “Has your father ever altered an edict just to make it possible for someone to return to Asgard?”

Loki pulled in a deep breath before exhaling slowly. “No. I honestly wasn’t expecting him to do something like that…” For me. It was be the equivalent of all those times when a pout of a few humbled words from Thor were all that was required for Odin to forgive the thunderer.

Jane nodded knowingly. “You were testing him.”

A slightly naughty smile crossed his face. “Perhaps.”

She sat up and he let her, but he didn’t let her move too far away. “So, we’re going to do this but if they screw up we’ll leave them to sort Thanos out on their own and go.”

Playing along with her, knowing she would probably react differently once she saw the devastation Thanos was capable of. He wouldn’t leave the AEsir to their fate. Asgard’s failure would simply mean that his focus would shift to his family entirely and only once they were safe would he return, no matter who was sacrificed in the process. “Everyone?”

She considered the question before shrugging slightly. “Well, maybe we’ll take Darcy with us.”

Loki grimaced at the very thought. She seemed a curiously nice girl for being so blunt, but
she was also very uncouth. “She is rather obnoxiously loud.”

Jane sounded indignant. “Hey, that’s my second best friend you’re insulting.”

He just purred softly as he asked, “And who is your…best friend?”

Shrugging without even pausing. “She tied with Pepper.” Loki instantly scowled and she giggled, kissing his jaw to appease him. “You’re such a softy, oh best friend of mine.”

He huffed before pulling her close for a proper kiss, the two of them relaxing back against the cushions after a few minutes. The glamour slowly faded to reveal his gaunt, AEsr body but Jane refused to react and give him a reason to hide again. He wasn’t even aware it was gone, his mind moving to something that seemed impossible.

“Did I truly lift Mjolnir?” He sucked in a startled breath, not even intending to say it out loud. Even though Jane would never mock him, he expected it anyway. Of course she didn’t and warily he continued talking. “I tried after Thor was exiled but I was unworthy. I thought it…was because I was Jötunn.” And it had only made the rage and horror worse. Rage that it was his Jötunn blood that made him unworthy and horror that Odin had known all along he could never be the king of Asgard and had been grooming him for centuries to be the puppet king of Jötunheim once Thor assumed his throne. “I am not that terribly different, am I?”

She played with his hair a little before lightly tapping his forehead. “I think you’re different here…” She then brushed her fingers over his heart. “…than here.”

“How is my mind different?”

There was no judgment in her eyes. No recrimination. “You looked down on us. Mortals.”

With the exception of his mother, no one had made him feel ashamed of himself like Jane could and she wasn’t even trying. His voice softened, his eyes lowered. “I did.”

Brushing her thumb along his temple. “And Jötunn were just monsters once.”

“Yes.”

She frowned just a little thoughtfully. “The AEsr could do no wrong…except against you.”

“That I never believed.” He swallowed. “I believed I was better than all of them. But I also believed I was a monster for it.”

Whispering against his temple, her voice firm in belief. “You’re not a monster. You’re just young.” He snorted at the very thought that someone of her age could call him out on that. She sounded slightly amused, rather than offended. “In a relative sense I’ve got ten years of living on you, buddy. That’s about a thousand to Asgard. And even then I’m still trying to figure things out.” She pulled back enough to look into his searching green eyes, lips quirking in amusement at herself at the strangeness of her own logic sometimes. “You changed your mind. You have a good heart, Loki. You’ve always had a good heart. You were hurting and you just got a little confused.”

“A little confused?”

Tapping the end of his nose lightly. “The point is that obviously your skin and your species don’t make a good or bad king for Asgard. You’re worthy because something changed.”
He knew talking to Jane would clear his confusion enough for him to figure it out. Maybe because he started to form opinions of his own instead of keeping his view narrowed to what he’d been told. Maybe it was because for the first time in his life he had tentatively established rules and boundaries. Or maybe it was because of his stupid vow to protect the idiotic innocents of this insane universe.

Or because now he was beginning to understand the importance of life, no matter the species.

And no, he wasn’t pouting. Protesting softly, not certain if he was trying to convince her or himself. “I would be a horrible king.” She rolled her eyes at him playfully and he felt he should remind her of why he was right. “I tried to destroy an entire realm after holding the crown for less than three days. Does that not tell you I am unfit to rule?”

Her amusement had only grown, her sparkling eyes telling him she was done with serious conversation. “It tells me you didn’t have me around to put his lordship in his place.”

“My place?” His tone turned flat, unamused.

She pushed at his shoulder lightly and he tilted to the side, stretching out on the surprisingly comfortable sofa but taking her with him. She just grinned and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. He made a few sounds of protest against her throat but gave up far too quickly for it not to be all for show. He hummed softly and she felt him yawn, her fingers returning to trek through his dark locks. As they both sank against one another, Loki couldn’t help but sleepily think that this was definitely his place.

Thor pulled in a slow breath, the morning temperate and the sun firmly above the horizon. There were already a set of runes on the ground of New Mexico, he coordinating with Heimdall for the amount of people that would be traveling from Midgard to Asgard today. Included in those numbers was his brother and he felt himself smile.

The royal stables had been emptied, as well as several carriages hitched. There wasn’t enough for everyone since the remaining horses of Asgard were with the warriors their father had sent into ready status in case they were needed. But there was enough for the light elves to arrive safely within the palace gate from the Bi-Frost. The rest of them would just make do with a slow walk to the palace.

“Uncle.”

Thor turned to the right, Hela standing next to him. He nodded to her in greeting. “Niece.”

She was here to see them off, since she wouldn’t be able to follow them. Plus she had noticed a little byproduct of Loki’s spell here and she intended to investigate it. She turned to look back at the grooves dug into the ground, the only true physical evidence for what had happened the other day. “Quite an impressive trick, was it not?”

Thor grimaced, though whether it was at the adjective or something else remained unclear. “Aye.”

She sighed at him. “Why are you so disturbed when Loki shows off his talents? Is it because he eclipses your father?”

Thor shook his head, surprised she would even think that was his reason. “Nay. Loki’s
display of his power, less or more than father’s, matters not.”

Hela tilted her head in curiosity. “Yet you dismiss us.”

He frowned down at her. “I do not dismiss you. I have proved oblivious at times but I do not dismiss your and Loki’s might.”

“Your words say——…” Her eyes suddenly widened, as if a puzzle piece that had remained elusive for centuries just slotted into place. “Your words say otherwise. Words you’ve been intentionally repeating for years. Words that dismiss seidr followed swiftly by encouragement for us to come to the training yard. To learn a new weapon. Time you willingly sacrifice from your own training to teach us a new skill. I get it! Why did I not--…you’ve done this on purpose all this time. Why?”

Thor didn’t answer right away, but when he did respond he offered the grim truth. “Because my brother is gravely injured after wielding his seidr properly. A sword held and used correctly does not injure the warrior using it.”

“You’re worried.”

His voice rumbled with that worry, his arms crossed. “Of course I am. Mother and father have always found a balance between magic and might. You. Loki. You both wield it and nearly kill yourselves when you do. What if--…” Thor stopped himself from saying it, the possibility that Loki or Hela could ever die from it too much for him to contemplate. He’d lost his brother too many times as it was. “I discouraged you as best I could when we were younger. I realized too late it only strengthens your resolve and the insult has become habit.”

Hela’s eyes narrowed a little, voice rising with anger. “That may be your intent, Thor, but when others repeat your words their intent is different. It drives us to prove our worth for Asgard has questioned that for years.”

“I realize this now and matters will change.”

She glanced away in a huff. “Do not make vows you cannot keep.”

He gently reached for her far arm to turn her back to face him. “As soon as I am made king I will break father’s edict.”

She slowly lifted an eyebrow. “You still believe he chooses to keep me at a distance?”

“Father has torn up and dismissed edicts before.”

“When was the last time you remember him doing so?” Thor slowly blinked in surprise while Hela’s tone turned leading. “Who has authority where the All-Father doesn’t, prince?”

Thor was quick to shake his head, knowing and dismissing them. “The advisory council is merely that.”

Her voice turned sickly sweet. “Are they? Or perhaps were they, before a very clever phrasing in one law changed all that?” Now her voice and stance was strong, nothing but the queen she was before him. “Learn this lesson well, prince. If you are not the cleverest person in the room, be sure you have the loyal aid of one who is or you will be reduced to a figure head and surrender the politics of your kingdom to a group of fools.”

“What can be done?”
Hela supplied the answer as if it were obvious. And how she knew of such things mystified him and probably always would. “Why do you think Odin is eager for your coronation? You have the power to request a new advisory council…and a decade after your crowning to alter or destroy any edict or law no matter how old.”

“Loki knows the phrases of the law better than I.”

Hela shrugged once. “Then establish him as viceroy.”

Frowning but watching her curiously. “Can he be both prince and viceroy?” For Thor wouldn’t be satisfied until Loki regained his title.

The corner of her lips quirked slightly. “Thor, when the time comes it will be your reign. Do whatever you want. Set a new precedent if it pleases you.”

“Even if I chose Sif as a wife?” He said the words carefully, watching her in expectation of seeing a look of disgust and surprised he didn’t see it.

Instead Hela spoke softly. “Don’t ask me that unless you really want my opinion.”

“Why do you dislike her?” He’d never understood why Hela had such a strong dislike for Sif. Until recently she’d never even officially met the warrior goddess. It wouldn’t be unheard of for Hela to dislike someone purely because Loki didn’t like them but it was surprising to him when it happened.

“You choose to hide your intelligence. I have serious concerns about hers.” He frowned at her opinion with disapproval but she ignored him. He’d asked for it so she was going to oblige. “There are others who could make a better queen. Anya’s insight would aid you well. Even Jane’s loud little friend would be a better queen than Sif but the choice is yours to make. Besides, your coronation may be soon but you don’t have to choose a queen or even a bride. So long as Loki’s title of prince is secured you will have the convenience of time.”

“Once I have new advisors, with Loki’s assistance we will break your banishment.” Hela had no doubt of that. But if all went according to plan, it wouldn’t be necessary. He nodded, seeing people starting to emerge from the SHIELD bunker and knowing she would take a step back in mixed company. “How large of an army has Thanos accumulated?”

“Right now he is focused on the gem of Reality.” Thor watched her fingers brush against a stone around her neck. His eyes slowly widened in horror, pulling in a breath to protest. She bared her teeth and her fingers hooked enough to let him know without words he would be in for a hell of a fight if he tried to claim it. “I keep that, so that even if he succeeds in vanquishing Asgard, he will never be able to complete the gauntlet. Once he discovers his quest is fruitless he will gather enough and attack Asgard.”

“Do you anticipate a number?”

Hela considered what she knew and what she’d planned for. “He has use of the Skrull technology with his own. Given AEsir reputation he will not be satisfied with less than 1,500 legions of 5.” He nodded grimly, absorbing that number. It translated to approximately 7.5 million strong. Not an impossible number. AEsir might had triumphed against those numbers before. Her eyes flashed of warning. “That is a modest estimate.” It was entirely possible the numbers would be three times that amount, if not more. Thanos would not be satisfied with just one realm’s worth of fighters, but three. He was not one to underestimate someone twice.
“Asgard will stand.”

Hela nodded slowly, watching as everyone started to gather. Asgard would stand and by themselves they would fall under the sheer numbers. But she and Loki thought alike, so he would be anticipating these numbers. Asgard would need Alfheim, convenient that Azni is accompanying them. Vanheim will be vital, but thanks to Sigyn the matter was settled. Only one realm left that was needed, and it was up to Loki to gain their assistance.

Author's Notes:

Countdown! Got the feels in there, a bit of humor, and some quality time between Jane and Loki.

Next:

One minor distraction to clean up
Chapter 75

ASGARD

Odin looked out, watching as the sun slowly rose over Asgard’s horizon. Today would be the day and he understood that his actions would determine the outcome as much as Loki’s would. He hoped that by evening he would be able to welcome this extension of his family home but he was not an optimistic man. The possibility of him losing his temper or Loki doing something unforgiveable was depressingly high.

A soft sound caused him to turn his head slightly, seeing Anya taking a rag to one of the pillars. Considering her one duty was exclusively to Loki’s chambers his suspicion of her presence had foundation. She paused in her cleaning to give him a curtsey. “Sire.”

He studied her for a moment as she went back to running the cloth over a pillar that truly didn’t need dusting. “Was there an opinion you wished to offer?”

She looked caught for just a moment, the expression similar to the one that would cross Loki’s face as a child. Only his son had been much faster in hiding it. “Uh, no. Sire.” This was a public corridor. In the distance there were a trio of courtiers walking in this direction. Anya noticed who they were and with a squeak tucked herself into a shadowy nook while continuing to clean.

Odin’s brow furrowed slightly, giving the courtiers a more thorough glance. Lady Tia if he wasn’t mistaken. The identity of the other two escaped him. Neither were of consequence. Putting a bit of a rumble in his tone. “Are you having difficulties with the ladies of court?”

He was a firm believer that a man fought their own battles. But he was not opposed to stepping in when someone used their position and influence to abuse the palace servants. Anya came forward now that she was required to offer a more formal answer. “T-…she will not accept that I do not serve her.”

He blinked once, surprised. A servant was not provided the luxury of informal addresses without an invitation. That Anya would skip using Tia’s name completely spoke volumes. He thought to respond, but Tia’s voice filled with cold malice stopped him.

“There you are, servant.” Anya made a slight face while her head was turned before her expression smoothed behind a mask of subservient obedience as she turned to face the other woman. Odin knew he was hidden from their sight, giving him an unfiltered view of behavior between the courtier and Anya. “Slaves should not run from their betters.”

Anya ground her teeth, fighting with her temper and responding evenly. “I’m a servant of the palace, not a slave.” Another social cut that Anya chose not to address Tia’s title or station. “Try to give notice, my dear, and see if you are not a slave.” Her expression turned coy. “I have heard that servant’s like you serve a particular master. Who is yours?”

“With respect I cannot say.”

Tia frowned heavily at being denied that information. “Who do you serve?”

Anya’s own eyes glinted with a hint of steel. She would never be disloyal to her prince. “Not you, that is for certain.”
“The impertinence!”

Odin came around the column almost casually, his voice a deep rumble of disapproval. “Those who perform duties here serve. They are not indentured nor are they bound to lifetime contracts.”

“Sire.” Tia and her two flunkies immediately dropped into a deep curtsey. “I did not see you.”

“Indeed.” They all rose with his first word spoken. He waited until he had their full attention before speaking again. “I find it interesting your preoccupation in flirting with danger.”

“Sire?”

He was the perfect depiction of disapproval, glaring coldly at her. “A woman of your position that would choose to utter such falsehoods is reprehensible. You are a discredit to your station and a shame to your family honor.” Tia flushed an ugly shade of puce. Anya was studying her feet, her head tilted down to almost hide the smile aching to spread. He didn’t wait for Tia to formulate a reply, “Anya. Walk with me.”

Tia hissed almost under her breath as Anya turned to walk away from her. “You will regret this…”

Odin had a practiced ear for hissed threats. He hadn’t in fact walked away so was easily close enough to hear Tia. “Perhaps an undetermined time banished from Asgard will improve your disposition.”

Thor’s banishment was a well-known fact. An act that had put the fear of god in the court. Tia’s eyes widened a second before she almost threw herself at Odin’s feet. “Please, sire, no! I apologize most profusely for overstepping myself.” Her two co-conspirators held no loyalty, sniffing down their noses at her.

“Humility is healthy. Never believe you are above the need of such.” A lesson he completely believed in and one that both of his sons had been in firm need of, in his opinion. “Anya.” He turned without looking back to see if he was obeyed, taking an inner corridor that the courtiers would not use without expressed invitation. He could hear Anya following and by the lack of the continuation of the other footsteps could only assume the courtiers had stopped to stare where they couldn’t follow.

The doors opened for him to his less formal study, inviting Anya to follow with a sweep of his hand. As soon as the doors closed he turned to ask a probing question, “Has her harassment been a common theme?”

“No, sire. Only recently have her actions been…less than respectful.” Some nobles began with less respect than others. Even the princes sometimes treated the servants as moving furniture. But there was a difference in that lack of respect and actual abuse. That was the true theme of their conversation, just with polite words.

“Only towards yourself?”

Anya pursed her lips just a little before slowly shaking her head. “No, sire. One of the stable boys, two of the serving girls, and…”

“What else?”
She dipped her head slightly, brow furrowed as she debated in what to say. “I do not wish to report what I have not confirmed.”

Odin nodded to himself, knowing there were a lot of rumors circulating and only a small percentage of them held any truth to them. “Then I will take the information as a possibility and nothing more.”

“I have heard that she coerced a footman to perform duties outside of those that he was hired for.” Duties designed for two consenting adults of similar rank behind closed doors. Perhaps not rape in the most direct sense. But if it was true it was a behavior that need to be immediately, harshly rebuked.

Odin looked a little like the wind had been knocked out of him as he walked behind his desk, staring at a tapestry. “She never would have permitted this to occur.” Frigga had been queen of the realm but she had taken the duties of the running of the palace as if this were her own small home. She had been involved in every aspect from staffing downward. If such a rumor had proved to be true she would have reacted against Tia as if the act was committed against one of her children. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Anya start to say something several times but never utter a sound, “You wish to speak then do so.”

“I-if I may…” Anya pulled in a slow breath but since he had invited her to speak she would. “Forgive me for stepping beyond my place, sire, but perhaps you should hire a steward over the palace staff.”

“There is not one currently?” Odin asked with surprise, but then seemed to realize that with Frigga now gone it had fallen to him to do exactly that.

“No, sire. The late queen fulfilled those duties.”

He gave her a more assessing glance. A clever woman who had the respect of the rest of the staff. A woman who hadn’t wilted against a courtier’s harsh will. Most importantly, a woman he felt he could work well with. “Very well. You will assume that role.”

“Me, sire?”

His expression held a touch of amusement as he asked, “Do you not wish for the promotion?”

“No, sire. I mean yes, sire. I do.”

Odin nodded once with finality. “Then it is settled. Should what you have heard prove accurate I will expect to be notified post haste. Such behavior will not be tolerated.”

“Of course, sire.”

There was a touch of a smile on his lips. “My sons return to Asgard today. Be certain their rooms are ready to receive them.” There was a bounce to Anya’s step and she dropped into a quick curtsey before leaving to do precisely that.

MIDGARD

The light elves were the first to make the journey from Midgard to Asgard in groups of fifteen. Azni and G’dath went with the first group, to act as emissaries and usher people out of the way so the next group could join them. Even Fury had decided to join the waiting group, most
probably to make sure Loki actually left with the others.

Hela had reappeared to see them off, she currently standing still with her arms crossed. Indel and Talia were skipping around her and she just sighed with a small shake of her head. “Are the two of you never tired?”

Indel paused before chirping up at her with a grin. “Nope. I like mornings.”

She narrowed her eyes at him just a little. “There is something wrong with you.” If anything his grin grew. Sensing someone rapidly approaching, she stiffened as Fandral closed the distance between them. “What do you--…”

"Hela..."

He seemed to be at a loss for words so she decided that perhaps words were overrated. Left hand clutching his armor, her right gripped the hair at the back of his head tightly. He was all too happy to comply with her demand. Talia ran back to Jane, tugging on her hand and pointing. Jane grinned and clapped her hands together once in delight, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Indel made throwing up noises and slapped a hand over his eyes. Loki and Thor both froze before snarling and stalking for the entwined pair.

The pair separated when breathing became an issue. Fandral panted while Hela’s eyes moved to look over his shoulder. She ran a gentle finger along his jaw and grinned evilly. “Have fun.” She disappeared a second later.

Fandral yelped as he was picked off his feet by Thor, the elder prince snarling in his face while Loki stood just behind the thunderer with a dangerous glow to his eyes. “Explain this.” Because every adult AEsir knew that Fandral was not the type of man to enter a serious relationship. There was a specific etiquette between AEsir males when it came to matters such as this. Fandral pursuing Hela without showing her elder male relatives that respect was the height of impropriety.

Jane hurried up to them. “Loki--…”

Thor and Loki both snapped at her. “This does not concern you.”

She blinked at both of them in shock. Lips thinning, she slapped Loki’s armored shoulder lightly. “The hell?”

The glow faded from the mage’s eyes before he explained. “I am her father and Thor is her uncle. It is our duty as her family to protect her from questionable intentions.” He narrowed a glare at Fandral who was still being held off his feet by Thor since the man was as much of a man-whore as Tony was.

It was the AEsir equivalent of a guy thing. Neanderthal, without question. She knew it and it was better if she didn’t try to get involved. She also noticed Sif rolling her eyes. Huffing a sigh before throwing up her hands. “Fine. When Talia starts dating we’ll discuss it.”

Loki growled lowly. “She is never dating.”

Jane lifted a single eyebrow at him and walked away. No discussion. Nothing said…yet he felt like he’d lost that argument. She didn’t move far, Darcy coming up to her right and speaking softly. “Admit it. Boyfriend is fuck-awesome HOT when he gets all growlie.” Jane refused to say anything, but the small smile betrayed her.

Thor was focused on the warrior in his grasp. “You will maintain your distance from my
niece, warrior.”

Loki turned back to focus on his prey. Oh yes, that was the reason he was currently furious.

“My-…”

Thor cut Fandral off with one brutal sentence. “Or Hela will be quite disappointed if you ever intend to take matters further.”

Fandral didn’t look at him any differently. In fact he didn’t look at him at all. Perhaps it was that or he might have caught the faintest flicker of something in his eyes. With a roar Loki went for his throat, held back by Thor who shoved Fandral away. Thor’s warning was all part of this ritual. Loki’s reaction was much baser and had he gotten his hands on Fandral he would have done his damndest to kill him.

Volstagg and Hogun hurried over, Thor holding onto Loki in a bear hug to keep his arms pinned. The thunderer was glaring as he fought with his own instincts to rip Fandral apart. Loki suddenly went still, which was even worse than when his instincts were beyond his control. While in the grips of instinctual rage his magic was quite beyond his reach. Now it wasn’t. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t do anything. He just LOOKED at Fandral.

The two Asgardians worked as a unit. Volstagg escorted Fandral away while Hogun offered a formal bow to take the initial edge off the protective rage. Jane helped further, coming over with Talia who immediately insisted on hugs. Indel was quick to follow with Mischief trailing. They both shot dark looks at the retreating warriors even as all three of them wrapped their arms around Loki who calmed down with a last huff.

Jane leaned back against him, humming a few calculations under her breath before glancing up at him to see him scowling down at her. She grinned. “You know you love when I do that.”

Indel started jumping up and down, arms raised to be held. Jane picked him up but he immediately reached for Loki who already had his hands full. With a last kiss to his cheek Talia wiggled to be put back down.

Loki growled softly, situating Indel on his hip. “Not when I can’t kiss you into silence.”

She just raised an eyebrow before asking, “Who says you can’t?”

The trickster squirmed because Thor still hadn’t released him completely. At this point Loki wasn’t sure if he was being hugged because the thunderer thought he needed it or because Thor needed it. He huffed when the older man ignored him. “My brother. The Avengers. My sense of decorum.”

Jane giggled, which seemed to loosen Thor up enough. With a last squeeze his brother finally let him go, ruffling his hair as he went to confer with the Avengers. Loki scowled at his back.

Indel made a face. “Kissing is icky.”

Pointing at the boy in his arms. “Him.” Indel playfully latched onto the pointing finger with his teeth and mock growled around the digit. Loki bared his teeth and growled back.

“Is kissing icky?” Jane just sighed and rolled her eyes affectionately, picking Talia up. But the girl was determined to have an answer. “Mother, is kissing icky?”

Mischief made a mock gagging sound. “Yes.”
Jane was only slightly sarcastic with her reply. “Only icky boys think so.”

“Ooh.” Talia nodded her head sagely while Mischief stuck out his tongue.

Indel’s teeth clamped down just a little harder, not that even as an intentional bite would it hurt Loki. The trickster raised an eyebrow before snagging the boy’s wrist with a soft whipcord of magic and tugged it towards his mouth. “No!”

“Let go.”

Indel shook his head, the finger still in his grinning mouth. Another tug on Indel’s wrist and the boy squealed. “No, dada!”

“Then release my finger.” Another stubborn shake of his head. Loki’s eyebrow quirked and a table appeared less than a foot away. He smirked and wrestled the little elf off of his hip so he was sitting on the table, before tucking his free fingers into the boy’s side.

Indel released him with peals of laughter, thrashing and squealing. “NO-OO!” The free hand joined its twin, the elfling kicking his feet. “Stop, dada!”

Loki was grinning broadly at his son. He froze at the same time Mischief did. Loki’s head cocked slightly, stepping to the right and turning. The bullet hit the front of his armor and bounced off harmlessly, the sound registering a second later. The Avengers all whipped around, SHIELD agents pulling out their own weapons. Fury snarled into his headset. “Hill, what the hell is going on?”

Jane grabbed Indel, Talia already on her hip and ducked down to keep the conjured table as a defense. Darcy ducked down next to her, eyes wide. Erik was running for the women while Loki made a face before taking three steps to the right and spinning. The bullet was not only deflected instead of hitting Erik, he sent it whizzing back in the general direction it came from. Mischief stayed right next to Loki. Indel raised his head above the table to see a second before Jane hissed at him. “Indel. Get back down here.” The little boy obeyed with a pout.

Hawkeye crouched down with a grimace next to the table. “That sniper should be shot. That’s some terrible marksmanship.” Loki paused to give him a look. “I’m just saying…”

Loki shook his head, walking around the table and acting as a shield as he pulled Jane to her feet. “You’re going next.”

She gasped. “Loki--…”

Ignoring her protests completely. “No, I need you to protect them.”

She wrapped a shield around them instantly and sent him a dirty look. “You are not doing this again.”

“Jane--…” Jane jumped slightly when a bullet glanced off the magical shield surrounding her and the children. A growl entered his voice, his anger with these mortals steadily growing. “…go with them to reassure them.” She just stared at him since Talia and Indel looked excited, not scared. Correcting himself, “If they remain they will wander.” Which was true since Indel had already proven that was the case. Loki was playing dirty and they both knew it. “Azni and G’dath have already departed or I would quite enjoy your company, shield maiden.” Her eyes just silently narrowed, confirming without words that there was a strong conversation between the two of them on the horizon. “Erik. Darcy. Stay or go but decide now. Thor.” His brother turned when Loki barked his name. “They go next.”
Mischief ran up to Loki’s side, his jaw set. She wordlessly growled even as Thor nodded to his brother. The thunderer reached out to guide her, freezing when she glared murderously at him. “Don’t even think about it or the slap I gave you last time will pale by comparison to this time.” Without even thinking Thor raised both hands to appease and took a step back.

Loki rolled his eyes. “Coward.”

She’d been wanting to surprise him and the look on his face was exactly that. Speaking carefully in high elvish. “I am only annoyed with him. Be afraid, Loki. Be very afraid.”

Jane shifted Talia enough to pick up Indel and with a last glance over her shoulder that was equal parts anger and love, she walked quickly for the Bi-frost point. Loki watched her go before shifting his stance without making it obvious that his leather breeches were suddenly very uncomfortable.

The male elves stepped aside so the most vulnerable went with the next group. Darcy was already glued to Jane’s side and after a hesitant moment Erik joined them.

Loki looked down at Mischief even as Fenris raced to Jane’s side. “Go with them.” Mischief just stuck out his tongue. The boy was physically stronger than him and at the moment their magical skill was at least on an even level, if not more so in Mischief’s favor. Loki sighed and gave up.

Everyone else ducked down, Tony’s faceplate sliding down so he could assess what was going on. He had one spare comm and he tossed it. “Locks, catch.” Loki caught it without turning, sliding it into his ear without comment. “Man is she going to give you an earful later.”

Loki didn’t even look in Tony’s direction. “You’re not amusing, Anthony.”

“I’m also not wrong.”

Now Loki slowly turned his head to glare at the inventor, ignoring the not completely muffled snickers by the rest of the group. “Of the two of us, who should be afraid of who?”

“Still doesn’t change the fact that she’s gonna kick your medieval ass.”

Steve cleared his throat and affected his reasonable tone. “Stark. Loki. Now is not the time.”

Tony glanced at his imaginary watch. “Gotcha. Reschedule for an hour.” He chewed on his tongue lightly, pulling up different screens and talking to his AI. “Alright, guys, running a scan now for firepower and numbers. JARVIS?”

“Running, sir.”

Loki had ignored Steve, shaking his head and muttering to himself. “Why haven’t I killed you yet?”

The trickster may not have been talking to him but Tony wasn’t going to pass up an opportunity to respond. “Your one shot was New York. Epic fail. Too bad, so sad. Stuck with me now.”

Loki lifted an arm in front of his face, catching the bullet between two fingers. Clint’s voice was full of sarcasm. “Maybe you should duck down with the rest of us. You know, those of us with survival instincts.”
He answered the archer dryly. “If they are targeting me, they are not yet concerned with you. Yet, being the focus of my statement. Thor, send them my regards.” Loki flung the bullet in Thor’s direction, the thunderer almost absently hitting it with Mjolnir so that it went screaming in the opposite direction. The trickster smiled darkly when the sniper was flung backwards from the impact, holding his shoulder in pain.

Fandral almost crowed. “Excellent form!” Loki sent the AEsir a dark look, still not quite ready to forgive the man.

Fury slammed his fist into the table. “Dammit, Hill, we have to get these people out of here.” Jerking his head up. “Loki, you’re their target.”

Loki remarked sarcastically, since this had already been more or less established. “So I gathered.” Not the only one, he was certain. Just the first convenient target. If he wasn’t mistaken these were the same mortals he’d caught scent of in Miami. With him out of the way they would concentrate on Thor next.

Nick growled, irritated he had to spell it out. “So go with them.”

Raising an eyebrow and snorting. “Your own survival instincts must be nonexistent. If they are focused on myself, they perceive me as the greatest threat. Foolish of them, perhaps, yet it is rather flattering. Thor, if you would.” Thor nodded and called to Heimdall to turn on the Bi-frost. Loki tilted his head slightly as he considered. Ten minutes between each venture. They needed to buy a few minutes. He narrowed his eyes to himself before smirking. “Sif.” He turned his head slowly. “Do you remember Vanaheim two hundred years ago?”

Slowly her smirk matched his. “Maybe.”

There were five snipers. Even with one injured there was still four remaining. With that kind of response to projectiles they’d activated the mutant with them. They had taken strategic points to be a distraction while the mutant, a man dressed head to toe in black who dubbed himself Grid, initiated an energy field to keep SHIELD from returning fire. One of the snipers looked over his scope. “Sir, target can anticipate the projectile prior to sound.”

Victor Devaroux nodded as he lowered his binoculars. He’d taken a very simple contract and turned it into his personal mission. It wasn’t the money. Well, it wasn’t just the money. His reputation was on the line at this point. The Avengers were as good as dead. He wasn’t about to bow to changing politics.

He’d been paid for a job and it would be completed or it would ruin relationships with future clients since Fury had made it clear their services would no longer be required. Killing a few aliens with a contingency plan cooked up by SHIELD in case the alien called Thor went off the grid was just a little icing on the cake. The storm had been perfect. A beacon that told them exactly where SHIELD and the aliens running rampant on his planet were located. “Alright, team B. How soon until we’re ready?”

“Five minutes, sir.” Team B bent back over what looked like a modified rocket launcher. It was rigged on a sturdy tripod and aimed towards the sky. The rocket had been modified with a payload of the serum which would release into the atmosphere upon detonation. The aliens would be dead in a matter of minutes and this could potentially protect earth from future invasions. Detonating it here would be the test to prove if this would be useful on a global scale.

Victor nodded his head, satisfied with that time table.
Neal, his tech that was skilled in hand to hand but also in locating resources, came running up to his flank with a file. “Sir! Incoming from the enemy camp. References state she is potentially useful against the current target.”

Victor turned his head slightly as he asked, “Weapons?”

“Currently sheathed.”

He looked through the file before nodding to himself gruffly. “Let’s see what she has to say. Let her through the line.” Grid unclenched his fists and the golden, grid-like energy disappeared. They all turned to watch her approach, he glancing at Neal and then to the modified tranquilizer gun meaningfully. “She might be an excellent test subject.”

“Understood, sir.”

Victor watched the woman walk steadily, one hand loosely resting on the hilt of her sword, the weapon sheathed. Her eyes moved over all those assembled. She stopped in front of the obvious leader, giving him a head to toe assessment. Victor nodded his head ever so slightly and the grid materialized once more, effectively boxing her in.

“And you would be?” Victor asked this gruffly.

Her head didn’t incline towards him, her posture stiff. “Lady Sif of Asgard.”

Victor held up the file slightly. “I hear that you and the alien called Loki don’t get along.”

Sif bristled silently, a growl entering her voice. “You heard correctly.”

“Or maybe you’re just telling me what I want to hear.” Victor smiled coldly as he said this, not about to be won over by a pretty face and words that he wanted to hear.

Her head tilted up a little higher. “If you want to hear the truth, then yes I am.”

Victor narrowed his eyes just a little, probing and buying time. “He’s supposed to be a prince in your world, isn’t he?”

Sif was quick to place emphasis on the word. “Was.” Her green eyes narrowed. “He was a prince until he proved he was a useless traitor.”

“We have a low tolerance for traitors here.” Several soldiers moved silently behind Sif. Victor didn’t even glance at them. “Although that you would tell me such information makes you a traitor as well, doesn’t it?” She didn’t move, still staring at him. Victor’s head tilted just a little as he asked her almost curiously, “Would you be willing to assist us in removing such a dangerous threat from our planet…permanently?”

“What did you have in mind?”

His voice was almost casual, but Sif noticed the cold gleam in his eyes. “We need to ascertain if a serum that SHIELD developed will be effective. Now.”

The dart moved through the air, deftly caught between two fingers. Sif’s green eyes narrowed further, as a snarl wrapped around her voice. “That was a terrible idea, mortal.” Her head turned a little to the right before purring her question, “Sif? Would you care to respond?”

Sif appeared next to an exact copy of herself. An exact copy with green eyes that was
smirking devilishly with the dart held between two fingers. “With pleasure.” The real Sif’s right hand formed into a fist before she used it, sending Victor flying backwards with a punch to the jaw.

Loki shifted back into his own form, gesturing and the warriors three appearing behind a group of soldiers. They rushed the three mercenaries they were behind. Mischief tilted his head slightly, standing on Loki’s other side and staring at Grid. His hand formed a fist but Loki put his own hand over it and shook his head.

Confusion danced in Mischief’s green eyes even as Loki formed that same fist and yanked. The mutant went down screaming and the energy grid failed. Loki glanced back at his playmate. “You are never doing that.” Loki couldn’t even begin to explain why he didn’t want Mischief to ever rip apart someone’s ability as coldly as he was capable. He simply didn’t. The boy just continued to look confused.

A roar in the sky caused heads to look up, just as Thor brought his hammer down. Mortals were thrown off their feet, supplies and weapons falling through the jagged cracks surrounding the epicenter of Thor’s attack.

Claws already extended, Wolverine ate up the distance and tore through the soldiers, his claws cutting through their weapons like they were made of paper. Chaos erupted and Loki smirked, ducking a front attack before swinging around to punch. The mortal was barely winded and Loki grimaced, encasing himself in a skin tight shield to add a bit of magical power to his attack. That punch knocked the human out. He made a mental note as he playfully batted around a few mortals. He was in his element now, and he reveled in it.

With a distinct roar a green menace smashed into a soldier as the rest of the Avengers charged. Tony stayed air born, calling down to Steve with suggestions. He turned his attention to some type of modified rocket launcher. All he knew is they didn’t want it firing. He dove while zeroing in on the rockets that had been modified with some type of substance he couldn’t identify at the center of the casing. He was prepared to lay down a bit of destruction just before JARVIS nearly shouted at him.

“Sir, an unknown substance is attached. Destroying them might–…”

“Yeah, got it.” He scanned the area for the closest Avenger. “Hey Cap, how about getting those creeps away from their weapon of mass destruction.” Steve looked left a second before launching his shield. The metal disc ricocheted off the tripod, tipping it over and spinning out, knocking all three of them off their feet. “Nice.”

One of them threw himself forward to hit the launch sequence, howling in pain as Clint fired an arrow that went through his hand. A second arrow released less than half a second later lodged into the control panel, making it virtually useless. Tony landed seamlessly, using his repulsars in his gauntlets to keep them off their feet while all but ripping apart the weapon to make sure it stayed dead.

Thor pivoted and threw his hammer to the right, the bullet hitting his weapon instead of Natasha’s shoulder. She nodded to the thunderer in thanks, flipping in the air with guns drawn. He effortlessly caught Mjolnir as it came back to him.

Mischief snarled and spun in a circle around Loki, providing a defense for the mage who wasn’t as fast to respond as normal. Then the light elves arrived. Whatever contingencies these mercenaries had been prepared for it hadn’t been this. The elves were fast, efficient, and brutal. None of them escaped without broken bones but they did escape with their lives so they should be thankful for some mercy. In a matter of minutes they were easily defeated.
Loki walked up slowly to who he assumed was the leader, the human cradling a broken 
arm and unable to stand from both legs being broken. Out of the corner of his eye Loki could see a 
pissed off figure shrouded in shadow and grinned evilly as he knelt down next to Victor’s side. “Not 
to worry, mortal. You will not live very long to regret your actions.” The shadow swept in closer and 
the trickster made a ‘tutting’ sound. “Now daughter…you know subtlety better than that.” His grin 
stretched further. “It wouldn’t do to give the game away just yet. It might be in a few minutes after 
my departure. Perhaps tonight, during the darkest period of the witching hour…perhaps weeks from 
now. But eventually, lady death will come for you little insect.”

He laughed mockingly as he stood back up and dismissed Victor from all thought, turning 
his attention to the dart still held between two fingers. He spied the half full canister and examined it. 
The S.H.I.E.L.D acronym embossed on the outside did not escape his notice. He doubted Fury would 
be so foolish to sanction this but he put nothing past the Council who used to control them.

Tony stalked up to Fury. “I thought those assholes were taken care of.”

Fury tried to keep his face blank but there was irritation in his eye. “I made no promises, 
Stark. Stand down.”

Jabbing a gloved finger in Nick’s direction. “I’m not one of your little minions. Your pals 
there almost killed my friends.”

Nick was well aware of that. His irritation came from that this couldn’t have been solved 
without casualties and strained relations. “They didn’t and now they’ll answer for their actions. I 
don’t see a problem.”

Tony made a disgusted noise and stomped in the opposite direction. After a pause of 
consideration Loki followed. He lightly tapped Stark’s faceplate with the back of one finger. 
“What?”

Face still carefully blank, he just looked at the inventor. After an indecisive moment Tony 
lifted his faceplate and Loki leaned in closer. “My one question is this…” He held up the dart he’d 
palmed. “…was this meant to kill my brother?”

Tony’s face was grim. “JARVIS thinks so and I agree with him.”

Fury knew what was in those vials. The Council had been adamant on contingencies for 
every member of the Avengers. He’d refused to order their creation but someone went around him. 
These were the stolen vials he’d been tracking. He was also close enough to hear Loki’s question. 
“Bit late to sit on a high horse, don’t you think?”

Loki turned, his arm going around Tony’s armored shoulder. Most would take it for a 
casual gesture but Tony could hear the subtle creak of metal. Either Locks was holding onto him to 
keep from losing his temper…or he’d spent all his strength and was using him to keep himself on his 
feet. “I applaud your initiative in developing contingencies. However. That is where my approval of 
this ends. You will either arrange so that the data as well as the components are destroyed or I shall 
be cross with your species.” His eyes flashed green as he leaned in. “You do not wish for me to be 
cross.”

“I’m not the enemy in this scenario.”

Loki snarled and retorted. “Yet you were not an ally for an ally would have warned of a 
potential lethal threat.”
The warriors all stiffened and Thor frowned as he asked, “Loki?”

The trickster held out a halting finger. “Not now.”

“It was being handled.” It wasn’t exactly a defense and Nick didn’t try to offer excuses.

“Obviously not.” Loki’s nostrils flared as he inhaled deeply. “You now have a choice before you: you will destroy all data, formulas and creations of this serum. You will offer proof of this to my satisfaction and if you do not, I will take your actions as a declaration of war against Thor and Asgard…and I will take care of it.”

“Let’s call it idle curiosity when I ask: how?”

When the deadly purr in his voice registered, all the Asgardians took a step back and Fury noticed. A malicious smile far too wide spread across Loki’s face. “I will offer you a choice. Either you will meet my demands by sunset tomorrow or you may choose between having all military knowledge removed from your collective conscience…and I can create a permanent spell that will never allow for a single electronic device to ever function again on this planet.”

Tony’s eyes widened in horror before glancing around. “Um, no offense Fury but if you choose door number 2 I’m staying in Asgard.”

Fury’s head whipped around to glare at the other Asgardians. “That’s a fucking bluff, right?”

“Think on it, our departure in nigh.” Loki spun on his heels, Mischief at his side and the boy subtly helping him walk to the Bi-frost point.

Fandral shook his head as he turned to follow, answering Fury. “Nay. When the prince is that angry, he never bluffs.”

Fury sputtered. “But—…he pulls some shit like that…”

Sif coldly glared at the mortal. “Why would anyone, even the All-Father, stop him? Your inaction is a declaration of war on Asgard; I fear the prince is showing too much restraint. He is protecting his brother, the future king of Asgard. He shall ever have my support to that end.”

It was like being doused by a cold bucket of water. A grim reminder that this was a threat against not just one of his Avengers but a crowned prince from another world. A world that could squash them because of his personal dislike for that world’s younger prince. Fury got a hold of his temper before this spiraled any further. “Like I said. Idle curiosity. We are not declaring war on Asgard. You have SHIELD’s assurance this…weapon will be properly destroyed.”

Bruce frowned slightly at Thor as he asked, “Are you alright?”

The thunderer looked a little pale. “Aye.” He swallowed once, not so much fear as trepidation. “My brother is always…intimidating when he does that. He gets his temper from both our parents, I think.”

The scientist looked sympathetic. “Your father?”

Tony snorted with a shake of his head. “Doubt it.”

Thor silently shook his head and Sif answered for him. “Nay, he sounded like our departed Queen who is now a celebrated warrior in Valhalla. And she was never a woman to present your
back to when angered.”

Loki glared at all of them from the Bi-frost site. “Are we leaving sometime this century?” At this point he wanted this day over and done with.

Fury stepped back with the remaining SHIELD agents, the mercenaries being bound to stretchers and dragged below ground for medical aide and interrogation. He watched as they all stood close together within the rune imprint, Bruce having shrunk back down to size for the journey. Nick looked up as the air started to churn, the rumble of what sounded like thunder before light and sound engulfed the travelers and they all disappeared in the next instance.

He stiffened as he felt Hela stand next to him. With the kind of power she flaunted she should have stepped in and squashed them. Hela smirked in amusement, hearing his thoughts on the matter. As if she would ever allow herself to become that predictable. “I’m not about to win whole battles for them from a minor threat they can handle on their own.” Her amusement faded. “I’m here to remind you that even if Loki fails to return to see that you carried out your orders…I won’t fail.”

Fury didn’t respond to the threat, his gaze where they had been. That serum had been inspired by the council, he had no problem destroying it. His focus was elsewhere. He considered his words carefully before asking. “Will they win?”

She didn’t even hesitate. “Yes.” Then she spoke a little more softly. “But both Jane and Thor will be left wondering if the price of victory was worth paying.” She turned and disappeared. She had preparations to make.

Author's Notes:

*Dusts off hands*  Okay.  Loose end dealt with.  Now we're off to Asgard.  Whee.

Next:

*Odin's court of many dramas great and small*
ASGARD

Being physically weak was humiliating. Add to that inconvenience the magical limits of a sorcerer when Loki had been a mage for the entirety of his life had been beyond unbearable. His magic jumped up and starting singing as Asgard embraced him, filling up his starving magical stores until he felt giddy with relief. Physically he was exhausted but magically he could run laps around the city.

Loki didn’t move at first. He barely breathed as he slowly drank in the familiar gold patterned room and the tall, stoic figure guarding the gate. His eyebrows slowly migrated towards his hairline. Talia was giggling, sitting on a broad shoulder while Indel was swinging from one thickly muscled arm, blue tail whipping around. And suddenly he remembered this. Heimdall indulgent, standing silently and letting him crawl all over him as a young child while Thor battled unseen foes with a practice sword. How had I forgotten that?

Indel turned, hanging on by one hand and waved. “Dada!”

Talia giggled again, hand holding onto Heimdall’s helmet. “Hi papa.”

Fenris was barking like a dog, tongue lolling from his furry face and clearly saying ‘again’.

Loki took careful steps, Mischief steadily at his side. His scepter was still safely tucked away in storage. He’d wait until they were in the palace before producing it. It was all about the show, after all. Smirking at the stoic gatekeeper, forcing amusement into his tone when he would rather lie down and sleep for the rest of the day. “My my…how surprising. Your all-seeing eyes have apparently failed you.”

Heimdall looked at Loki steadily with his golden eyes revealing nothing. “You assume I was not aware of your return.”

Loki smirked even though he was slightly unnerved by the knowing glint in those golden eyes. “Indeed.” He considered his words before deciding the Hel with it. “Does father await us in the throne room?”

It was as if the gatekeeper had been waiting for Loki to decide the tone of the conversation. He bowed to Loki, careful not to dislodge his passengers. His free hand fist ed and touched his heart. “Indeed he does. Welcome home, Prince.”

Loki’s head jerked around but Thor wasn’t standing anywhere near him so there was no doubt that the gesture of respect had been meant for him. He blinked almost owlishly at the other man, even if he recovered almost instantly. Thor smiled and nodded, greatly approving, as Heimdall stood tall once more.

Not a second later Jane was clinging to Loki’s side. Her hands fist ed his armor, her expression betraying her urge to shake and berate him. He decided the Hel with propriety. He’d gotten used to rewarding himself with the pleasure of her lips when he damn well felt like it. Instead of giving her pretty little mind time to formulate a strategy for attack he ducked his head and kissed her, silencing her anger.

They both ignored Tony’s wolf whistle. He smirked against her lips and slowly straightened, summing up an entire argument in one sentence. “I’m a warrior, milady. Part of being a
shield maiden is leaving my side to protect what matters most.”

She scowled at him, one hand clutching the Æsir locket that never left her neck, before turning to rescue Heimdall. “You suck.” Then she paused to glare over her shoulder. “And don’t think this discussion is closed.”

Loki’s smirk grew. “I look forward to it, my lady.”

Wolverine and Barton both exchanged nauseated looks, the Bi-frost not agreeing with them. The archer slowly shook his head. “I am never doing that again.”

Natasha lifted an eyebrow at him. “Then you intend to live here?”

Clint swallowed and turned a little green. “Yep.”

Loki lifted an eyebrow at Stark who spoke while carefully thumping a wall with the back of a gauntleted finger. “Bling-tastic, in every sense of the word.”

Darcy, standing next to Pepper, gave the inventor a head to toe glance. “Might want to check yourself out in the mirror, tin can boy.”

Thor gestured. “My friends, to truly appreciate Asgard, one must look beyond the observatory.”

Heads turned, people slowly walking and just stopping to stare. The skyline was filled with buildings and pathways, stone and metal married together and gleaming in the sunlight. Even in the day the sky was full of stars and at least two moons. In the distance beyond the city were snow peaked mountains and pine forest and at the center of the city the majestic palace of Asgard.

Tony’s eyebrows hiked up to see several stones floating around one another in what he guessed was some type of fancy artwork. Pointing as he glanced at Loki. “Magic?”

Slowly a crooked smile stretched across Loki’s face. “Not in the strictest sense of the word.”

Shooting the trickster a reproaching glare. “Uh, no. You don’t get to say crap like that to me. Don’t tease me, Green Bean. Are you telling me there is honest to god tech up here?”

“Call me that again and you will never find out.” Tony threw a pout at him. It wasn’t as tragic as the one Indel could make but he found himself yielding to it with a forced sigh. “Yes. There is.” Then he lifted a superior eyebrow at the inventor. “As I am one of the few who visits Asgard’s libraries I might be persuaded to show you how that is accomplished.”

“Are you expecting me to get down on my knees and kissing your ass for this…’cause you know I’ll completely do it.”

Loki blinked several times in surprise before asking, “You would?”

“You dropping trough in front of everyone—yeah. I’ll pucker up for that.” Loki glared as red crept up his neck. Clint and Volstagg both started chuckling a second before he shot them a deadly look. Sif bit her bottom lip hard to keep from joining in.

Jane glanced at Thor after looking out to examine the way that the bridge was built, asking softly, “What happens if someone falls over the side?”
Thor answered calmly. “There is little that can be done if that were to occur.”

Jane looked over at the men who were starting to piss Loki off, which annoyed her to no end. These were men that Loki had decided to be civil with, not friends with. They laughing, even if the intent hadn’t been to mock him, wouldn’t be received well. “Be careful, gentlemen. Accidents happen.” Suddenly both Volstagg and Barton found their feet fascinating.

Tony looked just a little more carefully at Loki’s face before belatedly realizing he’d crossed one of those mixed-company lines he shouldn’t have. He grimaced. “Guess I owe you two drinks now.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed just a little before snarling softly. “Your restitution requirement has almost escalated to an Asgardian feast. With boar.”

Tony’s grimace was more pronounced before frowning at Pepper. “You’re supposed to stop me from doing that.” Pepper rolled her eyes, not about to get caught in the middle of the inventor’s strange friendship with the trickster.

Logan judged the distance between here and the palace and sighed. “That is one hell of a walk.” Mischief felt Loki’s fingers tighten on his shoulder.

Jane shook her head, keeping her hands on young shoulders even as both of them squirmed to investigate. “I will never get tired of that view.”

Pepper glanced at her before asking, “Even after a thousand years?”

The physicist grinned in eager anticipation. “We’ll compare notes.”

Tony, helmet in hand, shook his head. “Should I be worried those two are friends?”

Bruce passed by him. “She’s only dating the God of Mischief.”

The billionaire moaned and started walking. “I’m doomed.”

Loki frowned at Thor. “By Hel, Thor, there are usually a thousand horses within easy access.”

Thor’s face set with battle edged grimness. “Father sent them with as many warriors to the fields to train…should we have needed aid in defeating the Other’s army.”

Loki raised an eyebrow while Mischief shot him a worried look, feeling his hand tremble. “Does he have so little confidence in my fighting ability?”

Thor sighed and shot his brother a quelling look. “Peace, brother. What you take for an act spurned by weakness father does as a need to protect.” He looked meaningfully at Indel and Talia. “As a father, surely you understand that instinct.” Loki blinked but didn’t press the matter further. He did. He just wasn’t about to admit that out loud.

The group moved slowly, the elves that had fought and traveled with them keeping to the rear while the Avengers and AEsir unconsciously kept the civilian members of their group in the middle. Thor kept to the front of the group, the edge of the city moving ever closer as they walked past several supports for the bridge over the raging water below.

Tony, who had been watching Loki intently, detected the first wobble in his steps and moved swiftly, quietly nudging Mischief to the side. “Move over, squirt.”
Loki paused for a heartbeat, staring hard, searching for even a hint of pity. Finding none, he let Tony’s suit hold up the majority of his weight. Mischief started clowning around loudly with Indel, distracting anyone who might have noticed the exchange. The only one who kept looking at the trickster and inventor walking side by side was Steve, his expression thoughtful.

Just before any Asgardian would have been close enough to see them individually, Loki disappeared. Tony jumped within his suit in surprise, jerking his head to the left to see Loki strolling easily with a wink. He heard a soft creak from his left shoulder but didn’t actually see anything before it occurred to him this was one of Loki’s doubles and the trickster was hiding so no one could see he needed support.

The guards and the people, whether on pathways above, to the side, or below, all stopped to point and bow. There was a little more bounce in Thor’s steps, though he didn’t change his pace.

Loki felt hot and cold all at the same time, walking the familiar bridge. The circumstances were vastly different than just a couple of years ago, yet he was a jumble of relief and wariness. Then he smirked and produced a small electronic device out of storage. “Jane.”

She turned in time to catch something lightly lobbed in her direction, then grinned brightly at the camera in her hands and started snapping pictures. Tony’s jaw dropped, head swiveling from right to left before making a noise at the trickster. “God of thieves is more like it.”

There were flowers lining the path that ran parallel to the bridge. Indel pointed at the flowers laid out, looking at Loki’s double. “What’s that?”

Smiling a little, if a little sad. “They are placed in remembrance of the departed. This close to the Bi-Frost, they are probably for your grandmother. She was a very special lady and dearly missed by her people.” Thor glanced back quickly at Loki, his face strangely unreadable before facing forward again. Bruce frowned from behind Loki, noticing the blond demi-god’s expression but keeping it to himself.

A little girl darted from behind her parents, picking out a single stem and grabbing a fistful of petals before throwing them. Tony froze as violet petals sprinkled lightly in front of them, the two men glancing back up at her. She grinned and giggled, before running back to her father’s side. The father stood a little taller before following his daughter’s example.

Reds. Yellows. Whites. Soon it was raining petals gently down on them, a cheer slowly rising in the air. The warriors stood taller, Thor’s steps a little bit prouder. Talia giggled, picking up a handful and tossing them up in the air. Tony gave Loki’s shadow sprite a confused look even as they started walking again. “I don’t get it.” Loki’s face was unreadable, just as confused.

Only because Thor was older did he know the significance. The last time was 1100 years ago. The flowers had been laid out in front of a family’s home, a celebrated AEsir warrior assumed dead after a battle, his body not found. He was actually discovered alive, recovering from battle wounds that had nearly killed him and left him comatose for months. King and Queen had personally escorted him from the Bi-Frost upon his return to his home. The flowers had been dismantled and the petals thrown to symbolize rejoicing of the return of a warrior of Asgard dearly missed.

Sif glanced over at them. “Asgard celebrates the return of the prince we thought dead. How is that confusing?” Loki and Mischief both jerked their heads around to stare at her. She noticed and buried a wince. She wondered if he truly believed Asgard would prefer him dead. She didn’t ask the question, knowing she wouldn’t like the answer.

Thor spoke quietly, refusing to look back. “The flowers on this path were left for you,
Loki. The people throw the petals to celebrate that the news was false.”

Wolverine frowned and flicked a petal that clung stubbornly to his jacket. “So they do this every time somebody comes back from the dead?”

The thunderer pulled in a slow breath. “No. Only the mightiest of warriors and those that Asgard mourns are left flowers…and even fewer gain such a response upon their return.”

Loki smirked suddenly and batted his eyelashes at Sif to alleviate the tension. “Did you leave flowers for me, Sif?”

She didn’t return the gesture, staying solemn. “Yes. Everyone who matters did.” He blinked in surprise and glanced away.

Jane kept an eye on him out of the corner of her eye. She would have preferred him teleporting from point to point over this little game of hiding behind illusion but that would be admitting to a weakness and she knew he wasn’t about to do it.

He was on his feet, even if both felt like he was dragging lead weights. When he couldn’t walk anymore or hold onto Stark, only then would he teleport. If any of them even looked like they would suggest they carry him he was setting someone on fire.

The closer they came to the main gate surrounding the palace, the deeper the sounds of celebration became. Loki’s brow furrowed. That couldn’t be all for him. It just couldn’t be. He stifled a gasp as a wave of magic swept from Jane to him, filled with love and reassurance. She’d been showing remarkable restraint but he knew soon she was going to put her foot down about his waning strength, his pride be damned.

In the courtyard the elves that had journeyed first waited for them, they joining the rear with their own. Azni and G’dath were both standing side by side, looking over the group to ensure everyone had survived unscathed. G’dath narrowed her eyes, not at the shadow sprite, but at the spot on Tony’s right were Loki really stood. She looked annoyed but she didn’t comment. The guards at the gate stood taller, holding their weapons with pride. The courtiers that weren’t in court turned and stared at the procession.

Loki stopped suddenly, reappearing as his double faded. He glanced to the left before pulling in a breath and letting go of Tony, veering off the walkway. It was a stuttered halt, heads turning as they watched Loki walk towards a private set of gardens. The guards on either side of the inner sanctum backed away a step, bowing. Jane was already at his side and kept a firm hold on his hand, following.

“Brother?”

Ignoring Thor, Loki pushed open the gate and silently entered the unoccupied space. He walked along the stone pathway towards the center of the garden. There were paths that veered off to the royal suites but all the son had eyes for was the simple yet elegant fountain that had been placed here as a memorial to his mother. Kneeling down slowly, Indel and Talia running to his side with Mischief not far behind, he carefully brushed aside a flower petal that was lying on her name, partially obscuring it.

Indel frowned thoughtfully. “Is this for grandmother?”

Loki’s fingers traced the letters. He smiled to feel Jane’s warm hand move to rub the back of his neck. “Yes, this is for my mother.”
Indel turned to wrap his small arms around Loki’s bicep. He leaned his chin against the
armor on Loki’s shoulder and whispered. “Hi grandma.”

Talia carefully rubbed the top of her ear, frowning. “Would she like me?”

Loki didn’t even think twice in letting his skin blossom Jötunn blue for a moment. To
remind them all that he wasn’t AEsir even though he appeared that way most of the time. “That’s
why she was special. She would have loved both of you.”

Fenris paused in his pacing behind the small family, golden eyes watching Thor who had
a small, sad smile on his face as he stood by the gate. The wolf glanced back before trotting over to
Thor and snagging the thunderer’s wrist with his teeth. Thor stiffened in surprise but was surprised
further to find the gesture was to hold, not harm. He let the beast tug him towards Loki, Jane
glancing back and smiling gently. Her hand moved just as Thor’s came to rest on the exposed neck,
feeling the sudden tension in his brother’s muscles. But then the tension eased and Loki leaned the
slightest bit into his touch. Thor had to fight to keep the tears out of his eyes.

The right words always failed him on so many levels, but he needed Loki to know he did
regret not acting so that his brother could be there for her funeral rites. “Loki I-…”

Not expecting a grip of steel on his wrist, the smallest of gasps escaped Thor. But Loki
didn’t let go, eyes closed for a second before he pulled in a slow breath. There would be a time for
talk but he refused to have the memory of this day spoiled, for good or for ill, with bringing up that
topic. “Thor, there will be a time for discussion. But it will not be today, here, and not in front of
them. If you say but one more word on the matter forgiveness between us will never be found.”

Thor had heard the growl behind the words and nodded even as Loki released his wrist.
He kept his hand where it was, his thumb brushing the nape of Loki’s neck in a reassuring gesture.

Indel looked up and eyed Thor warily, inching closer to Loki. “Are we gonna see
grandfather now?”

Loki sighed rather than correcting his offspring concerning his grammar. Nodding, he
pulled his staff out of storage and used it to stand up. Thor’s hand lingered on his neck for a moment,
not heavy but a comforting reminder of his brother’s protective intent. “Yes. It’s time for Asgard to
be entertained once more.”

Thor flinched at the reminder of two years ago before his resolve firmed. He’d failed to
protect Hela. He’d failed to realize Loki needed help as much as he’d needed to be stopped on
Midgard. He would not fail a third time.

As they entered the palace, Loki quickly looked at Indel who seemed so excited and happy
that he hated to be the reason it was all about to end tragically. A glance over at Talia showed him
the little elfling giggling and fitting petals into her braids. Trax moved closer to him, talking quietly.
“We stand behind you, Lokhi.”

Far, far behind him is what Loki feared. Mischief clutched at his arm suddenly, ducking
into his shadow. “Recall me.”

They all stopped in front of the double doors, waiting to be announced to the court
beyond. He turned to do exactly that and frowned when he realized he couldn’t. It was a question to
be answered later because there was no time now. His frown deepened to see true, deep fear in the
make believe boy’s eyes. Enough that if he didn’t know better, he would think…
Mischief tensed to turn invisible and Loki let the staff lean against his shoulder, hands on either side of the boy’s face. “If the worst occurs and we are forced to flee Asgard, I will protect you as I would protect Talia and Indel.”

Mischief didn’t know what was wrong with him. He’d never felt anything so strongly as he did now. He convinced himself it was because he’d been here for too long. He swallowed and after a hesitant moment nodded in understanding. Loki straightened as Mischief reluctantly moved to stand between the two elflings, holding a hand from each of them. The unmistakable thump of Gungnir hitting stone caused heads to turn and the doors slowly opened.

Loki pulled in a slow breath, smirking arrogantly. “Here we go.”

As soon as they passed through the grand arches, at the first glimpse of Odin on his throne, his bitterness faded. His anger became a distant roar and all that he wanted to do was beg his father to let him come home. His pride would never allow it, but Loki was almost staggered with how strong his need was for the father he had denied. He felt Jane squeeze his hand as she took position to his right and leaned towards her, borrowing her quiet strength.

Odin watched the procession enter his throne room silently, his hand tightening on his scepter to see Loki walking among a group of elves and humans. He wanted nothing more than to throw his obligations to the side and dismiss court, focusing on his youngest. But it was too deeply ingrained, his obligation to the throne. He reasoned with himself that he had been this patient for this long. An hour or so longer would make no difference.

It had not escaped his notice to see the small elven children, nor the younger version of his youngest. Indel turned, asking Loki questions excitedly. The little hand pointed towards him. “Is that grandfather?”

Odin hadn’t been certain if the boy would ever be told about him, and if he had; what those words would be. Adopted father. Guardian. All-father. Caretaker. He felt his heart squeeze painfully, straining his ears to hear the whispered reply. “Yes.”

The little boy beamed. “He’s the brave warrior who saved you, right? He saved the young blue prince?” Now the little girl turned to eagerly hear the reply.

Odin was shocked to see a softening of his son’s eyes as he looked at the children. “Yes, he is and he did.”

He had never expected to live long enough to see this side of Loki. It was subtle, something that he was certain no one else would notice except himself but only because he was desperately looking for it. His mother had seen it, but for Loki to relax this much in his presence nearly brought him to tears. Not just a Loki who was happy, but a Loki tempered by love. He had managed to do on his own what Odin had begun to fear was hopeless. Loki was healed and whole.

No one else was aware of the exchange, watching Odin. Cracking his scepter on the ground to silence everyone. “I see that we have news from Midgard. Thor, I will hear you speak.”

“…this will be good…” Loki muttered it under his breath, his hold tightening on his scepter.

Thor didn’t miss the displeased glint in his father’s eye, which meant he probably knew about his and Loki’s first encounter. Apparently Hela knew his father better than he did because a private lecture was most assuredly eminent. He moved to the center of the throne room, standing on the red carpet and considering his words carefully, as he was not prone to do. “I have done as you
wished father. I, Sif, and the Warriors 3 have returned from Midgard with my brother and the mortal Avengers.”

Odin nodded slowly and gestured to more than thirty extra people, most of them elves. “And who are your other companions?”

“A small village of Alfheim that was attacked and destroyed, sire, seeking asylum.”

There were surprised whispers and murmurs, quieting when Odin raised a hand. “I will hear more of this attack at a later time, for now I will hear from a representative of this village.”

Thor glanced back at them and Trax straightened his back just a little before gliding forward and offering a customary bow. “All-Father.” Odin nodded slightly in return. “I am Elder Trax. We resided on the smallest moon of Alfheim.”

Odin nodded thoughtfully. “I have heard strange tales of your moon, Elder Trax. I believe it is affected by time most curiously.”

Trax, unaware of Odin’s visit, nodded immediately. “Yes, sire, a single Asgardian year is five on our home…it was.” There was a hint of sorrow in his voice, quickly hidden. It was reflected in those here who truly had nowhere to go now.

“I see. And how is it that you came to Midgard from such a distance?”

Eyes narrowing for a fraction of a second, thinking the explanation was obvious. But then it occurred to Trax that the AEsir may not be aware of where Loki had been living. “We requested aid from Prince Loki and he used his gift of magic to provide our escape.”

“Time will be set aside to explore this threat in full. Do you require sanctuary on Asgard, or a return to Alfheim?”

Trax glanced back at Loki, catching the trickster’s eye and making it clear the request was because he was here. “With humble respect, All-Father, we wish to remain on Asgard and request sanctuary.”

“Granted.” Trax bowed and returned to the group. Odin didn’t waste any time in moving down the line. “I will now hear from the mortals known as Avengers.”

“Tony Stark, your righteousness.” Tony stepped out of the group, his suit clunking lightly on the marble that had apparently handled weight greater than his.

Steve hissed under his breath. “Stark.”

Tony waved him off, not bothering to look back. He smirked as eyes turned to look at him, courtiers whispering behind their hands while warriors silently assessed him. “At ease, Cap. Won’t take but a minute. Anyway, I was curious about this whole Asgard thing. King. Court. Go you, big man on campus…not so great in the dad department, are you?” Odin slowly blinked silently, stunned, and Thor’s jaw slowly dropped. “Granted, Stark senior was crap-tastic and I have the scars to prove it—did it ever occur to you to treat your sons equally?” Tony pivoted enough to gesture at Thor. “I mean, you’ve got your thunderer over here, blond and beautiful who can lift a city bus so he gets all the praise…then you’ve got Bambi over here, dark and gorgeous, who can blink you all out of existence with one spell and…what…you just forget about him?”

Bruce looked around nervously as the murmurs slowly rose in volume. “Tony, stop now.”
Eyes hard and ignoring the other Avengers, confronting Odin in a way he wished he could confront his own father. “Did you know that he took on the Other and his goons and killed them to protect us? Was that ever even going to come up where all the rest of these morons could hear or would this be just another little pat on the shoulder before his accomplishments get swept under the rug?”

Barton and Natasha both hissed ‘Stark’ in unison and Loki blinked in surprise, feeling oddly touched. *Is Tony actually defending me?* But then he threw a suspicious look around. *Did someone be-spell the room?*

Pepper had a death grip on Jane’s arm. The court started growling and grumbling, silenced when Odin’s voice rumbled through the space. “There is a protocol for the hearing of such truths, mortal, and this is not the correct venue.”

Jane and Loki both bristled at the word, which made Indel growl softly and Talia hiss. Natasha and Pepper both picked up on that, the assassin narrowing her eyes. Tony smirked since ruffled feathers around him was hardly a new experience. He was an equal opportunity insulter, after all, and when he saw bullshit he called it. “Nice. Yep, just like daddy dearest. Bambi, you have my condolences. Point Break…well, hopefully you’ll be a better king.”

Horrified gasps filled the air. “Perhaps you believe yourself in some court of fantasy wherein I am nothing more than a political figurehead while groups of men behind closed doors decide the fate of the nine realms…” Odin growled the rest, even if there was more truth to that statement than Odin liked to admit. “…rest assured my position as king is real and I may prove thusly if you so desire, to your detriment.”

Loki slowly brought a hand up to cover his face. The other Avengers were looking nervous, Jane spotting him shaking his head. “What?”

Gritting his teeth. “He is breaking more protocol than I would ever dare at my most reckless.”

“Do something?”

He glanced at her, then at Pepper who was sending him an almost identical expression. He yielded to Jane’s pleading look and grumbled under his breath even if he had been planning to do it anyway. “The things I do for you.” She smiled up at him and he narrowed his focus on Stark, three of the fingers on his left hand pressed to his lips before they twitched.

“Someone missed the memo about my being one of your flunkies and giving a d-…” Tony stopped mid-word, absolute shock on his face. He couldn’t force his body to move and nothing was coming out. Suddenly performing an artful bow that shouldn’t have been possible in his suit to show humble respect before rising again. “I-I beg most humbly for y-your forgiveness, All-Father, for my impertinence. I d-do not know what came over me and can only a-ask that my lack of respect was nothing more than a human failing on my part.”

There was a definite amused twinkle in Odin’s eye, none of the other courtiers suspicious save for Thor who was watching Loki out of the corner of his eye. Odin nodded slowly. “The slight shall be forgotten.”

A twitch of Loki’s finger and Tony bowed again, Loki’s mouth silently moving but the words pouring out of Tony’s mouth. “Thank you, your majesty.” Another twitch and Tony spun around to retreat, a look of panicked outrage on his face as he walked. One more spin and Stark found three of his own fingers pressed to his lips to keep him silent. He shot a glare to the left at
Loki, the bastard winking at him in amusement.

Another twitch of Loki’s hand and Steve turned towards him, again Loki’s mouth moving silently but this time Steve talking in a hushed whisper. “You are fortunate I was feeling generous. A slight such as that to the All-Father of the nine realms would have you beheaded before breakfast.” Tony’s eyes widened in horror. At worst he’d expected to get kicked out, not dead.

Odin nodded slightly towards the Avengers. “Is there a speaker of the mortal Avengers or have we already encountered him?”

The court chuckled, the tension disappearing as Steve Rogers carefully walked forward, unaware Loki had borrowed him for a moment. He bowed stiffly as Tony had before speaking. “I lead the Avengers during battles, your highness, Captain Steve Rogers.”

Odin rumbled with approval at the level of un-coerced respect. “And are you here to aid Asgard in her defenses?”

Glancing at Loki and offering him a small smile. “We are, sir.”

The king gestured grandly to those present but encompassed everyone else in the statement. “Then Asgard welcomes you and your people. At a later date we will discuss this first battle that was won against Asgard’s enemy on Midgardian soil.”

“I look forward to it, sir.” Steve bowed again and retreated.

Letting Gungnir hit the floor mightily. “I will now hear from Loki and Lady Jane.”

Loki mentally flinched but obeyed even though outwardly he projected nothing but confidence; Jane at his side. Usually only those invited moved before the throne but there was a protocol within that to follow. Technically Indel was his youngest but he was also his firstborn male child. His heir. Unless he wanted his son unacknowledged in AEsir society, an introduction was mandatory. He took Indel’s hand in his right, Jane following a step back and to the right. He sent Mischief a look and with a troubled grimace he followed on the left.

Loki was tempted to let his Jötunn form make an appearance, just to see what would happen. But Tony had already pushed the All-Father’s patience far enough. Never before had he ever tempered his impulses, but his decisions affected someone more important than himself. What was best for his family would always temper him. He did flick two fingers on his left hand slightly, staff in his palm, and smirked devilishly when Tony hissed and squirmed. He knew Stark was swearing at him viciously under his breath since a wedgie was his new favorite punishment for the mouthy man. He just grinned.

Loki knew court was pointing and whispering behind their hands, not that he cared. In terms of appearance he looked similar to how he appeared after his defeat on Midgard. His hair was wild and now brushed past his shoulders, a thick chunk of it pulled back to keep it out of his face. His armor, however, was different in subtle ways but the overall silhouette was the same.

He ignored the murmurs as he stepped away from the group to stand before the throne, glancing down at his son who was looking around with wide green eyes. He may be an arrogant fool but Indel learned by example. If he disrespected Odin now, it was a behavior Indel would imprint on and copy. Murmuring under his breath to his son. “Bow, just like this.”

Indel copied Loki’s bow, Mischief sighing silently and doing so as well and another series of murmurs filled the air. Thor stood with a shocked expression on his face. He couldn’t remember
his brother ever making a formal bow, a yield to the throne, a day in his life. Certainly not the Loki who had been dragged back from Midgard in chains. Jane performed a respectful curtsey but all of the focus was on Loki. Odin allowed the court to drift to silence, looking over his youngest and swiftly coming to the conclusion that the time away had been wonderful for him.

His past ghostly parlor had warmed with color, his eyes had brightened with life and even the way that he carried himself was no longer a false confidence inspired by stubborn pride. Still the same wary instincts but Odin could feel the power rolling quietly around him. The danger was still there, making those sensitive to magic wary, but it was more subtle now.

“It certainly is an extraordinary staff. May I?”

Loki’s brow furrowed but he stepped forward, Indel ducking to hide behind Jane. The adamantium gleamed against the light, the trickster resting the staff of his scepter in both palms as he stopped at the landing and held it out. Odin paused, his hand hovering over the staff and frowning to himself before grasping the metal lightly. Then he identified what he was feeling; a weight reduction charm. His eye flicked to Loki for a second, detecting the glamour…and what lay beneath it.

He barred himself from reacting but decided he wouldn’t be drawing this out so Loki had an opportunity to rest until midday. An evening feast would have to be offered today to welcome these new arrivals properly or the noble side of Asgard would see it as a political rejection. A flick of his wrist and the twin blades unsheathed, causing several of the warriors to nod in appreciation of the craftsmanship. “Where did you come across such a fine weapon?”

Tony stood up just a little bit straighter even as he squirmed and Loki smirked. “You have already encountered him. The Avenger known as Iron Man makes the finest weapons in all of Midgard.”

Odin raised an eyebrow to himself. “Then I suppose his arrogance is understandable.” That got Tony silently scowling again while Clint and Logan shared a look.

Loki’s smirk widened, thinking of AEsir arrogance. “We are all kindred spirits here. Each of us with our own share of higher expectations than are deserved.” Clint snickered softly, Tony not as softly, and the rest of the Avengers hid grins.

Queen Sigyn, who had been planning to leave for Vanaheim tomorrow, felt her lips twitch traitorously. She decided she would now be extending her stay. In the group, Sigyn spied G’dath and Et’ana Azni and offered the Alfheim queen a slight bow of acknowledgment.

The look in Odin’s eye told Loki he wasn’t impressed in the slightest, even as they both knew many of the courtiers were still trying to figure out what he meant by that. He held out the staff back to Loki who took it and stepped back without turning around, standing next to Jane once more.

“Loki Odinson…” Loki’s eyes shot up to Odin’s face in surprise, his eyes also betraying the hope there.

*Does he truly still acknowledge me as son? Even as a disgraced prisoner with no title?* It was a hope Loki had long given up on. He could feel Jane watching him. He was quick to hide it, but he knew his father had seen it.

“Did you or did you not break from your confinement in the dungeons to flee Asgard?”

*I knew it.* But Loki buried the snide insults aching to drip from his tongue. He felt Thor tense but he’d already decided he wouldn’t drag anyone into this. Not that Odin would have much of
an opportunity to control him. Until the chains were on, he had the ability to slip away if he was fast enough…just fast enough to take his family with him. Lifting his head arrogantly, speaking proudly. “I am the most powerful mage in the nine realms, did you honestly believe you could contain me beyond my wish to remain? With the greatest pleasure I did.” He heard the smallest of amused giggles and had to restrain himself against glancing at Jane’s dancing eyes.

“And did you utilize illusions to escape Thor’s custody?”

*He always falls for it.* Shrugging easily, looking around with a smirk. “I have found that my brother’s attentions may be diverted with but a glimmer of sunlight reflected off a sword. It was rather pathetically easy, of course I did.” Thor huffed behind him but his brother sounded more amused than offended.

Jane slowly narrowed her eyes at Odin. She didn’t say anything, but she was suddenly suspicious that Odin hadn’t been nearly as sincere in his want for Loki’s return as a son as she had first thought. But then she saw something for the barest of seconds in his eye that changed her mind.

Loki watched him nod slowly and knew that what Odin was going to say next was the most damning of all. This would be the point where Loki knew Odin would make it seem as if he had purposefully caused Asgard grief. Loki wasn’t so much of a sentimental fool that he thought anyone had been filled with regret that he had died beyond ceremony. No, if he was to face the dungeons he would have his full say. He tensed to speak, to no doubt damn himself further and froze as he felt Jane’s magic caress his lips as if her fingers were urging him to silence for just a little longer.

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye and she gave him a quick smirk. “Did you, Loki Odinson, use cunning and bravery to smite your enemy and save your brother’s life?”

Loki froze in absolute shock. *Wait. No. That--*he wasn’t supposed to ask that. His triumphs were never acknowledged in court. It wasn’t in his plan. It had been an instinctual choice to smite an enemy, not to mention it had been the perfect distraction for Thor to be fooled by his illusions. He admitted to himself he would have done it for real even if it had cost him his life but it hadn’t been some noble thing. *Odin--father made…he made it seem as if…*

Indel tugged at his hand when the seconds of silence started to stretch and he seemed no more capable of answering than he had been before. “Dada, did you save Thor?”

Glancing down at the little face he couldn’t lie to, moved to speak to him what he could not say otherwise. “Yes, I did.”

The whispers and quiet exclamations filed the throne room. Everyone looked and pointed at him but he didn’t see or hear it. There was no denying Thor’s face showed his pride or Jane’s beaming smile. There was also no denying the look of amusement in Odin’s eye at finally managing to render his trickster son speechless, if only for a moment. Tapping Gungnir lightly to regain order.

“Did you, Loki Odinson, willingly answer Asgard’s call of aid today?”

Loki recovered quickly. He smirked, arms outstretched and bowed slightly that was border-line between playful and mocking. “You called and I have come.”

Odin felt a very familiar flash of exasperation and as welcome as that feeling was, it showed on his face to those paying close enough attention. The old king knew that even if he were destined for the gallows, Loki wouldn’t be able to maintain his decorum. Thor whispered under his breath in warning. “…brother…”
Glancing over his shoulder, the trickster winked before reaffirming his attention on his father. But Odin had already shifted his own attention to Jane. “And the Lady Jane Foster has returned to our great halls. Whole, I should hope.”

Jane nodded slightly. “Yes, All-Father, I am fully healed.”

“I seem to recall commanding Thor to retrieve the Midgardian Avengers as well as Loki, and I understand why the refugees from Alfheim have followed…why have you returned?”

Tilting her head up just a little, amber fire in her eyes. “I go wherever Loki goes. He swore a blood oath to protect me for the rest of my life.” Thor’s eyes widened in shock and a chorus of gasps filled the air. Even Odin looked startled though he recovered quickly. Jane silently vowed to grill Loki later, their shock was much too emphatic for his oath to be the simple, dismissive act he’d convinced her it was. Trickster, was all she could think.

“…and who are these young men you have brought before us?”

Left hand tangling in the tails of his father’s armored jacket, voice soft. “I’m Indel, grandpa.” Grip abandoned, he ran over to the elves. Jane and Loki both frowned as they watched him, Loki smirking as Indel dragged Talia across the distance, his hand holding hers. Chirping at Odin. “This is my big sister, Talia.”

Talia smiled that small little elf smile before snuggling in tightly to Loki’s side. Mischief inched closer to Loki, wary. Odin almost smiled but Loki saved him by clearing his throat and standing a little taller. Odin didn’t miss Loki’s hands grasping for Indel’s shoulders as if to hold him protectively, Jane moving to thread her arm through Loki’s with little Talia protected between the two of them. He suddenly felt no need to smile, knowing what Loki feared.

_Not this time, Loki. Not ever again._ He would find a way to talk to his youngest and to make him listen.

Loki consciously considered the order of the introduction, as it would be just as important as bringing forward all male children before the throne. “This is my heir, All-Father, Indel Lokison.” His left hand moving to rest at Talia’s shoulder. “And my daughter Talia Lokisdóttir.” Loki glanced at Mischief, a spark of trickery in his eyes and saying the Hel with it. Putting his left hand on Mischief’s shoulder since any other explanation wouldn’t be accepted by Asgard. He was not about to leave Mischief vulnerable to the Advisory Council as Hela had been when he had the ability to protect him with a half-truth. “And my second son, Mischief Lokison.”

_Interesting_, Odin thought. He was also dreading what the oldest boy was capable of if he was anything like Loki as a child. In his heart he welcomed all of them as well as what he hoped was his son’s future bride. But he also noted that Thor had stepped closer, Mjolnir held in his hand and ready to defend all of them. He nodded slowly, ignoring as the murmurs became whispers.

There would be assumptions as to the parentage. Because of Indel’s appearance, most would assume an adoption, especially as Talia was also an elf. Add to that mixture Mischief who was a physical replica of Loki from a few centuries ago and the deception was perfect. No one would ever suspect the truth and so long as Odin acknowledged him in the court, Indel would be protected.

Odin considered his words carefully, the decision made a long time ago. Compromise was not in his nature, nor in Loki’s. His son would only return on his terms, which meant that any child acknowledged by him must be accepted by Asgard and anything less was unacceptable. “Asgard is a realm of the finest warriors. Brave. Strong. Eternal. We learn and train from an early age until death
to perfect the art of war, and of peace. To protect our honor. Our people. And the nine realms. But none of us here are perfect. Perhaps perfect in intention, but not in action.” His gaze swept over the room and saw no disagreement. “Mistakes are a part of life. They shape and define us…and they may change us. If, however, there is one here who feels they have never transgressed on another, let them step forward to dissuade my intended course.” Silence filled the room, no one moving. Odin nodded slowly before turning his attention to his youngest. “Very well. For your courageous actions in defense of a son of Asgard, the slate was wiped clean of past misdeeds. But for your actions in protecting the light elves of Alfheim, now a choice is before you, Loki Odinson. There is no precedent protocol for my next question, so you alone must choose. I need only ask you the question to answer for you four. To whom is your allegiance? Who do you yield to? Who do you fight for?”

A test, even if the answer was simple. A warrior, no matter how great, was not a law unto themselves. Even the mighty Thor yielded to Asgard. But he was Loki, and Loki answered only to himself. He was the God of Mischief, known and feared through the nine realms. He was not a weapon to be wielded and shelved in the weapons vault when his skills were not required. He was a citizen of Alfheim. He was a prince, of Jötunheim if nowhere else.

But the want was still there. The want that had not faded but had only strengthened as his heart had mended. He wanted to be a brother, to be Thor’s younger brother. He wanted to be a son of Odin. He wanted to be the second son of Asgard.

His answer would mean the same for his children, clever of his father to wrap their fates together to force him to heel, and he knew Odin rarely gave second chances to correct a misstep. Pride was his hubris but it was a vanity that would condemn his children into exile and as much as it hurt, he couldn’t allow something so foolish to harm them. And Jane, sweet Jane would follow him wherever he went. What kind of husband could he offer to her if he couldn’t be the man that she deserved?

How long will he have to be a pet, supplicant to his master before given his freedom? How many centuries of groveling, going to distant realms to recover lost artifacts and cut shady deals for Asgard’s benefit before he was again worthy to be freed?

Taking a knee, staff in hand, shoulders straight and eyes front. “I am Loki Odinson, I show allegiance to the King of Asgard…” His vow wouldn’t revoke his Alfheim citizenship nor his status on Jötunheim as long as he phrased it correctly. It felt like chains were snaking out of nothingness, wrapping around his wrists and ankles, dragging him down. “…this great body and its people.” A muzzle, bright and sparkling like golden Asgard to fit over his lying mouth. “I yield to none, save those above my station and I fight for the glory of Asgard.” A resounding battle cry filled the air, the humans in the group jumping in surprise.

Odin nodded with finality and stood, fierce pride in his gaze. “Then rise and take your place amongst your people once more, Prince Loki Odinson.”

Loki felt like he’d been kicked in the chest hard, gasping in pained shock but obeying. No chains and imprisonment, the imagined shackles and restraints falling to the side. No months or years of groveling at Odin’s feet. That was all that was required to come home? That was it? Gauntlets touched armor, fists over hearts, those present bowing to show respect, Loki unable to keep from ducking his head slightly. For once in his life his stance was humble because he truly felt it was undeserved.

Indel peered up at him. “Should I say all that?”

There were a few amused chuckles, Odin one of them. “There is no need. As it has been since before King Bor’s reign, all acknowledged children of a Prince or Princess of Asgard shall
receive no less recognition. From this day onward, as your father is a prince of Asgard, so too are you. Prince Indel Lokison of Asgard.” Another battle cry as fitting for the welcoming of a future warrior, Loki’s voice joining the chorus of the others. Talia blinked up at Odin silently with clear summer-sky blue eyes and he did allow a small smile. “Princess Talia Lokisdóttir.” Instead of a battle cry, a cheer filled the air. It had been many millennia since there had been a princess of Asgard and Sif looked particularly excited. Mischief tried to duck behind Loki but his adult self wouldn’t let him and Odin nodded slightly. “Prince Mischief Lokison.” One more battle cry, to welcome Loki’s second son.

Loki kept it buried for now, but he knew court protocol. This was a declaration of king to court, but there was a whole separate ceremony required to grant titles. Until then by technicality he wasn’t a prince so until then he had to decide if he was going to force Asgard to accept a Jötunn as the second son. But what if they couldn’t accept him?

Author's Notes:

Woohoo. The douche award is not handed out this time. Now whether or not actual communication occurs remains to be seen.

Next:

Several overdue bitch-slaps occur; Father and son both kinda suck in communicating
ASGARD

Sif stiffened as she entered the formal study; Fandral, Hogun, and Volstagg already within. The doors were left open and they all shared looks. Volstagg’s eyes roamed the space they had only entered a handful of times. “Do you believe this has to do with the matter concerning Prince Loki?”

Fandral opened his mouth to reply, cut off as Thor’s familiar steps thumped down the hallway before the warrior entered. He hadn’t called them here to his father’s study, and it showed in the slightest slumping of his shoulders. They all shared grim looks, everyone feeling a spike of worry as the guards on either side of the doors audibly snapped to attention and the doors were pulled open wider.

Odin swept in with measured steps, the doors closing behind him ominously as he walked behind his desk and set Gungnir to the side. No one moved. No one even breathed as Odin rested his hands behind his back and began without ceremony. “Do any of you understand the importance of an oath offered, not just to Asgard but to your King?” Eyes quickly found the floor, hearing the rising anger. “Obviously not, or you would have tempered your actions to match your vows. Not since I first assumed the throne of Asgard, more than 5,000 years ago, have I ever had to strip title and rank for the breaking of vows.” Odin eased back slightly on his anger. “One of you is blameless and has in fact stepped forward as both friend and protector to my son and that shall be rewarded. Warrior Fandral.” Fandral looked back up, standing tall and eyes forward. “We will have a discussion before court for an appropriate reward. Your actions are honorable and I am personally pleased that you have acted as Asgard’s emissary to my son. You are dismissed.”

“My King.” Fandral bowed low and took his leave of his friends, hoping he wouldn’t be the only one not banished.

Odin waited until the doors had closed again before speaking, voice booming. “I could not have presented a simpler task. Your actions not only broke your oaths to me but harmed my son. Do you think I accept such words lightly?”

Thor swallowed. “No, father. Of course not.”

“The last general to break his vows had his tongue removed. Perhaps if I enforced consequences such as that your actions would match your words.” Sif made a soft sound of protest but kept herself from speaking the childish words aching to escape.

Odin gave her a knowing look. “You perhaps are going to compare yourself to Loki. You may want to examine the past a little more closely, Lady Sif. When he gives his word, he keeps it to the letter. He is intelligent enough to offer vows that may be interpreted differently than what is being requested. Such a skill is not an act of dishonor.” His gaze hardened. “But we are not addressing the distant past. We are not focused on my youngest son. We are here to focus on all of you. The breaking of oaths may carry several penalties before court. Your status as a warrior may be irrevocably removed.” Sif flinched. “You may be barred from ever having the honor of fighting for Asgard.” More winces even as he turned his gaze to Thor. “You may be stripped of the line of succession.” Thor didn’t look up, silently paling. “Do you doubt that Loki is my son, merely for being born Jötunn?” He knew they were aware of Loki’s species, even as the rest of Asgard remained unaware.

Sif glanced at Hogun before standing taller. “No, sire.”
Having received a full, detailed report from Heimdall, he knew exactly what had been done and by whom. “And yet you would physically strike the son of a king?” They were all tempted to look at one another. All of them wondering just how much Odin knew.

Swallowing and clenching her fists to keep from shaking. Words had been exchanged before over the course of centuries. She and Loki’s fights had gotten physical at times, and she could admit to herself that she had always struck him first. But this was the first time she was facing a king’s ire for it. More ire, in fact, than she had expected. “I reacted in anger, sire. I broke my vows and can make no excuse for my actions.”

Odin decided to just continue down the line. “Warrior Hogun, do you carry doubt?” No actions were followed through, yet words could be just as deadly a weapon. His youngest was an expert of such a weapon, yet seemed to be made vulnerable by them as well. He refused to allow Loki to breed that doubt within him again.

Hogun bowed, a fist to his heart. “No, sire, my words were misguided. Loki is a prince of Asgard and your son.”

Glancing at Volstagg who looked absolutely crushed. “Edicts are to be followed, but they are never without give. No denizen, not in 10,000 years, has ever been held under an edict put in place from the actions of war.” He included Hogun in another glance before asking, “Will this be a matter that needs further attention? I will allow no harm to come to Prince Indel.”

“No, sire. I-I reacted in haste but I harbor no dislike for the boy--um…young prince.” Volstagg’s head hung a little lower.

“No, sire.”

Odin turned his attention to his eldest. Usually lectures were set aside for Thor once his friends were not present but this was not going to be one of those times. “I purposefully made you take those vows, my son, knowing that you would break them.” Thor lifted his head in surprise. “A king of Asgard CANNOT be an oath breaker. If you cannot keep a vow, you cannot make one and it is the only honorable recourse. Am I to expect this behavior in the future?”

Thor pulled in a slow breath. “No, father, I will not dishonor myself again.”

Odin turned to stare into the firelight for a few minutes. The only reason he wasn’t already stripping them of their titles and honor had everything to do with their tentative acceptance of Loki. “Hear me well on this matter. A man who cannot maintain his word will not wear the crown of Asgard. If this is to be a chronic issue I must be informed so that there is time to form the line of succession from Loki.” Odin turned so Thor could see just how serious he was. Thor looked absolutely stunned, and well he should be. Never had the eldest son of the king not held the crown of Asgard. Nodding his head slightly to the others. “You are dismissed and only if your actions warrant shall this matter be brought before court.”

The warriors solemnly filed out, Thor not moving. Whatever still troubled his eldest didn’t have anything to do with the current discussion so Odin waited. With a slight frown Thor waited until the doors closed again before speaking. “I have need to ask something that I…I wish for the truth, although I suspect I know of it.”

Odin nodded slightly and tabled what had been said. Thor would be true to himself and his words had been more of a warning than anything. He had faith in Thor being the king Asgard deserved but reminders that he wasn’t perfect never hurt. What he had said needed to be said even if it was never brought up again. “Ask, my son.”
“Does the enchantment on Mjolnir still stand? Are only those who are worthy as King of Asgard may wield it?”

Considering what had just been discussed Odin thought it was off topic but he had a feeling Thor had a purpose for walking down this road. Passing a thoughtful hand over the hammer in his son’s hand before nodding. “The enchantment stands.”

Thor nodded as well, pride in his eyes. “Then you should know that Loki has been found worthy.”

It was a strange combination of pleasure and surprise that found Odin, but it was overlapped by pride. “Are you certain?”

Meeting his father’s gaze easily. “He is the one who wielded Mjolnir to smite the Chitauri world eater.”

“A most auspicious turn of events.”

Thor read the pride there but felt a frown slowly turn the corners of his mouth. He had been so happy to return home, even if there was still a taste of sadness to it. Loki was one again by his side but mother never would be. But there was another reason for that sadness and now was the perfect time to ask. “Father?” Mighty brow furrowing, feeling troubled and needing Odin to answer him honestly. “Did you allow the council to decide my niece’s fate?”

It was not the first time this discussion had passed between them. But his son was to be a king before the year was concluded. It was something that needed to be discussed so that steps could finally be taken to correct the error his temper caused. “Even though your brother claims her she was not, by definition, of the house of Odin.”

“But you swore to me that you would protect her.”

Odin slowly shook his head, remembering how he’d phrased his response because he knew there was little he could do. She had not been old enough to form her own house, nor could he slip her within his own. “Nay. I said that she should be protected, not that she would receive that protection. Until Loki was of age I could not claim her. Nor could he for he was not old enough to set his own house.” For a child could not be acknowledged by any noble house until those that sired him or her were of age. Yet another law that needed correction.

“Would you truly have let them kill her?” Thor’s voice cracked in pain, his eyes desolate. As if the idolization that he had held onto since childhood was now at stake.

“Where have you heard—…Loki.”

Thor nodded gravely. “Aye. He heard. And conquered Helheim to protect her.”

Odin’s eye widened. He had seen the rune carved in Loki’s staff but had assumed…he wasn’t sure what he had assumed. It would certainly explain the state of Loki’s old armor when he had returned from his proving ground with claims that he had killed a phoenix. He hadn’t believed Loki. But he had seen the spark of innocence that had been in Loki’s eyes, that almost all warriors carried before they’d took their first life, had been lost. He’d let the response remain as it was. “Your mother had made arrangements for her to be hidden with her extended family in Vanahelm for a few centuries, until Loki was old enough to acknowledge her. He certainly did not help matters by so brazenly entering a full council meeting to confront me and announce she was now Goddess of the Underworld.” The confrontation had escalated to the point where in anger he had lashed out at Loki
by sealing her from ever returning to Asgard. “Her banishment was a result...an action I may never find absolution.”

His father wasn’t perfect, just as he wasn’t. In his youth the idea of being king sounded like fun. To always get your way. To be able to do anything one wanted. But there was a definite downside to the title. Thor’s thoughts immediately moving to little Indel. “And my nephew, your grandson?”

Odin slowly nodded, thankful past mistakes would not be repeated. “Loki is old enough to acknowledge him in public, as have I in court. Within a few days I will call for a title ceremony for all of them. Indel will have the full protection as a member of our family.”

“Then can my niece not come home?”

He had been hoping he wouldn’t have to have this conversation. “Until you wear the crown of Asgard, I am unable to break that edict.”

Sounding as confused as he felt. “You are the king. Surely you can say her name.”

Once again Odin damned his own foolishness. If he had been less arrogant he would have appointed a viceroy to his side centuries ago. “I would declare myself neither AEsir nor Asgardian in doing so, and my children would no longer be in the line of succession. The edict must be broken, for it is bound in magic. It cannot be altered and the Advisory Council have already rejected my numerous attempts to do so.”

Thor blinked slowly in surprise before he nodded. “Then she spoke truth. The Council decides the fate of Asgard, not her king.”

Odin knew exactly who ‘she’ was. “Loki’s daughter is a very clever girl.”

His jaw setting, his voice firming with conviction. “Then once I am king I will select a new council who will do so.”

Odin nodded easily in agreement. “As is well within your right----...”

A knock at the door silenced both of them, the door opening slightly for one of the court scribes to stick his head in. “Sires.” He bowed and held out a parchment. “An audience has been requested in the morrow by Lady G’dath, sire.” The scribe turned and scurried out the door.

Not even the God of Thunder missed his father’s grimace.

Odin took the private corridor that would lead to his less formal study and the family wing. A small body in his way stopped him from his intended destination. His brow furrowed slightly as he looked down to see little Talia silently stare up at him.

For as humanoid as light elves appeared, there was something so alien in their gazes sometimes. Were he another man he would be unnerved by her probing, assessing eyes. She spoke softly, as she was often prone to do if she spoke at all. “You’re not like the others.”

Odin didn’t make it a habit to posture in front of children. Instead his own voice was nearly as soft. “I am the king of Asgard.”

She shook her head slightly as if in disagreement. “You’re like papa. You have a little bit of cold in you.”
It took a considerable amount of effort not to react to the soft words. He had many secrets and this was perhaps one of his greatest. “You should not speak of such things.”

Talia frowned curiously as she asked, “Why? It’s not a bad thing. It just is.”

Instead of answering Odin responded with a question of his own, “How do you know that?”

Her head tilted slightly as she considered how to answer what she was sensing. It was the same thing she sensed in Indel and there was a tiny spark of it in Thor. “When I’m around papa my magic sings, like wind through chimes. It’s quieter around you but it’s there.”

“You do not believe it is because we both have magic?” Talia was quick to shake her head. “And it doesn’t frighten you?”

Jane appeared in the corridor, Pepper only steps behind her. She seemed to sigh and tense all at once. She’d left Indel in Thor’s keeping while she went on a desperate search for Talia, who rarely wandered. As she approached there was a difference he noted in her gait and in the way she held herself from her last visit to Asgard. She was stronger, more confident. She was Loki’s perfect complement.

She wasn’t that far away that she couldn’t have heard their initial conversation. She confirmed Odin’s suspicions with her first question as she picked up Talia and rested her on her hip, “Why should it? There’s nothing wrong with being Jötunn. The ones that are convinced to the contrary are either ignorant or stupid.” She turned to smile gently at Talia, a smile the little elf copied. “Sometimes both.”

He nodded to her ever so slightly. “Lady Jane.”

“All-father.” Her nod in return was a little deeper. She shifted Talia just a little who had returned to watching Odin silently. “Loki will be waking up soon. You should talk to him.”

Odin stood up just a little straighter, his mind already set on how to proceed. “Time will be set aside to discuss the future.”

Jane was not amused and it showed. “I didn’t think honorable warriors lied.” Amber flashed in her eyes in sympathy with the emotions she was trying to contain.

If he was surprised to see a hint of her power he didn’t show it. “You insult me.” What might have been a question from him certainly wasn’t.

Her lips pursed ever so slightly, keeping her tone carefully controlled. “I made an observation. I never assigned that observation to yourself, your majesty.” Talia giggled. What she said wasn’t the most intelligent thing to Asgard’s king, but when coming to Loki’s defense common sense wasn’t always readily available to her.

Odin blinked at her in surprise before a look of resignation crossed his face. “I see Loki has been influencing you.”

Her lips twitched just a little. “As often as possible.” The humor faded from her expression quickly. “You assured me you wanted Loki to return.” Pepper stiffened but Jane was only concerned by the All-father’s response. “You don’t really expect him to stay if he becomes an afterthought again, do you?”

“What is there to discuss that cannot wait until the morrow?”
Jane struggled for patience, knowing a bad father wasn’t made overnight, any more than a good father. “Start with an assurance that you accept Indel.”

A flicker of confusion lit his eye but his voice was as gruff as ever. “I have already stated so before court.”

“There—…” Both of them glanced at Pepper. Her jaw set and she squared her shoulders before continuing. “There is a difference between what is politically accepted and what occurs behind closed doors.”

Odin gave Pepper a thoughtful look. It had been a long while since he’d last visited Midgard but he’d thought most of the mortals had done away with monarchy rule. “Are you a king’s consort on Midgard?”

“No, sire. Although my former employer imagined himself to be royalty.” Pepper’s lips twitched in the beginnings of a reluctant smile before she controlled the impulse.

It was a struggle for Jane to not giggle. But Pepper’s observation had been exactly what Jane had been thinking. “The king of Asgard accepted Loki’s heir.” Pepper nodded once, well versed in politics. Jane’s jaw tightened a little, angry on Loki’s behalf Odin couldn’t figure this out for himself. “Your son needs to know that his father accepts his grandson.”

Odin admired how fierce she was in defense of his son without crossing the line to rudeness. He marveled at the fine addition she would make. Instead of protesting that he had planned to address it at a later time with Loki, he nodded slowly.

Loki slowly opened his eyes, yawning and sitting up. Mischief grumbled against his side, still asleep and Loki was surprised. Mischief never slept. When the magic supplying him was too low he faded back into the ether but he never slept. But then Loki thought about it. Mischief had been present since Hela had brought him to reality to heal his magic.

It wasn’t possible. Probing, assessing, he soon came to the startling though illogical conclusion that what he was sensing was different than before. Careful not to wake him, he followed Mischief’s magic to the source and jolted to realize it wasn’t looping back on itself but flowing to a deep well. Hela? Midgard?

Answers to figure out later but for now he wrapped an arm around the very real AEsir boy sleeping against him. Considering the morning they’d had it was no wonder Mischief was tired, both physically and magically. He may be a mage but he was still a boy. Loki yawned again, judging by the angle of the light shining under the door that it was early afternoon. At least he hadn’t slept the entire day. Magically he searched everyone out.

He’d been shocked to discover that his rooms were still next to Thor’s, everything maintained and waiting for him. It was a contradiction to both his status as a disowned prisoner as well as his later status of being dead. One or the other should have initiated his belongings to either be thrown away or burned. Technically his freefall from the Bi-frost should have seen to that. He wasn’t certain what to think about the matter.

Next to him a suite had been created for Jane. He’d been too exhausted to investigate but he had no doubt it was as grand as his since the family wing didn’t have small chambers. Next to her was a set of rooms with two beds for what he assumed were for Talia and Indel. He should be disturbed that his father was this prepared. It would be completely appropriate to be disturbed. Yet he couldn’t understand why he was so content.
The door opened, Indel looking around curiously before darting to the foot of his bed and crawling onto the mattress. “Grandpa is having a feast.” Loki wrinkled his nose before sighing. Of course he was. “Is that like a party?”

“Yes.”

Pouting as he glanced down at his armor. He liked dressing up like this. “Mama said I have to dress up and Anya said there are clothes for me in the wardrobe.”

Loki pointed to the wardrobe by the doors to his bathing chambers and with a sigh Indel leapt to the floor. “Where is your sister?”

Indel opened the wardrobe and stuck his head inside. “With mama. They’re doin’ girl things in her rooms.” Pouting as he reappeared for a second. “Why can’t you sleep with mama?”

Loki closed his eyes at the mention of Jane and—…inappropriate moment, Loki! Sighing softly because he knew that’s not what Indel meant even if his libido sat up and took enthusiastic notice. “Because it is not appropriate for unmarried men and women to share a bed.”

“Oh. Wow! There’s like a million-billion clothes in here.”

Loki sat up straight. “Who taught you that?”

Indel peeked out guiltily. “Uncle Tony.” He disappeared just as quickly while Loki grit his teeth and growled in irritation. Uncle Tony was going to regret getting even with him through his son.

Loki looked right as the door the servants used to move behind the scenes opened, Anya pausing to give him a curtsey. “Your highness.”

Loki wrinkled his nose at her, never once demanding she stand on ceremony around him and always annoyed that she insisted on it. Sighing with a slight shake of his head. “Anya.”

The corner of her mouth quirked in amusement. “Welcome home, prince.”

He reclined against the pillow and smirked. “Strangely enough it’s good to be home.” Then he arched an eyebrow devilishly at her. “So, any delightful gossip to be found?”

A grin tugged at her lips now. “Currently you are the gossip.”

Loki muttered under his breath. “We’ll just have to fix that, then.”

“Does Mischief have to change?” Indel asked without reemerging from the closet.

Loki nudged the boy next to him while he nodded. “Yes.”

Mischief scowled grumpily and batted away his hand, curling away from him. “Sleepy.”

Pulling in just a little bit of his ‘father’ tone that had never failed to make Indel and Talia obey. “Mischief, go change so we can eat.”

With a huff Mischief pushed himself up, asking, “Why am I hungry?”

Thinking quickly, not willing to deal with a panicked playmate just yet. “You’ve been here too long. You need to sustain yourself until we can come to a solution.”
The boy paused to throw him a look of suspicion over his shoulder. “I hate feasts.” Indel was frowning at Loki silently. He’d detected the lie, he just wasn’t certain what it meant.

Loki hated feasts as well but he wasn’t even going to bother complaining. Feasts were an integral part of AEsir life and to have this life again meant putting up with them. Mischief grumpily searched at the back of the adjoining wardrobe to find one of Loki’s older pieces as a child. He took the simple but finely made clothes into the bathing room while Indel continued to search and pout.

Mischief had changed and crawled back on top of the bed, nodding off while Indel continued to search. Anya had quietly watched the exchange, frowning slightly. “Is that not your friend…that I of course have never met?”

“A tragically long story.” Loki gave a long suffering sigh when he said this.

“I cannot wait to hear it.” He was almost eager to find a quiet moment to do exactly that. Even if Anya never understood a word that came out of his mouth; that she was curious enough to ask delighted him. If he ever did decide to get in touch with his dark side again, as Tony phrased it, she would be one of the few spared. She took a step closer, making a sweeping gesture. “I hear congratulations are in order.”

Loki stiffened automatically, the behavior almost ingrained when it was a female AEsir doing the asking. “In what regard? That I managed to snake my way back into the All-Father’s good graces?” She just stared at him and after a moment he grimaced and dropped the trickster. “Congratulations for the fine children I’ve produced?”

She tilted her head a little towards him. “For your blushing bride to be.”

“Assuming she says yes.” Loki’s grimace that he’d actually said that out loud was more pronounced as he pushed himself out of bed and did a little fussing himself before finally selecting something to wear. He flashed it onto his body since it was just easier. Glancing back at Mischief with a small frown, knowing that the few outfits he’d preserved from his childhood would only go so far. “Can a selection be created to fit him?”

“I will have a wardrobe commissioned before the day is out. Is his favorite color also green?”

Loki gave Mischief a thoughtful glance even as he nodded. “Yes, green with silver piping.”

She frowned and ventured to his side, nudging him aside to give his clothes a critical eye. “Most of these have held up well but if any no longer satisfy just leave me a list.”

Loki nodded slightly and Anya smiled before ducking back through the door. He turned, realizing Indel had yet to change. The boy continued to pick at outfits and pout unhappily. “Indel, settle on something.”

“It itches!”

Loki rubbed the bridge of his nose with a finger, eyes closed. “Then wear the breeches.”

“But they look stupid!”

Mischief jolted awake before crawling under a pillow with a grumble. Loki gestured to the closet full of clothes that were perfect for Indel’s height…and he refused to dwell on that too deeply. “Then wear something else.”
He could only imagine how opinionated Indel was going to be when he turned Mischief’s physical age. Thankfully he would just let his son loose on court and stand back to laugh in delight. “Indel, I do not have time to take apart your wardrobe right now. Wear one or the other or go to the great hall naked.”

Thankfully Indel was too shy to ever do that. Thor at this age, however, would have done it without thinking twice. “Fine!”

A door slammed to punctuate his son settling on something to wear and changing. Chuckling almost too quiet to be heard behind him pulled Loki from his thoughts. “Now this does sound familiar.” He turned, wary as Odin stepped inside. “I seem to recall a young prince who had similar opinions of wool garments.” Loki nodded slightly but he felt awkward and couldn’t seem to decide where to put his hands.

Odin considered him for a moment before nodding in return. He had received a lot of advice in recent months but no matter which source it all came back to the same advice. “I heard you.” Loki’s head shot up in surprise. “You asked me a question on Alfheim’s moon. This is the answer: I did hear you, my son.”

Loki’s brow furrowed before asking with equal parts confusion and alarm, “How? How is that even possible? I was shielded. Cloaked—Heimdall cannot see me.”

Odin considered him carefully before responding. “Your spells can hide you from Heimdall, but on the throne they do not hide you from me.” Loki gasped in horror and stumbled back into an end table at the foot of the bed. A shaking hand touched his abdomen, even as he shuddered with the horror that his father knew—…

He couldn’t complete the thought. He loved Indel. He wasn’t ashamed of his son. But he was ashamed that his honor was hopelessly lost. Odin didn’t take a step so much as lean towards him and Loki’s body shifted instinctively so that he was between Odin and the doors that Indel was on the other side of.

Mischief’s head jerked up but neither man took notice of him. Odin was acutely aware of instincts, whether they be AEsir, Vanir, or Jötunn. His tone softened. “I accept and acknowledge your heir, Loki.” He didn’t step forward, knowing Loki would see it as an aggressive move against his son. He remained still, at least until the significance of the phrase seemed to process.

Loki blinked twice before asking softly, refusing to meet his father’s gaze. “Why?” His father had never vocalized a position one way or the other concerning the origins of children. He assumed that Odin believed as the majority did. If that were so then Odin shouldn’t be able to stomach Indel’s very existence.

He thought carefully before responding. A response that he wouldn’t have even considered offering Loki just a few years ago. A response that not only could affect his status as king, but Thor’s right of succession. After a silent moment Odin spoke so softly even this close Loki almost didn’t hear him. “As my father was Bor, my mother was Bestla. Who am I to judge how a child enters the universe?”

Loki blinked slowly as that name penetrated the panic. Bestla. That wasn’t an AEsir name. Yet it was a familiar name in a vague sense. Then it came to him and it was almost as stunning as a sledgehammer to the head. She had been a giantess, rumored to be Bor’s consort once upon a time. His father was half frost giant. He’d been handed not just an explanation as to why but a means of
political blackmail to protect Indel. Not that he could use such information to usurp both Odin and Thor to his benefit, even if he wanted to. Odin noted his son’s body relaxing, instinctively accepting the danger against Indel was past.

Only then did Odin continue speaking. “Thanos will suffer for what he has done, but you must hear me.” Loki nodded slowly but it was a little too automatic, his thoughts still turning. Odin wasn’t sure what prompted him to repeat himself but he found himself doing so. “Loki. Are you listening?”

Whispering hoarsely, his gaze still elusive. “Yes.”

Odin was relieved Loki was receptive enough to listen. With this out of the way, he hoped the two of them might actually come to an understanding this time. “I could see you but not find you. But I swear to you that I did search for you. We all did so. As soon as I found you, you were on Midgard for the Tesseract and I sent Thor to bring you home.”

Jerking back harshly a step further, voice growling in anger and glaring at Odin’s shoulder. “But then why imprison me? You knew! You knew it wasn’t my fault--I had no choice!”

The tone was a gentle chide in comparison to his usual preference of gruff authority. “Loki, you know you had a choice.”

Snarling and snidely retorting. “Yes, to die immediately or slowly. I chose a third option.”

“That is not of what I speak!” Loki flinched back ever so slightly as he stiffened, a habitual reaction to his father’s raised voice. Not that Odin had been abusive to him as a child. Loki had just always had a low tolerance for his raised voice. Mischief flinched just as much. Odin gained control of his temper and continued evenly. “I will set aside time later to discuss this.”

Just as quickly as the anger appeared it abandoned Loki. His father always promised later. A later that conveniently never occurred. Loki spoke dully as he stared at the far wall. “Of course, All-father.”

Odin blinked, for some reason catching what he hadn’t before. What he had always taken from Loki as acquiescence was actually resignation. His son didn’t believe him. It also hadn’t escaped his notice that Loki wouldn’t look at him. “There is one matter further I would wish to speak of before I depart.”

Loki pasted on his court face of polite interest. Odin knew what Loki needed to hear and he gruffly brushed aside his own hesitation of speaking of such a taboo subject. While Indel’s origins could never be officially announced, no matter his conception he was still happy and proud of the heir his son was raising. He was able to pull Loki against his chest, who was too stunned to struggle. Odin whispered in his ear. “You cannot lose honor in what is taken by force. It does not make you weak, nor less of a warrior. You fought bravely and you never shamed me.”

Swallowing thickly, after a hesitant moment Loki moved his head to rest lightly on Odin’s shoulder as he refused to allow his eyes to do more than burn. Were he in a better state, he would marvel at being held so closely and firmly by his father. He couldn’t keep the traitorous words from escaping. “I broke—…”

“They have no honor, Loki, but it does not impugn your own.”

Closing his eyes, focused on asking what he had to know. “Did she—did—…”

Odin nodded to himself, knowing Frigga’s opinion of him mattered the most. “Your
mother knew that you had been captured and tortured. She knew nothing more and no one else ever shall.” Frigga had wanted Loki free but Odin had known Loki would simply slip away. He’d kept it hidden in court, but it had been painful to see the stranger wearing his son’s face. At that time Loki had been a danger to himself and to others. “The dungeons were a compromise between us.” Somewhere close where Loki could be safe and protected. Somewhere that his mother could reach him, but that he wouldn’t be able to escape and avoid her. “Once she and I were satisfied that you were whole again, you were to be released.”

Loki’s brow furrowed in confusion as he swallowed hard. Odin hadn’t lied. It was what had made leaving so easy. Because he’d known his father hadn’t lied. “But you said--…”

Odin sighed softly but didn’t release Loki. His youngest was far too skilled in ferreting out lies. The words that had burned like acid as they’d left his lips had been words he’d forced himself to believe. “Would you have ever listened if you knew one day you would be free?”

Loki bit into his lip hard enough for the coppery taste to fill his mouth but the words reluctantly escaped anyway. “I wish I had listened.”

What had amounted to seven years was how long it had taken for Loki to heal from the crushing blow to his sense of self. Not that he could have done so alone, but his journey to Alfheim’s moon had given Loki what he’d needed most. Odin nodded again slowly. “You needed the one thing that was in short supply. Time.”

That small offering of understanding broke through Loki’s control and the tears escaped. The washroom doors thudded open, Indel stomping out with his arms crossed in a pout. Loki pushed himself away from both of them, his back to his son. “Indel, mind min fader.” He was out the doors before either of them could reply. Indel slowly looked up at Odin with eyebrows furrowed.

Odin could see why the boy had been pouting. He wore breeches under his pants and a tunic under his jacket since both top garments were made of wool. He would have new clothing made immediately, Loki unable to tolerate wool any more than Indel apparently could. “Indel, would you like to follow me to the great hall?”

Those large green eyes studied him and he was again surprised to find how much of Loki was in this boy. “Are you really my grandpa?”

He nodded slightly to the boy. “Your father is my son, therefore you are my grandson.”

Frowning a little. “Then why did dada run away?”

Odin glanced in the direction Loki had left before trying to explain Loki’s sudden departure. “He--…”

Indel sighed impatiently, which took Odin aback. He would expect such actions from a child much older. “Before he made me, he ran away from home. ‘cause he didn’t know you loved him.”

“Indel--…”

Ignoring Odin and continuing to talk. “Did you forget to tell him? ‘cause dada tells me he loves me every day. Even if I was mad, I wouldn’t run away ‘cause I know he loves me.”

Voice rumbling softly. “Sometimes words are not all that is required.”
Indel rolled his green eyes. “Well, yeah, you’re supposed to hug him, too. Did you forget to hug him?” Frowning in distrust an instant later. “I thought grandpas were supposed to make you smile and happy.”

Odin tried to smile gently but felt like he was in one of those circular conversations he would always get lost in when Loki was a child. “We try to.”

Eyes narrowing further. “My dada was crying. Why were you making him sad?”

Looking sad himself. “I fear there are many times here your father will be sad before he is happy again.”

Indel’s eyes narrowed to slits and he growled, a scary sound coming from a child of five. “If Thor makes him sad again I will set him on fire. I learned that spell just for him.”

Mischief’s cackle of delight caught both of them by surprise, both turning to stare at him. After a second the boy turned invisible and fled. Odin reaffirmed his attention on the small elf boy. “Indel—…”

“He almost broke my dada, I hate him. And--and you make him sad. I hate you, too!” Indel ran out the door, not looking where he was going and ran into Loki who had composed himself enough to hear the end of that.

Loki hoisted Indel up into his arms. His legs wrapped around his waist as his boy cried. “Shh, Indel, shh…you cannot hate your grandfather. He has done nothing to you to deserve it.”

Small arms wrapped tightly around his neck, little back shaking in distress. Loki shook his head to himself. Indel was so much like him. Loki was dramatic and he knew it. Ever since he’d come of age he’d taken to hiding his emotions but he was still prone to bursting when his emotions ran too high. Example: Asgard, Jötunheim, New Mexico, New York…

Crying into his neck. “But he made you cry!”

Loki rubbed his back as he winced but knew it wouldn’t do any good to lie. Indel was the literal definition of a living lie detector. It chaffed at his pride but reluctantly he admitted, “I told you the young blue prince was foolish, remember? I did this to myself. But I’m going to tell you a secret. A secret so big you can never tell anyone.”

Indel rubbed at his face and whispered as his upset faded to intrigue. “What secret?”

Odin walked outside, head cocked slightly as sadness had shifted to curiosity. His words were for Indel, but Loki was looking right at his father. “Even knowing what would happen… everything that would happen. If it meant not finding you I wouldn’t change a minute of it. You are the best of me, my crowning achievement. I will never regret anything else so long as my son is the brilliant, perfect Indel.” Odin’s lips twitched ever so slightly.

Indel giggled before he tilted his head to consider Loki’s words and asked, “I can’t hate grandpa?”

“Absolutely not.”


For once, Loki wanted to crow. Someone in the universe who wasn’t instantly in love with
his perfect brother. Feeling childish and sticking his tongue out at his father as he lightly patting his son’s thigh. “We’ll talk about that later.” Surprise crossed Odin’s face and belatedly Loki realized what he’d just done. *Oops.*

Loki started to walk past, slowing when Odin lightly caught his elbow. “So shall we, my son.” Loki caught the meaning and silently nodded. This was not a conversation he was looking forward to.

Glancing around before asking, “Where is Mischief?”

Indel pouted. “Grandpa scared him.”

Loki turned to slowly raise an eyebrow at his father who grumbled and walked down the hall. Smirking, Loki shook his head. He doubted it was his father’s fault. Apparently Mischief was making up for his lack of shyness up to this point. He started walking again, using his magic to search Mischief out and found him hiding a couple of pillars down the hall. Mentally he sighed, knowing the two of them were going to have to have a conversation very soon.

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**Author's Notes:**

*There are still more bitch slaps to come. After all, G'dath did promise herself a bit of evisceration.*

**Next:**

*Asgard feasts; Scary dreams*
Chapter 78

ASGARD

Talia kept giggling and spinning, the yellow sundress she was wearing fanning outward. An abrupt knock was followed with a brunette sticking her head in the door. “Everybody decent?” Darcy slipped inside without waiting for an invitation, closing the door behind her. “Are we testosterone free in here?” Slowly, warily Talia nodded. Darcy sighed in relief and immediately turned to shimmy and adjust herself. “Thank God! This place has no concept of an underwire bra. Damn skinny bitches and their flat chests…”

Jane made a disapproving sound as she exited the bathroom, draped in a flowing fabric of gold with earthy green highlights. “Darcy! Loki is going to kill you if she starts talking like you.”

Darcy just snorted. “Like he has a leg to stand on.” Jane just gave her a look. Darcy frowned before looking down at the little girl staring at her in fascination. Shrugging dismissively. “Whatever. Hot boyfriend will just have to get over it.” Then she took a slow look around. “Damn, girl. Your room—rooms I should say, are epic. Emphasis on the ‘s’ in that. I feel like used kibble.” Smirking a little. “Must be nice to date the rich prince of a foreign land.”

Talia’s brow furrowed. “Mother isn’t dating papa.”

Jane smiled a little, running a hand gently over corn-silk before meeting Darcy’s surprised gaze. But then Darcy slowly nodded. “You found your Neo, huh?”

Raising both eyebrows, sounding amused. “What?”

“Neo. The One. Dammit, girl, you are not allowed to coast through life without seeing the Matrix!”

Still smiling, Jane crossed her arms loosely. “I thought Star Trek was a must to life.”

Darcy stabbed a finger in Jane’s direction. “First of all, Zachary Quinto is a fine ass man, gay or straight, and homage must be paid when he is given screen time. You must either see Spock or Sylar, although personally I find him hotter with a bit of scruff. Now, there are three necessities in life. Every woman must see Legends of the Fall at least once, because Brad Pitt with long hair is divine.”

Lip twitching, remembering another movie Darcy had dragged her to, to drool over. “What about Interview with the Vampire?”

Darcy shrugged even as she nodded. “That is acceptable, only because Antonio Banderas shares a sexy almost-kiss scene with him. Second necessity: an unapologetic chick flick. My guilty pleasure is While You Were Sleeping. Don’t judge me.”

Jane was laughing now as she asked, “And third?”

Rolling her eyes at the physicist as if it were obvious. “Tragic romance when you just want to sit with ice cream and tear up a box of Kleenex. Titanic. That shit still makes me cry like a bitch.”

A male voice caused heads to turn. “Should I back away slowly and pretend I heard nothing?” Talia ran and threw her arms around Loki’s legs, grinning up at him. He scooped her up, resting her on his other hip.
Darcy cocked her head a little. “I was just reviewing some of the necessities of human culture.”

“Mhmm…Talia, you are not allowed to repeat anything you have just heard.”

Talia frowned curiously. “Why?”

“Because I do not want to spend the night washing her mouth out with soap for the bad habits she teaches you.” Then Loki paused for effect before grinning evilly. “Actually, I do. Please, repeat what you’ve just learned.”

And because Indel had to be a part of all conversations he was ready to chime in. “Can I repeat it?”

Loki raised an eyebrow, knowing how to instantly discourage his son without saying ‘no’. “If you want to sound like a girl you may.” Indel scrunched up his face and rapidly shook his head.

Darcy crossed her arms slowly. “I’m not scared of you, Scar.”

Loki just rolled his eyes. “A Lion King reference, how juvenile.” Although technically if the universe were following that movie’s formula that would make him his father’s brother. Loki shuddered at that thought.

“Huh. Caught that one. Snape?”

The trickster glanced at Jane who was giggling behind her hand. “And now we have moved onward to a series of books I doubt you have read.”

Darcy’s hands on her hips as she leaned towards him. “Hey. It was also a bunch of movies, smartass.”

Loki affected a tone that made even Jane question if he’d seen the movie. “I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, and even put a stopper in death.”

“Dear God you could give Alan Rickman a run for his money.” Darcy immediately started fanning herself.

“And I am considered the smartass?” Loki snorted before continuing. “It appears the pot calls the kettle black.”

Darcy narrowed her eyes a little before nodding smartly at Jane. “I see why you like him.”

He just shook his head, looking mystified. “I fail to see why you like her.”

Jane jumped in with both feet before round two could commence, asking almost desperately, “Is it time for the feast?”

“Hence my purpose to enter your rooms.” Then his gaze dropped to caress appreciatively over the way the fabric dipped. “…except of course to enjoy your beauty on such magnificent display.” Jane glanced down, blushing but couldn’t keep the pleased smile off her face.

Darcy leaned back with a raised eyebrow. “Da-a-arn…that is what they mean when they say Silvertongue.” Loki just sent Darcy a look and with a last grin the brunette scurried out the door.
Tony turned, Pepper standing next to him. In fact all of the visitors from Earth were in the hallway, looking a little lost. Tony spotted the trickster first, Jane on his arm and all three children trailing behind them. His eyes swept over Jane from head to toe. “You sure do clean up nice, Janie.” Pepper sighed with a shake of her head while Loki instantly scowled. The inventor winked at the demi-god. “Yeah, yeah…you’re pretty, too.” If anything the trickster’s scowl deepened.

Jane cleared her throat to prevent herself from giggling, giving him a nod in greeting. “Mr. Stark.”

The inventor made a ticking sound of disappointment, his voice a hair shy of being a whine. “Don’t call me that.”

Loki ignored Tony’s interactions with Jane, focused on making certain his point was made. “Do not think you will escape unpunished.”

Steve stiffened and took a step forward in defense of his teammate. “Loki, we’re--…”

Tony just waved a dismissive hand at the super soldier. “Save it, Cap. We’re just bonding. Party of two, here.” Steve turned to shoot Bruce a questioning look but the scientist just shrugged and shook his head. Stark had already turned his attention back to Loki and asked, “For what?”

Slowly a dark eyebrow lifted. “Million-billion?”

“Not following you.” Stark kept his face remarkably innocent.

Indel peered around his father, sounding innocent but a spark of mischief in his eyes said otherwise. “You taught me that, Uncle Tony.”

Tony grimaced at the boy. “You’re not helping, squirt.”

Smirking in perfect imitation of his father. “Yes I am.” Tony’s jaw dropped. Talia giggled before whispering in Indel’s ear. The boy grinned and whispered something back. Then both of them shot the inventor an innocent look. Tony shuddered in horror.

“He is not your uncle.” Thor took a step forward as he said this, sounding defensive. To Loki he sounded jealous.

“Is so.” Indel stuck out his tongue at Thor before hiding his face against Loki’s leg. Loki rolled his eyes when Thor sulked.

Tony gave up pretending to be innocent. “That’s what happens when you pull crap like that.”

Loki shook his head and gave a long suffering sigh. “You did ask I save you from my father if needed.”

“Yeah. Head still on shoulders. Thanks. Wedgie of doom was soo uncalled for.”

The trickster bared his teeth at the inventor. “You are a man of power on your planet and an emissary of that back-water little world on this one. It behooves you to learn what line not to cross before king and court.”

Pepper shook her head. “I’ve been saying that for years.”

Tony shot her a scowl. “Traitor.” Reaffirming a glare on Loki. “Like you’re one to talk
Loki’s shrug was easy enough but his voice had deepened into something dark and painful. Enough so that all the children looked alarmed and Jane put a comforting hand on his arm. “I have done so in the past because those choices only effected myself.” A blink of his green eyes and whatever it was that he was thinking about was repressed once more. His chin lifted just a little, his tone easy and for the first time Erik, who had been listening intently, caught a glimpse of the man behind the trickster. “From this point in my life forward the outcome affects others more important than myself. Even if this were not the case, I am well aware of the consequences of those choices.”

“Brother—…” Thor was wound up to interfere, whether to defend him or chide him went unanswered.

Loki cut him off with a simple question, smiling, “Yes, Thoura?” Thor’s eyes widened and he closed his mouth with a click. Loki just continued to smile pleasantly.

Tony did a double take. “Wait. What was that?”

Loki only had to open his mouth and Thor’s voice roared over him. “NOTHING.”

After a moment of pause for the two brothers to come to a silent understanding, Loki changed the subject. “The feast will start soon but will carry on well into the night. You may sit where you wish, with the exception of the high table. Follow my lead. There will be a series of toasts from various people who love to hear the sound of their own voice.”

“Loki…”

Loki raised a challenging eyebrow as he asked, “Do I lie?” Thor muttered something under his breath but didn’t contradict him so Loki continued. “At the conclusion servants will fill the goblets to your right and empty plates will be placed in front of you. Everyone will be invited to eat at that point. After the king departs, anyone else may do so.” Loki sounded almost wistful when he said this.

Thor made a rebuking sound. “Brother, this feast is in your honor.”

The mage made a show of rolling his eyes as he gave a long suffering sigh. “I’m well aware and I will endure it.” Turning away from the others dismissively, he waited until Jane had repositioned her hand and escorted her into the great hall.

Loki’s mood was on a steady decline by the time the third round of mead sloshed its way through the great hall. He knew on a logical level this was his father’s attempt to show Asgard his pride for his son but he could really have done without being forced to attend. When the emphasis had been less on food and more on drink he’d persuaded Jane to take the children out. A quiet hint to Bruce and the scientist had followed with Erik and Darcy in tow. Since this was in his honor and his father had made such a point to emphasize that fact he couldn’t just bow out gracefully, even though his father already had. A king’s prerogative.

If ever there was a good reason to covet being king it was for that reason. Loki had never been opposed to bow out ungracefully but he was trying to be good. He wasn’t a heavy drinker, even less inclined to do so during these festivities. From experience he knew how this evening was going to progress. As alcohol flowed inhibitions lowered and the tall tales would commence. Soon the boasting would follow, the hall filled with happy cries for tales of Thor’s greatness and it always chafed him whenever his contributions for a particular adventure were ignored in favor of steel and
The imaginary devils perched on either shoulder, since apparently he didn’t have an angel on the opposite shoulder like most people, were winning the argument of punishing them all when, not if, it happened.

“Thor! Tell us the tale of Jötunheim!”

“Aye!”

“How many of those savages did you slaughter?”

A few cries of agreement filled the air and more mead was passed around. Tony choked on what he was drinking, letting his mug hit the table with wide eyes. The remaining Avengers all shared uneasy looks, glancing at Loki who just nodded with a raised eyebrow. Just par the course as far as he was concerned.

Thor sent a wary glance at Loki who just dared him with his eyes to say something stupid. “My friends, surely we have better tales than that?”

“Nay!”

“I heard you used your hammer to single-handedly defeat your enemies and save your brother.”

Tony hissed through his teeth and glanced at the trickster. Loki silently sipped from his cup. Of course that was how it happened. It couldn’t have been Thor’s fault that started the fighting because he couldn’t pass on a petty insult. It was impossible that they all held their own and that his mere skills saved Fandral’s life. That in the end it was Odin rescuing them that kept them alive.

“Why did he even bring a magician to such a dangerous location?”

“A witch would be dead in a real battle in a matter of seconds.”

Loki’s eyes flashed and lost all control over his temper. He flicked his wrist and instantly warriors were spitting out their mead with outraged howls. Well, it had been mead. Now it was something else entirely. Less than sober eyes turned to glare at the trickster in their midst who was putting down his cup.

Thor was standing, hands up to try to temper him. “Brother…”

Loki ignored him and stood up slowly, a feral grin that was merely bared teeth spreading as he spoke, “Continue with your meal, I am certain it will be yet another glorious occasion. I would refrain from further drinking. I’m afraid you’ll find it quite intolerable now that the horses filtered it for you.”

Tony glanced at the mugs and started howling. One of the warriors lunged for Loki and he ducked under the advance. An elbow to the kidney, courtesy of an invisible Mischief, sent the offending Asgardian flying. Loki almost sighed out loud. Mischief’s protective instincts were getting out of hand.

There was a pregnant pause of assessing silence. But the silence was also filled with words running through Loki’s mind. Words that he had heard repeatedly over the centuries combining with his favorite of the night. Mere mage. Weak. Savages.
Fuck it. He knocked back the rest of his goblet and tossed it at the far wall where it shattered. A dangerous glint entered Loki’s eyes, matched by the wide smile across his face. “Anyone else care to test their mettle against this witch?”

A challenge that would have been met by a few of the more reckless sober. But he wasn’t dealing with that. These were less than sober minds who didn’t need much of an excuse. The room erupted.

It was the giggling that had her rushing for the door. Jane flung it open, winced at the obvious fight they’d all been in, then winced harder as Tony steered a giggling trickster into her room. Out of all of them, Steve was the one who looked truly apologetic. “Sorry, we weren’t sure what to do with him.”

Logan rolled his eyes as he passed, completely unscathed thanks to his healing abilities. He became one of the main focuses once the AEsir realized he healed so quickly. He hid a smirk, pleased with how the evening ended.

Jane waved them off easily and took both of Loki’s hands. It wasn’t that he was smiling, he was just…giggling. She led him over to a sofa and coaxed him to sit down. Looking over her shoulder at Tony and Clint who looked a little worse for wear. “Are you two okay?”

Clint smirked. “An Asgardian bar fight; now I have done everything.”

She winced as she tilted Loki’s face up a little. “That is going to be one heck of a black eye.” Another soft chorus of giggles filled the room.

Indel perked up and abandoned the AEsir children’s game they were playing. “What’s wrong with dada?”

Mischief roughly pushed his way through the line of Avengers, yelping as Natasha nabbed him by the scruff of the neck. Heads turned, the boy slowly looking up as she raised an eyebrow down at him. He didn’t look anymore apologetic for causing Clint and Steve to knock into her but he did sigh. “I apologize.” Then he flashed from point to point, stuck out his tongue, and hid behind Jane.

Jane ignored the mini-drama, focused currently on Indel. “He’ll be okay in a little while. Do you remember the berries he ate? When he was acting silly?”

“Ooh.”

She lightly touched under the bruise with her thumb, frowning. He was still wearing his glamour to hide the state of his body. She couldn’t wrap her mind around a reason why this was showing. She also wondered why his glamour held up to touch when his illusions didn’t. Actually, she also wondered how it was still in place since the last time he’d gotten this drunk his spells had all failed. She sighed, realizing magic would most probably always have an air of mystery to her. “Can you make me some ice wrapped in a towel?”

Indel chirped eagerly. “Sure. That spell’s easy.”

“Thank you, sweetie.” Jane turned and gave them her mock stern face while Indel went into the bathing chamber to get a towel. “Why did you get my boyfriend drunk?” Loki bared his teeth at her for calling him that. She ignored him.

Steve held up his hands. “That wasn’t us, ma’am.”
Clint jerked his thumb. “Exactly, thank the room full of Asgardian assholes.”

Mischief giggled into her back and Jane turned just enough to look at him. His moods were swinging even more erratically than Loki’s did. Speaking to him softly. “Go get ready for bed.” She didn’t get why he hadn’t vanished but she had already decided to treat him like one of the little ones until he did. Mischief sighed but didn’t fuss, looking tired. Instead of trying to push past the humans again he walked through the wall that separated her space from Loki’s.

She raised an eyebrow at Steve and he winced before continuing the explanation. “I don’t know if it was the comment about…uh, his species being savages or witches being weak that finally did it but after he finished hexing about a dozen of them he drank until he’s…that.”

Tony was fully in the room now, his tie gone, his shirt missing a couple of buttons and his jacket without sleeves. “I have never heard anyone giggle that much when they’re drunk.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow at him. “How do you know you don’t?”

Indel came out of the bathing chamber proudly with his creation wrapped in a towel, Talia trailing behind him. Jane took the towel and ruffled his hair, causing the boy to grin. “Thank you, sweetie.”

Tony just shook his head and snorted at Natasha. “Yeah…no. No way. He sounds high, not drunk.” Spreading out his arms, hands in the air. “Me doing that? I can see the headlines talking about me high on life or giving blow jobs to clowns for the helium or something.” Steve turned bright, bright red.

Indel frowned. “What’s a--…” Jane silently put a hand over his mouth while giving Tony a death glare. Mischief started cackling, having returned just in time to hear that. He shook his head and crawled onto the bed.

Talia nodded sagely at Indel. “It’s one of those questions.”

Stark just ignored Jane’s ire, giving Loki a longer look. “Speaking of, I need a camera. Actually, I need my camera, please.”

Indel squirmed until he was free. “But I wanna know.”

“Ask you father in the morning. Be certain to tell him where you heard it when he asks.” Tony’s eyes widened in alarm. The inventor made a protesting sound and she just gave him that look again. “Be careful what you say around little ears.”

“Fine. A blow job is--…” Jane narrowed her eyes and held out her palm, using a defensive spell to her advantage. It was harmless, but it did knock the inventor on his ass. He wasn’t hurt and he didn’t even appear upset. From the floor he shrugged at her. “Since I’ll be dying from an ‘accident’ I might as well make the most of it.”

“No photos and no more discussions about…that.”

The inventor pouted even as he pushed himself back onto his feet with a spark of mischief in his eyes. “Oh, come on, Janie, he’d do the same to any one of us.”

She held up a single finger. “There is one major difference.”

Tony shoved his hands into his pockets before shrugging, curious. “Oh?”
Loki was still giggling, but his arms moved to wrap around her waist. He leaned his head against her hip. Her right hand sank into his hair affectionately. “You know that laughing gas will make serious people giggle uncontrollably.”

He shrugged again dismissively. “Sure.” She made a grand gesture in Loki’s direction and Tony’s eyes widened. “Oh.”

“Yeah, and he will remember everything. Loki retaliating for things done to him when he’s like this…not worth the brief thrill. Really trust me on that, you will regret it.”

“Ah, good! I see you found my brother!” Thor’s boots clomped heavily as he entered. His face fell when he heard the giggles. “Oh no, brother, not again.”

Jane shook her head, suddenly feeling claustrophobic. “Okay, everyone else out. Thank you for bringing him now go drink some more or have fun but…shoo.” After everyone left between her and Thor they coaxed Loki to stretch out on the sofa and she applied the ice pack to his face. He leaned into the coldness, eyes closing even if the soft sounds of amusement continued. Talia crawled into his lap, grinning as she leaned her head against his chest and his giggles tickled her ear.

Thor sighed. “I should have kept a closer watch of him.”

Jane grinned. “Oh, stop, Thor.” Thor frowned. “He’s a big boy and he can drink if he wants to.” Indel held up his arms and she picked him up. “He’s been pissed off and tense all morning, he needed to loosen up a bit.” Mischief yawned widely and snuggled into her pillow, falling asleep. The tall Asgardian tilted his head slightly in Jane’s direction for an explanation. “In one day he’s had to deal with those mercenary jerks, the stress of court, his father, and a banquet—which he hates, by the way. I’d say he earned the right to get as drunk as he needs.”

The giggles quieted a little. “Glad you…approve…”

“Uh huh.” She held a hand out, three fingers on the top of his head to keep him from trying to sit up. “Trust me, just stay put until you stop giggling.”

“Men…do not…giggle…”

Rolling her eyes slightly. “Well, you and your manly chuckles just stay down.” His forehead butted against her fingers once more before he relaxed back on the sofa.

Thor chuckled slightly before nodding slightly to her. “I see you have matters well in hand.” She held up a thumb and Indel did the same, just before he yawned and curled his head into her shoulder adorably. “Sweet dreams, brother.” It was said just insolently enough that it penetrated Loki’s alcohol numbed mind and the finger Loki lifted in Thor’s direction wasn’t his thumb.

By late evening the alcohol had mostly left his system and he’d retired to his rooms to actually sleep. Loki opened his eyes slowly, feeling Indel burying his face into his neck to quiet his whimpers. After a moment his internal clock informed him it was well after midnight. Rubbing a gentle hand up and down his neck. “Shh…what is it, Indel?”

The boy whispered almost too quietly to be heard. “…monsters…gonna eat me.”

Pressing a gentle kiss to the top of his head, Loki looked around his old room and felt himself shiver. Was this really all his? It all looked so strange and foreign to him now, and with the shadows moving and dancing by way of the torchlight outside it was little wonder his boy was having nightmares. No, first thing in the morning he was going through everything. “Where is your
Still whispering, Indel buried the words against his skin. “With Mischief and mama.”

Loki thought to ask why he hadn’t joined them, but decided it was unimportant. Indel needed help to banish the monsters and Loki knew what his solution had been as a child. He held out a hand and whispered a quiet word. A little globe of green light hovered in his palm an instant later.

Indel sniffed and looked up at the light, green eyes large but still frightened. Loki debated with himself for less than a heartbeat before deciding he would soothe his wounded pride later since he wasn’t feeling particularly brave right now. Scooping his boy up, Loki threw on a pair of breeches under his tunic and carried Indel swiftly for the door. “When I was very little I used to have bad dreams, too.”

“You did?”

Loki nodded and turned in the opposite direction of Jane, going to a very familiar door. “Oh yes, very bad dreams.” His dreams were a little ironic now. Dreams of ice-filled corridors and he unable to find any of his family. “And when I was terribly frightened, I knew there was one room I could go to that would chase those bad dreams away. So anytime you have bad dreams, Indel, come retrieve me and we will stay in this special room.”

“Okay.” Loki extinguished the globe and quietly slipped through the door, making sure it closed behind him before padding the distance to the large bed near a set of windows. He put Indel down on the floor next to the bed and climbed under the mountain of covers on the right side, then helped Indel join him. Curling up towards his son, Indel’s fingers fisting his tunic as he whispered. “Why is this a special room?”

Stroking his fingers through the fine white hair, whispering in turn. “Because this is my brother’s room, and bad dreams are afraid of him. So we will sleep here tonight and he will protect both of us.”

“Your brother Thor?”

“He’s—…” The denial was still automatic but he’d promised himself he would work on it. Loki sighed at himself. “Yes, he is my brother.”

“Do you love him?”

His response was immediate even if he did ponder it thoroughly. The man who encouraged him to learn to fight, even if it wasn’t his strength. The man who pulled him from his studies to play and go on adventures. The big brother who stood up to bullies for him. The Avenger who’d tried to take him home and protected him from Midgardian justice. The prince who relied on him to save Jane and the universe, not just because he knew the dark passages, but because he knew there were some loyalties that even Loki would never break.

“Yes. I love him.”

Indel yawned and snuggled just the tiniest bit closer. “Do you love him as much as you love me, dada?”

The easiest and the hardest question to answer. Losing Thor would break something inside of him but he could limp along as the broken shell he had become after losing Frigga. Losing Indel would kill him. Loki smiled tiredly. “I love you both, just in different ways.”
“I love you, too, dada.”

Loki pulled his son just a little closer as he closed his eyes and leaned into the strong hand rubbing his back gently.

Author's Notes:

The feels, the feels I tell you. I have cavities at this point! Not so much of the bitch slapping this time but that is scheduled for in the morning :)

Next:

The morning after; G’dath and Odin chat; the brother's finally agree
Loki opened his eyes and promptly squeezed them shut, swearing in his head. Thor was never going to let him live this down. Not even back in Asgard for 24 hours and already Thor has the upper hand. No, this won’t do at all.

Both he and Indel were prone to moving while sleeping, in this case they instinctively sought out the nearest heat source. Indel had squirmed his way to sleeping on Thor’s chest, thumb in his mouth and looking perfectly adorable.

He had somehow managed to curl against his brother, snuggled into his side with his head on his shoulder and arms wrapped around his neck. DAMMIT. Then Thor’s hand moved to stroke through his hair and he clenched his teeth, his humiliation complete and hissed. “I hate you.”

A soft chuckle was Thor’s response, his words completely ignored as having even a hint of truth to them. Which was good. He hadn’t meant them like that but they were brothers and such things needed to be said. “Bold words for a man in your position.”

Loki growled softly. “If you tell anyone…”

Thor moved his head to the right to look at Loki, his hand stilling since he’d detected a bit of a worried undertone. “I do not break your confidences, brother. I never shall.”

Loki finally remembered his arms and thought about moving them. They stayed right where they were but he did open his eyes before narrowing them. “That has never stopped you from mocking me before.”

Thor made a slight scoffing sound. “A little fun is hardly the same as this.”

No, it wasn’t the same and they both knew it. Thor revealing a vulnerable moment like this would be a true betrayal of trust. Just as there were moments and truths that Thor had given Loki that would never pass his lips. Loki could feel the rising tension between them of a long put off conversation. Sometime today he and Thor would talk. Not like this and not in front of Indel, but soon. Loki just noticed he’d been procrastinating a lot of talks recently.

“Is he gonna be nice now?”

Thor blinked at Indel in surprise before glancing at Loki who was suddenly studying the covers in fascination. “I was not nice?”

Indel huffed and sat up, sitting on Thor’s chest. “Of course you weren’t! You were being mean and not listening to dada. You hurt him against that rock and almost broke him.” He leaned down and growled in the demi-god’s face. “Very mean.”

Thor blinked in surprise at the growl before chuckling. “Most definitely your son, Loki.” He sobered quickly, realizing he wasn’t making a very good impression with his nephew. A nephew that he very much wanted to know. “I was angry, which is not a good reason and I will not be mean to your father in the future.”

Indel eyed him thoughtfully before nodding firmly. “Good.” And because he was the mini-prince of non sequiturs. “How come you don’t look like dada?”
Loki perked up with interest while Thor looked confused. “Uh…because I look like our father.”

The little boy frowned. “Oh.” Then his eyes squinted, reaching up to tug lightly at Thor’s blond hair. “But grandpa has hair like me, not you.”

Loki pressed his lips together, desperately swallowing a tickle in his throat. Thor wasn’t quite ready to admit defeat. “As we age our hair changes to white.”

Scrunching up his nose. “So…dada looks like grandma?”

Thor’s lips twitched, thinking of the times in their youth when Loki would try to make his hair as blond as mother’s and would end up with frizzy pink hair instead of frizzy black hair. “When he chooses to he can look quite fetching as mother.” He buried the flinch when Loki got his revenge by biting his shoulder.

“Can you really scare away bad dreams?”

Amusement rumbled in Thor’s chest but he took the question in stride, well used to Loki shifting course in the conversation. “Of course. All bad dreams yield to the power of Thor and mighty Mjolnir.”

“Who’s Mjolnir?”

Thor puffed himself up proudly. “My weapon.”

“Why did you give your weapon a name? Was it a kid once?” Thor’s jaw dropped open, unable to think of what to say. The elfling tilted his head slightly in curiosity as he asked, “Can you do magic?”

Thor weakly pointed to the pedestal where Mjolnir lay and struggled to explain by hoping he only needed to focus on the last question. “I have my war hammer, I have no need of magic.”

Loki shook his head silently. Thor was doomed.

Indel was completely serious in his confusion. “You still didn’t say why you named a hammer. Was it your son who did something bad? Do all weapons have names? Do the names mean something? And why is a hammer scary? Does it grow spikes or something useful? If you can’t do magic, how are you supposed to scare bad dreams away?” Pointing at Loki who had finally managed to rescue his arms from around Thor’s neck and was now on his back. “My dada can build a shield stronger than a stupid hammer.”

In every sense of the word Thor pouted, which looked as ridiculous as it sounded and Loki muffled his giggles with a pillow over his face. Thor scowled at his brother. “Shut up, Loki.”

The knock at the door announced her before G’dath entered. Odin rose from his chair behind his desk before gesturing in invitation to the chair across from him. She paused to consider the invitation before taking the seat, leaning back slightly as she watched him retake his own and the doors closed. This was a conversation long overdue between them.

“Lady G’dath, to what do I owe the honor of your visit?”

G’dath raised a single eyebrow, not at all surprised that he was going to pretend he didn’t know. “You have a very clever son. I have had the privilege of getting to know him over the five
years he has been living on Alfheim’s smallest moon. You, however, are not clever so let us forego acting coy when you damn well know exactly why I’m here.”

Odin stiffened at the verbal attack. “Lady G’dath…”

She lifted one shoulder slightly in a shrug. “I am a visitor. Banish me to Alfheim for all I care. But I would not be who I am if I didn’t take advantage of this opportunity.”

“Opportunity?”

She slowly shook her head, thinking of all the AEsir she had met over the years. She had less problem with the commoners than with the nobles and courtiers currently flitting about the halls. “You AEsir are curious creatures. The supposed gods over the mortals and yet you are the most bigoted, hypocritical, lying cretins I have ever had the displeasure of knowing.”

He pushed himself to his feet in outrage. “I will not sit here in silence for such insults.”

G’dath mirrored him with a smirk. “Then let us stand, I don’t care.”

His voice an angry rumble as he asked, “You would dare to order a king?”

She lifted an eyebrow. “I have no qualms in ordering around your son when he acts like a brattling.”

The muscles along Odin’s back tightened, as did his jaw as he asked, “You compare me to my son?”

Feeling her own temper sparking. “Yes. It must be so disheartening to be so lacking compared to him.”

Odin’s rumble was now a full snarl. “Your insults will be abided no more.”

Ignoring him, completing her thought. “I have even less fear of you.” But she wasn’t lying which perhaps angered him even more than the insults.

Roaring at her as his temper snapped. “You overstep your place in the order of things!”

“SIT. DOWN.” Odin blinked, a shocked look on his face that his body had obeyed. He was the king of Asgard, the All-Father and yet he could be heeled by a healer. G’dath was breathing slowly, eyes closed. “Impressive…and I thought only your son had the unique ability in being able to make me lose my temper.” One last exhale before she opened her eyes again. “You approached me once, to teach your son how to use his gifts. I made a counter requirement that he be told his origins. You ignored me and my advice and this is the result. Your bridge. Your eldest. Jötunheim. Midgard. Those are the consequences of lies. Your lies. You can tell yourself whatever you wish for why it was done, but they are still deceit that reaped a vicious cost.” Ticking off each insult carefully on her fingers so that he heard the reason behind the labels. “I call you hypocrites because you hold truth to such high standards, but you lie almost as frequently as the supposed Liesmith. I call you bigoted because his actions were the results of the views ingrained into him since childhood concerning Jötunns and mortals. You made him hate the former and despise the latter. It caused hate of himself and the conquering of Midgard unimportant. I call you cretins because even after all that I have just said you and your people still do not understand your culpability.”

He didn’t react the way she expected. His voice was as stiff as his posture. “I am aware of my responsibility.”
Her eyes narrowed slightly in consideration. “Hmm… I have a feeling your granddaughter got to you first.”

Odin’s grimace answered for her and she sat back down. “What is the point in this discussion now?”

Now G’dath leaned forward slightly. “I understand why you did not reveal his origins to Asgard. I believe he even understands that. Why would you wait so damn long so that he knows?”

He didn’t glance away, but something in his tone told her he was looking right through her and imagining he was somewhere else. Perhaps in an ancient vault where the truth shattered everything between father and son. “Is it not the wish of every father for their child to not feel as an outsider in their own home?”

Her sarcastic tone pulled him back to the here and now. “Right. Because I can list a dozen other green-eyed, black haired, pale as snow, male mages in Asgard.” She wasn’t going to let that be his answer because it wasn’t the only reason. “And he’s twice as clever as your brightest AEsir. Try again.” When Odin refused to respond she replied for him. “You were afraid. This is your son and you were afraid of seeing all that love he held in his eyes for you turn to hate.”

“No father wishes to lose their son.” Odin’s voice was soft, pride barely keeping the regret out of his tone.

“No. So you fed the lie and lost him anyway.”

He rallied at that. “The past cannot change, as I have already told her.”

“But you need to understand you were in error so that you don’t repeat the mistake.” Whether he did or not before, she had wanted it said to her satisfaction because she had no idea what transpired between Odin and Hela. A lot, apparently. Or just enough time for him to realize he had been on the verge of losing everything that he and Frigga had worked so hard to nurture and protect. “I promised myself I would grace you with a thorough lashing if the opportunity ever presented itself. I keep my word.” Then she shrugged easily, feeling enough had been said, and leaned back in her seat. “Besides, the air needs to be cleared between us if we are to clean up your mess.”

“I beg your pardon.”

She ignored the flat tone. “There are few in a position of power within the nine that are not aware that your advisory council currently rules Asgard and has for some time. Many had been hoping that you would make your sons aware of the matter so that. At least one of them would be clever enough to cut their legs out from under them.”

He paused to consider her point for a moment, then shook his head ever so slightly. “Different matters will be discussed with my youngest—…”

G’dath cut him off with a gesture. “Tonight.”

Rumbling softly, having had more than his fill of her impertinence. “You do not dictate the will of my house, Lady G’dath.”

She glanced away in annoyance and huffed to herself. “Forgive me. I forgot your disregard of female advice.”

Any reminder to Frigga had him leaping to the defensive. He stood, angry. “You tread a dangerous line, Lady.”
Not intimidated, she slowly crossed her arms and glared at him since she knew exactly where her power started and ended. “As do you. He is your son but my apprentice. I am still within my right up until his 2000th year to yank him out of your house and Asgard so fast it will make your head spin.” Nothing on his face gave away his surprise and horror. It was something in his eye, there and gone. “And if you do not think I’m serious on this matter gain the advice of Queen Sigyn, who is quite familiar with the Master Articles.”

The Master Articles were a series of spells woven through Yggdrasil and all nine realms thousands of years ago by the spell casters of Vanaheim. It was meant as a means of a master protecting their apprentice, particularly if the apprentice was taken from them. No court. No clan. No realm could keep an apprentice from their master. There were counter spells of course, but only those that safeguarded the Master Articles had access to them. The case would have to be brought to all three queens of Vanaheim, then those three would have to convince the five caretakers that the apprentice needed protecting from the master.

G’dath was prepared to accept Loki’s reaction to keep the past from repeating itself. “He may hate me until the end of time for it but if you ignore me again I will do it for his sake.” Odin stiffened, standing tall, but said nothing. “The discussion has been pushed aside for seven years. It needs resolving. Not next week. Not next year. Tonight.”

Silence filled the room for several tense moments. Then it shattered when Odin chuckled softly, which surprised her. His further question surprised her again. “Does he still argue with you when you’ve decided a matter?”

She smirked and stood as well, giving him the bow of respect he deserved as king. “Constantly, but only to a point. Your son is a clever man, after all. He knows when to retreat with grace.”

“Hi, Jane!” Jane turned away from the mirror, seeing Indel bouncing happily with his clothes in his hands. New clothes that apparently weren’t wool. “Dada said I can use your bathing chambers to change.” He shot a grin at Talia as he skipped past, who was using a mirror to finish her braid.

Jane raised an eyebrow at Loki who was leaning back against the wall with a wicked smile slowly spreading across his face. He crooked a finger in her direction and with a soft smile she slowly obeyed as she asked, “Something you had in mind, prince?” She gasped in surprise as he spun her gently, kissing her lips softly before ducking his head to feast on the expanse of her neck. She groaned and carefully scraped her fingernails along his scalp. “Someone is…pleased with himself.”

Loki moved his head to nibble on her ear, whispering. “Happy to be home.”

He obeyed her guiding tug and she started the next kiss. Smiling against his lips. “So am I.” Here with him was home. It wasn’t the place. Just him.

He leaned his forehead against her own, breathing deeply to calm his racing heart, and to calm the need that was racing through his blood. “Thank you.” She opened her eyes. “Thank you for saving me from myself…for once.”

She raised an eyebrow as she asked, “For once?”

Sighing with self-deprecation. “I am acutely aware that my silver tongue is often responsible for the predicaments I find myself in, much to my detriment.”
Jane grinned and lightly stroked his jawline with a finger. “Are you saying you’re losing your touch?”

The trickster nipped very lightly on her bottom lip, smirking when she moaned softly. “I wouldn’t go that far.” She caught his hand as his thumb brushed her cheek, opening his palm to display the scar and sent an arched eyebrow his direction. He sighed and leaned his shoulder against the wall next to her. “If I told you the significance at the time you would not have reacted well.”

“Tell me now.”

His brow furrowed a little, thinking of the thousands of years of history wrapped up in such an inconsequential line. “It used to be a common practice amongst the nine realms. Wars could be halted in such a manner.”

Jane sounded both surprised and intrigued, asking, “With a promise of protection?”

The power of honor. Of all the races in the universe, those of the nine cherished and revered it the most. “A blood vow with the same gender can be a vow of protection. Even a means of bringing someone from a different clan or even a different race into the family.” He arched an eyebrow in her direction. “I believe in your human mythology I am Odin’s brother with a similar vow.”

She wrinkled her nose playfully. “Thor’s uncle?” They both shuddered at the thought. “And the opposite gender?”

He spoke softly, not reluctant so much as nervous. “Most of the races no longer even remember the true meanings. It is only upheld—…”

The physicist shifted her body a little closer to him when he cut himself off. “Only upheld?”

“Among those of royal blood.” He let out a little sigh when he said this.

Jane felt her lip pull upward slightly. He was dancing around the meaning. “What does it mean?”

And there appeared that hint of shyness he still carried as his green eyes shifted slightly. “I have promised myself to you. Even if you reject me, I can never marry anyone else.”

She blinked in surprise. She’d suspected it was something more than simple protection but she had no idea it went to that extreme. “That explains the gasps.”

He forced out a soft chuckle to try to lighten the moment. “If the court knew I am Jötunn they would have gasped again.”

“Why?”

His head ducked down slightly as he sighed again. “When a Jötunn mates, it’s for life. Much as it is for elf kind.” But then he surprised her by meeting her eyes evenly, the green orbs burning with passion. “I will only ever see you. Want you. Love you.” It had suddenly registered to him that she wasn’t cringing. She was curious and intrigued. It bolstered his flagging confidence. Jane felt herself just melt and with a naughty grin he leaned back against her.

“Icky!!” Jane looked down at the little boy who was grinning up at them and stuck out her tongue. He copied.
Loki muttered under his breath. “With this one around we’ll never have the opportunity for another one.” Jane’s eyes widened at Loki. A full grimace crossed his face, realizing Tony was corrupting him. “I knew I should have killed him.” Loki leaned down enough to turn him around and shoo him out the door with a gentle pat to the rear. “Go wait outside if it disturbs you.”

Indel spun around and shook his head vigorously. “I wanna be carried!”

Loki rolled his eyes and Jane kissed his ear, whispering. “Patience.”

He sighed. But then he grinned and threw Indel over his shoulder, the boy squealing and kicking his feet while hanging upside down. “You know I only carry a limited supply of it this early in the morning.”

“DAA-DAA!!”

Mischief sat up and with a scowl threw a pillow at them. “Go away!” He promptly dove back under the covers with a snarl.

Loki caught the projectile with one hand, raising an eyebrow at Jane as if to ask if he’d been like this all night. Her answering grimace was all she had to do. Letting the pillow drop, Indel still over one shoulder, he stalked the distance and lifted Mischief out of bed by his waist. The youth was decently enough covered in an under tunic and breeches and Loki didn’t even pause, turning around to head for the great hall for breakfast.

Mischief scrambled but soon lost his grip on the trailing sheets and wiggled but Loki was cheating, using magic instead of physical strength to pick him up and hold onto him. Then his eyes widened to realize where they were headed and his vicious snarls instantly changed to embarrassed pleading. “Wait. No! No, no, no…please? I’m sorry! I’ll be good--noooo…”

Just before the entrance Loki set Indel back on his feet, who was grinning broadly, before doing the same with Mischief. A snap of his fingers and a set of clothes appeared on the pouting boy’s frame. Looking from one boy to the other. “You both need to eat and if you leave the great hall, you do so together after informing either myself, your mother, or my brother. Understood?”

Indel grabbed Mischief’s hand and started tugging. “Okay, dada. Tali! Come eat!”

Mischief sulkily stuck out his tongue before letting himself get tugged inside, Talia rapidly following to take his other hand. Loki sighed as he straightened, Jane snuggling into his side. “When did I turn into the strict parent?”

“I told you I woke up in an alternate universe, Pep.” Loki glanced at a smirking Tony over his shoulder, Pepper on the inventor’s arm. “There is no way I can deal with daddy Loki.”

Slowly a very unpleasant smile spread across Loki’s face and Jane was quick to slap a hand over her mouth to muffle her laughter. She excused herself after a kiss to Loki’s jaw and joined the children at the long table. Pepper glanced at Tony with a frown and squeaked.

Tony’s head jerked back down to her. “What?”

“You—…” She pressed her lips together tightly, gave Loki a look before exhaling slowly. Swallowing and speaking shakily with repressed laughter. “You might need to check a mirror, Mr. Stark.” She copied Jane’s example, kissing Tony’s cheek before retreating from the two men.

Tony narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms. “What? Did you do?”
Baring his teeth at the inventor, he pulled a mirror out of the ether. “See for yourself.”

Tony’s eyes widened to anime proportions before he took the mirror in both hands and screamed. Loudly. And remarkably high. Several warrior filed past, a few of them more carefully than the rest. Loki bared his teeth at them in a knowing smile, recognizing them from last night. Apparently the healers were kind enough to return them to their appropriate AEsir shapes. After all, it would be very difficult for them to continue to be warriors for Asgard with their lips and boneless arms dragging the floor.

The warriors already at the table barely even looked up, well used to Loki’s antics over the centuries. They’d learned from experience you did not approach the God of Mischief before midmorning as his tolerance level for others was low before breakfast.

“WHERE IS MY HAIR YOU B-…ASSHOLE?!!” Only because he remembered AEsir reactions when Fury’s insult to Loki technically could be seen as an insult to his mother kept him from saying ‘bastard’. He was not about to go for round two with Odin if he could help it.

Logan paused at the threshold, giving the inventor a slow glance at his current cue ball state before nodding gruffly. “Good look for you.”

“You were going to expose my five year old son to fellatio and you are surprised this is the outcome?”

Tony dropped the mirror, which promptly vanished before it could hit the floor, as he shook his head and slowly pressed the fingers of both hands to his mouth. He shook his head again, still breathing heavily, and jabbed a finger in Loki’s direction who was watching him with undisguised fascination. “First of all, bad word choice. Second, fix it.”

Looking amused. “Or what?”

“Or—…” Seething, clenching his hands into fists, Stark struggled to think. He had dirt on Loki. Unfortunately all of it fell in a category that the bonds of friendship prohibited in repeating. Even if said friend was being a dick. “I tell your dad you said he sucks monkey balls.”

Loki’s lip twitched just a little, leaning back against the archway. “Actually, you were the one who said that.”

“So?”

The trickster just continued to look amused. “Who will he believe since that phrase sounds like something an uneducated human would utter instead of a prince of the realm?”

Tony’s eyes slowly narrowed. “I will teach your kids, all three of them, the lamb chop song.”

Loki blinked rapidly before frowning delicately. “Is that not a human food?”

A smirk was now firmly plastered on Tony’s face. “It’s also a circular kid’s song that never ends and can go on for hours. Hours.”

“So I even want to know how you know it?”

Tony stuffed his fists in his pants pockets and rocked on the balls of his feet. “Got drunk. Woke up singing it. Pep kicked me out for a week when I wouldn’t stop.”
Loki glanced at his three magically exceptional children. His three magically exceptional mischievous children who would probably choose the worst times to sing it. With a sigh he waved his hand. Tony tossed his head back a little, feeling the familiar sway of his hair, and smirked in victory as he strolled in. Loki smirked evilly to himself and went to go hide beside Thor. It would be half an hour before Steve would be kind enough to mention that Tony’s goatee was upside down.

Thor moved to the balcony, looking outward. After breakfast Loki had disappeared and his current location was unknown to him. But then he had found that when he needed to speak, the trickster always found him. “I looked in on you.” Thor nodded slightly to himself but didn’t turn around, Loki’s voice washing over him as his brother appeared next to a pillar. That Loki knew they needed to talk didn’t surprise him. “I was fairly cut off from the rest of the nine but I wanted to be certain all ended well enough.”

Not turning just yet since this was a conversation between them long overdue. “You visited me when the Vanir Queens came.”

“I didn’t hear a question.”

Thor pulled in a slow breath before turning. “Explain to me why you could allow me to believe you dead. Again.” He knew protecting Indel wasn’t the only reason.

“Is it my fault you always fall for it?” But Thor didn’t respond, he just waited.

Loki snarled and threw himself against the banister in frustration. It would be so easy to offer up a pretty little lie of how it was for Thor’s own good. But it wasn’t true and the truth stung too much to say. He’d been afraid, terrified that Thanos would find him. He still was but he was again Loki of Asgard. He would die fighting the tyrant now that he was no longer an outcast.

At the time he’d done what he had to so that the nine realms would be convinced he was dead, because he could not see Asgard shedding a single tear for sacrificing a prisoner to torture and eventual death in exchange for peace. They were not the actions of a warrior but at the time protecting himself had mattered most.

Pride. His vice. His curse. He would not say it. He could not. Even if Thor decided he couldn’t love him anymore as a brother. Thor didn’t say a word and he didn’t move. Loki tugged on his own hair and closed his eyes. Muttering softly. “Do you think I planned for my life to turn the way that it did?”

“No, you planned to rule Asgard--…”

Whipping around, more than ready to defend an accusation like that. “I never wanted the throne.”

“You sabotaged my coronation.” Now that he knew where his brother came from, it became obvious to him. Thor was actually surprised when Loki admitted it easily.

Loki shrugged. “It was not as if it was hard. I know the dark passages. Do you really think it was that difficult to slip a couple of frost giants past Heimdall?” But then Loki turned away, his green eyes distant. “And you reacted exactly as I feared. But still no word of a delay in your day as king. I had to see if you would really push Asgard to war.”

“You put the idea in my head.”

Snorting at his brother before retorting. “I didn’t even use persuasion. One sentence was all
it took and I instantly regretted saying it as soon as I did. I even took precautions. I sent word to
father to stop us. I purposefully said nothing to Heimdall to persuade him and he just lets us go
because you insist. You refused to allow us to leave peacefully because of a petty insult…everything
got wrong.”

And then Thor had been banished, which had not been Loki’s intent. He’d wanted Odin to
see Thor still needed time. He’d truly meant to step forward to persuade their father not to do it, but
as always he was roared into silence. Considering it had been happening with more frequency over
the centuries, he shouldn’t have been as surprised as he was.

“Loki, you tried to kill me to take my place.” Thor shook his head, at a loss.

“That was an accident.” The words were blurted out quickly. “I--…” But then Loki
paused and seemed to get stuck on what to say next. It hadn’t been a conscious thought. The rage
that had surrounded him at the time clouded his judgement to everything but the moment. He’d been
angry. He’d reacted. “The fact that you were mortal at the time was a detail I overlooked.”

After a moment Thor nodded in acceptance. But he still wasn’t quite convinced that Loki’s
intentions hadn’t been to usurp his right to the throne. “You told me father died to keep me from
returning.”

“It wasn’t for that reason.” Loki muttered this and glanced down at his nails. It was less for
that reason and more for the fact that at the time Loki had been hurting and he wanted Thor to hurt as
much as he did. “Admittedly I certainly gained a taste for it during your exile but if you had been
ready I would have stepped aside.”

“I returned from Midgard worthy and you--…”

Loki interrupted him, asking incredulously, “Worthy? You spent less than a week being
surrounded by helpful little human servants and the attention of a sympathetic ear wrapped up in a
beautiful package. Poor Thor. Such tribulations you suffered.”

“Why, Loki??”

The trickster hit the banister with his fist before he turned and yelled. “I wanted you to stop
being such a reckless child and be a king. But you weren’t ready and no one, not your friends, not
father, no one would listen!”

“You let go--…”

Loki got right in Thor’s face, uncaring if he was flattened for it. “And I meant it! I wanted
to die!” Guilt for what he had done to Thor. Fear for what father would do to him, or more to the
point what he would do with him. Anger for being lied to for too many years, destroying not just his
trust in the few people he had granted it to but the very foundation of his existence. Disgust for what
he was, a belief taught to him by his kidnappers. At the time he saw nothing but the death of the life
that he knew and saw no point in continuing it.

Thor put a surprisingly gentle hand on the back of Loki’s neck, almost breathing his name
sorrowfully. “Loki…”

Suicide was a repugnant, cowardly act for an AEsir warrior to commit, but by then he was
beyond caring what those idiots thought of him. Loki slapped his hand away and backed up a step,
snarling, “Don’t pity me.”
“Never, brother.”

It had bubbled inside of him, hot and bitter for too many years, and spilled out in careless words now. “I refused to be a tool for peace, always such a disappointment to father. To you. I was an embarrassment!” Thor opened his mouth to refute his claim but Loki talked over him, his tone scathing as he mocked himself. “The weakling prince who couldn’t fight. The trickster prince who was only good for his magic--I wanted to be your equal!” He pulled himself to his full height, fists clenched at his sides. “If I was to die, let it be for any other reason. Let me be the betrayer. The liar. Let it be for being an enemy and a traitor. Not for being weak. Not for coming to you, begging you for help and hiding in your shadow like I--…”

And he had. On Midgard he had wanted to. But he’d been broken and enslaved thanks to Thanos’ manipulations. But beyond that, it was his thrice damned pride that had stilled his tongue. Turning away, he faced out over the balcony again, chest heaving.

A strange calm that only comes with clarity fell over Thor. His voice was quiet and calm. “They were your enemy, Loki, which meant they were mine. There is no shame in requiring assistance to vanquish a foe.”

Not quite whispering, almost to himself. “Who believes the Liesmith?”

It was true. Believing Loki was always difficult and sometimes Thor wanted to believe him more than he actually did. He rested a hand again on the back of Loki’s neck, relieved when his brother didn’t flinch away. “I wanted to listen, brother. I wanted to hear anything than what was said and what you allowed me to believe. I had hoped that there would be a foe we could face together and vanquish.”

Scoffing to himself. “You never needed it.”

Thor tilted his head ever so slightly as he asked, “What have I never required?”

“Aid.”

Thor frowned at that. “Of course I did. It was fun to fight with Sif and the Warriors 3, all of us so brash to prove our worth as warriors…but you are the one I needed there.” Loki looked up in surprise. Thor thought to himself. Unlike himself, Loki was a man of words. In many ways they were just as important as the action. And suddenly he knew what truth he could say that might make a difference. “I wanted to impress you. To show you that I was worthy as your elder brother. I needed your cunning, your wit, and that silver tongue of yours. Yes, I became an arrogant fool and I think I forgot why I needed you there, but I always needed you.”

Loki ran a hand through his hair, thinking of all the years and centuries of bitterness that could have been avoided to hear something like that before now. “By Hel…”

Thor’s mind was still back on the question that plagued him, letting go of Loki’s neck. “Why?”

The trickster’s mind immediately moved back to the choice to keep his status among the living a secret. He shrugged and leaned back, crossing his arms. “I was dismissed and forgotten. I knew my death made no difference to any of you except an end to the shame my existence represented.” Not quite the truth but a step closer to it.

“Loki…you must know--…”

Cutting him off effortlessly with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I know that after the dark
elves attacked that neither you nor father even thought…to tell me.”

Thor closed his eyes for a moment. Her loss would always sting but he knew that what hurt he felt, it was a much sharper wound to his brother. “My grief turned inward, my thoughts only for myself.”

Sneering at the thunderer. “Wonderful. As if I didn’t realize you were selfish.”

“As are you.” Loki just shrugged silently since it was true. But that wasn’t the point. Thor pulled in a slow breath. “I know father—…”

Loki shoved his chest with a snarl to keep Thor from defending Odin. This was between them. Loki didn’t want to hear anything except what Thor felt and thought. “Do not speak for father. What he chooses to feel and express are for his lips alone. You wish to speak, then do so for yourself.”

Thor ignored the hand still on his chest and reached out to lightly clasp Loki’s armored shoulder. Loki wasn’t the only one with too much pride. But Thor knew these were words that had to be said if he ever truly wanted his brother back. “I apologize most sincerely, Loki, for neglecting you. What animosity was between us should have been set aside for our loss, so that we might support one another.”

“Pretty words. Why is it always an apology for inaction instead of pride for actions?”

The thunderer pulled in another slow breath and mulled over the words carefully. He considered that Loki wasn’t looking for an apology so much as an admission. “I was angry…and cruel.”

Loki’s green eyes stayed locked on blue even as he felt something in him ease. He wanted to breathe ‘finally’ but he didn’t. Instead he said what was much easier to say now that Thor had taken that step. “So was I.” Thor blinked in surprise as the words were heard and absorbed. After a few seconds Loki took measured steps back. Thor’s hand fell loosely to his side. Loki leaned against the balcony and crossed his arms over his chest again. He tapped a single finger against his bicep, the only sign that he was gathering his thoughts. “I wasn’t safe in the dungeons and I knew you would never listen about my freedom since it countermanded father’s orders. So at the time, it seemed like a solid plan.”

“How were you not safe?”

Lifting an eyebrow at Thor as if the answer was obvious. “A prison is designed to keep prisoners from escaping, not to prevent a danger from entering. If dark elves could get in that easily there was no conceivable way I was waiting around to see what else might slither in.”

Thor sighed before reluctantly nodding. “And more often than not, I cannot seem to balance what I desire to make you safe while making certain you are happy.”

Loki’s eyebrow quirked. “Mostly the two are mutually exclusive.” After a moment Thor started chuckling softly. The trickster shrugged again, grinning hesitantly, as if inviting Thor to the easy teasing relationship they used to indulge in but unsure of his brother’s reception. “Jane has discovered it is impossible and just allows me to do as I wish.”

Thor frowned but leaned against the balcony as well, a physical cue that brightened Loki’s grin. “Does she?”

Loki inched just the littlest bit closer. “Of course she does, I do not bow to her whims.”
“You do not?”

“Do I?” It had not been Thor who asked.

Loki spun around, not surprised, and smirked playfully at Jane. “Of course you do.” Purring softly, looking and sounding so seductive in that moment as he leaned towards her. “The rewards far outweigh the headache of my being cross.”

Jane felt her body lean towards him in return. But she kept control of her expression and lifted an eyebrow at the obvious performance from Loki, not impressed. “Translation…he pouts.”

Loki frowned and instantly dropped the act. “I do not.”

She made a scoffing noise, glancing at Thor who looked far too amused. “Of course you do.”

“No, I do not.”

Naturally Thor felt he should intervene. “Loki, I have to agree with Lady Jane.”

Not taking his eyes off of Jane, Loki pointed a finger at Thor’s nose. “You stay out of this.”

Playfulness sparkled in her eyes. “It’s almost his default expression.”

Now Thor looked thoroughly confused as he asked, “What is…default?”

Jane shrugged before she explained. “His fall back. He basically has two standard expressions if he’s not smirking: pout or scowl.” Pointing at Loki’s currently scowling face. “See?”

Thor tipped his head back to laugh. “I approve whole heartedly of your lady, Loki.”

Loki’s scowl deepened. “Shut up.”

Jane turned to hopefully illicit another opinion. “All-Father?” Odin had already stopped to look over the three of them, Indel and Talia trailing behind him like a little prince and princess. Indel was holding his left hand while Talia held onto his right elbow. Her right hand was firmly in Mischief’s, who was reluctantly tagging along. “You being his father you can tell us honestly: have you ever seen Loki pout?”

Indel bounced on the balls of his feet before the king could reply. “Yeah! Looks like this.” His little face twisted to pained sadness, lower lip sticking out slightly and trembling just so to mimic a classic Loki pout. Talia grinned shyly and nodded with enthusiasm. Odin swallowed a tickle, having seen that expression before, and took his leave of his children.

Loki frowned at Jane. “I like you a little less now.”

Both Thor and Jane shared a look before ruffling his hair in unison. Loki was quick to vanish with a yelp.

Author’s Notes:

Alrighty, lots of feels. Some humor. A bitch slap or two. Mission complete.
Next:

Loki and Hela compare notes; Mischief gets some attention; Loki and Odin...finally
Loki spoke slowly and precisely to Tony, his words flowing smoothly. But there was no denying that he meant every one of them. “I need you to understand something, Anthony.”

“Uh oh, serious face. We need to work on that sense of hum--ack--…”

The trickster’s hold around Tony’s throat was designed to shut him up, not hurt him. The inventor’s eyes widened but he didn’t struggle. “I consider you a friend Anthony, horrifying as that very thought may be. That is why I will warn you. I am leaving my family in Thor’s care. It would be in your meager force’s best interest to not let him fail. If anything happens to them, after I have finished destroying Asgard and everyone in it…I will save your Avengers for last. Do we understand one another on the serious nature of his undertaking?”

There were times when Tony wondered about the wisdom of being friends with the trickster. This was one of those times. But he was pretty sure Loki had the same thoughts at times so it evened things out. Loki loosened his hold on the inventor’s neck but didn’t release him completely. Yet even like this Tony wasn’t afraid of the trickster, but he allowed his tone to turn serious and his eyes grave. “Got it.”

It sounded like a simple enough request. Thor was going to be keeping an eye on Loki’s family while he went to have a conversation with Hela. It sounded harmless. Thor knew it was nothing close to that. It was a tremendous amount of trust being offered and the thunderer had been quite solemn in his vow to watch over them. Loki felt it only courteous to warn his friend that all their lives were genuinely at stake.

“Loki?” The question was asked, not by Tony, but by Thor who was approaching.

Loki tapped the inventor’s jaw lightly with two fingers and released him. Tony nodded slowly in understanding. Loki ignored Thor who had come up behind Tony as Loki disappeared down the family wing. The inventor spoke over his shoulder at the thunderer once he was confident the trickster was too far away to hear. “Your brother is one scary mo-fo.”

Thor didn’t understand the terminology but he understood the meaning behind it. Nodding slowly in agreement. “Aye.”

Loki walked down the hallway with haste before he changed his mind. He’d promised himself to make Mischief his priority in fixing him; especially now that matters between he and Thor were truly in a good place. With Mischief he knew some of the results but not the why or how. Were the effects temporary or permanent? There would be no spell exploration until he knew everything. He never walked into anything with half the answers, but he knew someone who probably had those answers. Walking quickly into his room, he pushed aside his work desk and stood in the center of the circular runes hidden underneath.

“Helheim.”

The rush of sensation like diving into freezing water was familiar and he opened his eyes to find himself standing outside of Helheim’s gate, in another set of runes. Garm was glowering down at him and growled softly, barring his way. “Only the dead may enter, trickster.”
Loki tilted his head slightly, looking impatient.

Hela looked up from the book in her lap as Loki strolled casually through her door, letting it shut behind him. A mournful whimper drifted from a distance before the door clicked shut. Hela knew that whimper. She sent Loki a frown and closed her book as she asked, “What did you do to Garm?”

He just shrugged and fussed with a few bottles before selecting wine from Vanaheim. “It will wear off in a few hours.”

With a roll of her eyes she set the book on the table next to her chair but didn’t get up, her body still stretched out and eyes watching him. “Court went well?” He nodded slightly but didn’t elaborate. Her eyes narrowed a little. He wasn’t usually tight-lipped with her unless he was upset with her. He drank an entire glass full before refilling it and she made a displeased sound. “Something tells me you’re about to accuse me of something I didn’t do.”

He paused in his actions, not looking at her and speaking carefully. “Why would Mischief suddenly have a well of magic to draw from like any other living being?”

Hela’s expression went blank before she sighed and joined him in a glass. She walked back to her seat casually before speaking. “I suppose because he’s a real boy now.”

He waited until he was seated in the chair across from her before asking his next question. “Did you know?”

She sipped and slowly shook her head. “No. I suspected something was different about him—…”

“Hela.” He said her name flatly as he let his glass thud onto the table next to his chair, his tone full of fatherly disapproval.

Her eyes flicked to his for a millisecond and there was a hint of something in her gaze. That ‘caught’ look that he was familiar with in Indel. Then she huffed. “He deserves a life of his own.”

He sent her a dirty look. “A warning would have been appreciated.”

“You weren’t present to ask. Midgard thought of it as a reward for his risking his existence to help you…strange planet.” Hela shrugged casually and sighed.

Flicking a finger towards her chest, and to the gem that was partially hidden. “And that wasn’t required to assist in this transformation?” She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and moved her thumb and forefinger so they were only an inch apart. He felt the dots slowly line up and nodded to himself. “Then he belongs to Midgard.”

Hela’s expression was less than patient, as was common when people around her were being less than brilliant. “He belongs to you. The realm that recognizes him as a child of hers is Midgard, that’s all.”

Sounding as incredulous as he felt. Thinking of the millennia that would be robbed from Mischief and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it. This boy, if he was lucky, would die of old age before Indel even aged to look six. “That’s all? An AEsir mortal?”

She blinked at him, stunned that he’d come to that conclusion. “What?? Did you suddenly switch species because Asgard claims you as her child? Of course not! You are an Asgardian Jötunn.
He is a Migardian AEsir. The same lifespan as an AEsir, idiot, just with a different mother.”

He was relieved and worried all at the same time. He rubbed at his forehead with two fingers before asking, “What happens now?”

“He’s been acting differently, hasn’t he?” Because Loki didn’t kick up rocks unless something required fixing.

Loki nodded slowly. “His emotions are stronger but his instincts are out of control.” He chuckled humorlessly. “He’s even more mercurial than I am lately but he’s suddenly…” He shook his head and summed up his early childhood. “…shy.”

Hela was already nodding to herself as if it all made sense. “Shy. Afraid. Grumpy. Disobedient. All the emotions and actions that don’t belong in an imaginary playmate are surfacing. He’ll push at the boundaries that you set for him just to see if you care enough to push back. He’ll cry. He’ll make mistakes. He’ll worry you don’t love him.”

Loki blinked slowly, considering what she was saying before giving her a thoughtful look. “So you’re saying, daughter, I truly have two sons, not one.”

“Something that isn’t real…you can’t call it that when you can’t tell the difference anymore.” She smirked, talking about herself as much as Mischief in this instance. He nodded to himself in understanding, knowing it explained matters but didn’t necessarily provide a solution.

He shrugged lightly in curiosity after thinking for a few moments. “Then why isn’t he Jötunn?”

Hela gestured to herself. “You physically made me from yourself so making me duplicated the species on the outside as well as the inside. Mischief you modeled after the AEsir boy you believed yourself to be.”

“Huh.”

Hela grinned at him slyly. “But then you knew all this.”

He supposed he did since she and he thought alike. His worry just got in the way of solving this puzzle. “And his instincts?”

She sent him a more thoughtful look. “How difficult?”

He grimaced. “Fully formed with lethal intent. At least Indel pauses before attacking. Mischief doesn’t.” Which could prove as more than just a problem for those around him. Currently his attacks had been based on fighting maneuvers and weapons. If he chose to start attacking with magic he could extend himself beyond the capabilities of his still growing body and hurt himself. Or worse.

She was already nodding, puzzling through this new bit of information. “The body of 300 but the instincts of 800…and no training.” She grimaced a bit at that thought. At 300, no matter how intelligent, Mischief would do foolish things just because of his age. She produced her grimoire with a snap of her fingers. “Only one recourse then.”

He growled protectively with a snap of his teeth. “I won’t do it.”

She turned a page, focusing on the parchment as her lips thinned. “Do not insult me by even suggesting you thought I was proposing to scrub his memories or I’ll kick you out of Helheim
“Fog them?”

She hedged a moment for a better word. “Soften them. The biggest problem he has is that he was supposed to be a child’s playmate and he became an adult’s playmate and protector. You didn’t filter your memories so they have passed onto him. Not all of them, obviously, but enough. Physically he is a prepubescent boy, but he retains your adult instincts. Softening those memories will let him retain his personality and sense of self but restart those instincts so he can be trained like any other AEsir boy.”

Loki stood up to see the spell she was talking about, liking the sound of this but still concerned. “But he won’t forget Jane, Indel, or Talia?”

She grinned at him over her shoulder, showing him the page. “We’ll make sure he won’t.” She turned back to the spell, her finger moving down the page to make sure she wasn’t missing anything before asking him. “Have you decided on the choice for when Thanos focuses on Asgard?”

He wasn’t thinking about his preferred methods of subtly. In truth he wasn’t thinking at all. He wanted—**needed** Thanos to be destroyed. “I want him obliterated.”

Hela’s voice was full of warning. It wasn’t the smartest choice, although it was the most satisfying. “There is more risk involved utilizing that method. You will be vulnerable during the first arch of the spell. There are also several potential consequences if this is not completed successfully.”

What she had proposed if he chose to destroy Thanos, body and soul, was a method he’d never even heard of. He suspected it was knowledge that she had gained with her connection as Goddess of the Underworld. “More risk, greater the reward.”

She nodded in acceptance. When she’d become the queen of Helheim and Niflheim, it was almost as if the realms had been waiting for her. Her young mind had filled with knowledge in how to break down the barrier of life. Flesh and bone was just a shell. It was what lay within a body that made a being. In an instant she’d known how to disperse that golden barrier of magic gifted to every living being from Yggdrasil that kept the soul anchored to the shell, so she could personally invite the dead to Helheim or Niflheim. The spell being proposed would not only shatter the bond of that golden barrier, but it would destroy the soul. She’d done what she could to warn him, now all that remained was to make certain he knew how. “Then at the conclusion of this spell, I will show you what to do.”

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**ASGARD**

Out of many of the different duties and responsibilities of wearing the crown, there were only a few of them that Odin detested. This had become one of them. Four thousand years ago this had been his arena and he’d presided as the king he was over his advisors. Now he made suggestions and was largely only addressed when certain matters could not be decided or overruled by them.

The members were in a half moon shape, three rows deep, all of them talking quietly and not so quietly among themselves. Odin sat back as one of the members of the Advisory Council rose. “Milord Odin, with all due respect we cannot simply gift a criminal, former or otherwise, a title of such influence.”

There were murmurs on both sides while Odin felt both amused and satisfied. “I recall that personally.” He fought to keep a chagrined look off his face. Now she looked over the book, her eyes flashing. “We fog his recent memories.”
titles are bequeathed at my discretion, not yours. I also recall that all charges against Loki have been dismissed in light of Lady Amora’s testimony before court.” With each new voice, more men rose to add their opinions.

“It sets a bad precedent, sire.”

“The commoners might see it as a sign of weakness amongst the aristocracy.”

“We cannot have such a man in line for succession!”

“Royal without title?”

“He should be banished from Asgard--…”

“ENOUGH.” Odin cracked Gungnir against the floor and fixed them all with a heavy glare. Slowly the dissenters sat back down. “You are an advisory council…and I emphasize the former word. You have made your opinions known and I have dismissed them. The discussion is over. I will hear no such talk concerning Loki for his fate is mine alone to decide and I have done so.” It was cheating, but what he said next was also very true. “Your hand has been forced. If you publically speak against my son…I feel certain his brother will make his displeasure known.” That stopped even a hint of rebellion.

“Much better.” Heads whipped around and Odin raised an eyebrow as the two elves stepped out of the shadows and into the light. G’dath and Azni shared a look, the healer with a sly grin spreading across her face before bowing towards him. “All-Father.”

Odin nodded in return, wondering what she was up to. “Lady G’dath.”

Everyone in the room knew the feeling in the air. Whether it was a little or a long time ago, all of them had been warriors at one time or another. What they felt now was a pair of predators circling. They may be nobles of the Advisory Council but those trained instincts never completely faded.

G’dath indicated the regally poised woman standing next to her. “I present Et’ana Azni, what you Asgardians would call Queen since there is no translatable word for your understanding.”

Odin nodded to her in greeting, his brow furrowed ever so slightly as he stated a fact that was very true. “If Et’ana Azni has a matter to be addressed, it is usually brought before open or closed court.”

Azni spoke softly, but there was a quiet steel behind her tone. “If I were to do so, the ones who need to hear would not receive the message.”

The others jolted in surprise while G’dath’s grin turned feral. “We are going to have a discussion about Loki Odinson, Indel Lokison, Talia Lokisdóttir, and Mischief Lokison…and what Alfheim will and will not allow.”

Odin was intrigued by the way she phrased her statement. He obliged her by asking the question, “What Alfheim will allow?”

The two women walked as one, flowing to the right of the seated men until they were only a dozen feet away from Odin’s chair. While it was a seat of obvious power, elevated above the others, it was not the grand throne of court. “Loki Odinson is a recognized citizen of our realm and therefore afforded the same protections as any elf kind. Alfheim is senate run but war is still a matter for the royal blood to decide. One order from Azni--…”
“Which I will give if required.” The quieter woman nodded her head slightly.

“…--and you will have all of Alfheim to contend with.” G’dath turned her attention to the men listening closely and smirked at them. “Instead of just a few dark elves you will have entire legions of light elves ready to lay waste to your great realm.”

The council members could all feel they were losing control, which in turn led to desperation. “Do you truly believe your realm will triumph over AEsir might?”

G’dath’s eyes glinted dangerously. “Do you truly believe Vanaheim will assist you in suppressing our rebellion?”

“For an AEsir and a dark elf you will go to war??”

“For a criminal!”

Odin slammed his fist into his armrest and heads whipped back around in his direction, his voice booming like thunder. “My son is not a criminal but a prince of this realm. Any who make such statements again will face me in the honor ring.” And everyone knew that Thor would stand in his father’s place. “Neither will Asgard initiate war against Alfheim.” He narrowed his eye as if waiting for them to contradict him.

Her eyes flashed gold as G’dath answered their question. “For this prince, who is a recognized citizen of Alfheim. This prince, who saved the Queen of the Light Elves. For these reasons, Alfheim is his to command.”

Odin sat just a little straighter. It was exactly the kind of political backing that had been needed. “We will be facing war on our soil before the year is concluded. War that will require not just AEsir might but the aid of other realms.”

“No, sire. Who could possibly be stronger than our warriors?”

A formal announcement of war hadn’t been announced in court. Even so, that these men didn’t know what he was certain even the servants knew irritated him. “An enemy that we have faced before. An enemy that we could not defeat, only exile from the nine realms. An enemy that will return to attempt to finish his task. Thanos.” Some stopped breathing while others widened their eyes. Odin looked to the two ladies and nodded his head towards them slightly. “Asgard would not dream of creating tensions with Alfheim, our most staunch supporters.” The sense of predators circling turned, now both sides focused on the council.

G’dath purred softly. “And since Indel Lokison, Mischief Lokison, and Talia Lokisdóttir are recognized children of Prince Loki our support extends to them all.”

Eyes moved to Azni, one of them daring to ask. “The light elves would shelter and support a dark elf?”

Azni’s expression grew colder than the north wind. “My lineage on the matriarchal side is dark elf, do you truly believe I carry your prejudice of them?” It was a forgotten fact, but her mother had been a dark elf though she had been raised by her father and the elves of Alfheim. Most eyes suddenly found their fingers fascinating and the ones that didn’t were filled with resignation.

The doors opened to admit Queen Sigyn who swept across the distance to stand next to Azni. “Et’ana.” Azni nodded to Sigyn in return. “Lord Odin.”

“Lady Sigyn.”
No one said a word as the doors closed ominously. Sigyn was the first one to speak. “With so many raised voices I could not help but overhear. At some point in the future, was it your intention to approach Vanaheim for aid?”

Odin corrected her, “This enemy is a threat to us all.”

Sigyn smiled just a little and retorted politely, “But this enemy will be intent upon your realm first. Perhaps it would be more prudent for Vanaheim to wait until he turns his attention to the next realm to conquer, his numbers depleted by your own warriors.”

“You would be so cowardly?”

The Vanir queen looked coldly at the men asking the question. “Practicality is not the same as cowardice. Only fools like you cannot discover the difference.”

Odin inclined his head ever so slightly, reminding the elf of their previous conversation. “You had mentioned a favor owed.”

Her eyebrow lifted ever so slightly, her expression shifting to amusement. “It is not a favor I owe to you or to Asgard. If you wish for Vanaheim’s assistance, you will have to ask Prince Loki to claim that favor owed to him.”

The men searched faces and realized a lot of power was aimed their way. Alfheim. Vanaheim. Two queens and a notorious healer, all of them elves by birth. The three women shared a look before slowly smiling at their captive male audience. The council never stood a chance.

Mischief was feeling sullen today and he didn’t know why. Which in turn scared him since he didn’t like not understanding what was happening to him. And since he had very little experience with being scared it made the fear even worse.

He’d refused to leave Jane’s room and after getting into a snarling contest with Thor he’d been left alone. He refused to label his current predicament that he’d been locked in his room. He could just walk through the wall if he wished. To be more correct he’d been locked in Jane’s room. He didn’t like being left alone but he also didn’t want to be around anyone.

Currently he was stretched out on the bed, his safe haven since coming to Asgard. The people were nicer. The AEsir were…well, AEsir but they didn’t go out of their way to be insulting so it was an improvement. Odin was actually interested in what Loki had to say and it was a nice change. Still, with so much happening and so many people pulling Loki in different directions he was feeling a little bit abandoned.

Frowning, he looked down at his stomach as it grumbled at him. “Shut up.” He rubbed it as it seemed to ache. He wondered if that meant he was hungry. Blinking rapidly as tears threatened, he scrubbed at his face and willed them away even as his lower lip trembled with impending sobs. He needed Loki. His playmate-creator-friend would know what to do. He always knew. Mischief suspected he knew what was wrong and was afraid to tell him.

“We need to talk.”

Glaring over his shoulder at Loki as it all shifted to anger. “You think?” Loki was lying on the bed behind him on his side. The trickster didn’t even react to the anger he could see. It was deserved. He should have mentioned his suspicions sooner and Mischief was too smart not to pick up that truth was being kept from him. Then after a moment the boy uncharacteristically moved to curl up against him and hide. “Send me back?”
Mischief couldn’t even describe where it was he was sent. Warm. Safe. It was timeless sensations more than anything. A special little place, cocooned in Loki’s magic, where he could wait until it was time to play again.

“I cannot.”

Mischief hooked a finger into Loki’s armor, tone soft with fear and despair. “I’m broken.”

Loki shifted enough onto his back so that Mischief was tucked more into his side. Mischief’s head was on his shoulder and the trickster used that arm to loosely hold him. Pulling in a slow breath, the trickster nodded to himself. “You’re not broken. You’re real.”

The attempted laugh was even sad to hear. “Not funny.”

Using his other hand to run through the mass of frizzy black hair, Loki’s voice deepened and twisted. “You’ve heard my jokes, you know they’re not that bad.”

Mischief yawned as something wild within him stopped snarling and started paying attention. The rest of him felt horribly tired. “…terrible…jokes…”

Pulling together one of his sneakier talents, Loki used his voice but no fancy words to project the spell outward and wrap lightly around Mischief. “I hold in my arms a real AEsir boy of 300…but you carry my adult memories and instincts that you’re not ready to control.”

The boy’s brow furrowed a little. They were both mages. They both could feel and even smell spells being formulated. “…what are you doing?”

Loki’s lip quirked slightly in amusement. “Calming your instincts and, as she calls it, softening those memories so you have time to learn control.”

**She.** Any fear that had been resting quietly in Mischief calmed. Hela wouldn’t compromise when it came to his existence. He supposed that was also true of Loki. Now that he thought about it, he wasn’t sure why he’d been afraid. Loki had always thought of him as real.

Wisps of green started curling around Mischief, part of Loki concentrating on the spell while the other was tuned to the conversation. But he knew himself. Loki knew what Mischief needed to hear most. “I will look after you as I promised. You have nothing to fear as a son of mine.”

Mischief’s brow furrowed a little as his eyes slipped closed. “Can I pretend?”

Loki’s lips quirked happily that there was no doubt in his voice. He and Hela had both been children and it was a promise he hadn’t been able to keep for her sake. Matters were different now. “This is our spell, Mischief. What would you like?”

Mischief shook his head slightly. It wasn’t about the spell. He trusted Loki to keep him safe. He was modeled after a son of Odin but he’d never been Odin’s. Friend or otherwise, he’d always been Loki’s. “Not that. Like her. Would--…can I call you father like she does?” Like Hela does.

Loki smiled easily. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He finished the spell as Mischief stilled, but those comforting words followed him into a dreamless sleep.

A minute. A year. Dreamless and timeless was his sleep. Yet even as Mischief frowned slightly he wasn’t alone. He sat up slowly, looking around before glancing behind him. Loki was still there next to him, watching him without expression.
Mischief’s green eyes were full of innocent mischief, the worry and fear forgotten and softened behind a magical wall that separated his recent memories from a childhood of more than seven hundred years ago. Jane. Indel. Talia. The important names were still there. Some things were foggy and confusing but he knew Loki—father would explain what he didn’t understand. A crooked smile crossed the boy’s face before he leaned into Loki with a soft ‘father’. Loki hugged him firmly.

Loki paused for a moment outside of his father’s study, knocking lightly on the door and almost hoping he wouldn’t be heard.

“Enter.”

Damn, was all Loki could think. But he pushed open the door, here for the talk that he’d been eager to finally have over, hoping to put off forever, and dreading all at once. The one reason he hadn’t wanted to ever come back to Asgard was resolved. He was still a son of Odin. He was even a prince of Asgard which he’d never thought was a title he would retain. But he was regretting how he’d acted in court after being defeated on Midgard. He regretted a lot recently and it was a wonder Odin hadn’t stormed down from his throne and throttled him for it. Positions reversed he would have had a difficult time restraining himself if Indel acted the way that he had. But then again he never would have let matters between he and Indel become so strained but it was little comfort now.

The large windows were closed behind the desk, the fire burning merrily and Odin was sitting in his favorite chair. Loki glanced down. He’d been wondering where Fenris had wandered off to. At Odin’s feet was a very familiar wolf and Loki scowled briefly at the animal who grinned up at him before putting his muzzle back on Odin’s shoe. Traitor.

Loki sat across in the neighboring chair, his back stiff and feeling like a young demi-godling about to be reamed for something inappropriate he’d done. Odin contemplated the fire a bit longer before touching his finger to his lips. “I assume you have talked with Indel about his heritage.”

Blinking in surprise that this was the topic of conversation. “Yes. His ears became enough of an issue with other elves that I decided to address it.”

“Has the issue of your heritage come up, or do you think they are too young?” Odin asked only because Loki was very skilled. He’d heard Indel speak of the ‘blue’ prince but it could have been presented as just a story.

Letting Jötunn blue blossom across his skin for a moment, watching carefully for even a hint of a flinch. But just as in the vault a seeming lifetime before, Odin didn’t flinch at his true form. Loki let it fade back to AEsir pale. “I decided to address it all at once.”

Instead of surprise or even disgust, Loki was shocked to find a spark of pride in Odin’s eye. A spark he’d been desperate to gain for centuries. “Then you have grown into a very wise father.”

The trickster felt his cheeks burn. “I doubt that...I am simply fortunate Indel is so very much like me.”

Odin frowned almost imperceptively. Modesty was not something he was used to seeing with Loki. He wondered if it was something his son picked up from Jane Foster. “You have embraced who you are, Loki, and that makes you wise. I am very proud of you for such courage.”
Loki swallowed, starting to feel the overwhelming need to ask what he desperately wanted to know. “I had help. Jane encouraged me quite a lot…” A silent sob choked him suddenly, the need to know overriding the common sense of saying nothing. “Why? How can you--how can you? You demand nothing from me. Not an apology. Not remorse. All that I did was take a knee and I am welcomed back a prince? I--I don’t understand.”

His father had never been so forgiving of his mistakes. The littlest of slights was followed by fierce punishment, but never an explanation of what exactly he’d done wrong so that the mistake could be avoided. The few times when his chastisement was within his mother’s earshot always followed with she telling him how he had erred.

There was no anger, no recrimination in Odin’s eye. If anything there was sadness. “I know you do not…but the fault does not lie with yourself.” Loki slowly shook his head, looking so confused and lost. Odin leaned forward slightly. “I have not the way with words that you do, Loki. Actions have always been my strength. I wish to speak and I ask that you do not search for a hidden meaning in the wording or falsehood in the tone. I do not intend it, nor do I intend to offer you anything but truth. Can you do that?”

Loki’s brow furrowed. It was like asking a fish not to swim. He always did that. He always searched for the lie, the hidden meaning. But perhaps…his searching for the lie was keeping him from hearing a truth. He slowly nodded. “I will attempt to do so.”

His father nodded to himself, gaze returning to the fire as he seemed to collect himself. Loki was shocked to notice the heavier set of the lines in his face, the smudges under his eyes, the way that his shoulders were weighed down with worries and burdens. When had his father grown old?

“On Jötunheim I found a babe that I knew was special. A simple touch and you changed yourself to look AEsir. I have never seen the like. I did mean what I said; that I had hoped you would be a bridge to peace but you were never a bargaining chip. Perhaps for the briefest of times I considered raising you to assume Jötunheim’s throne but then you smiled at me and that plan was abandoned. Perhaps there is another fear you carry I am unaware of but I took you home to become my son.”

“To what end?” The start of a frown appeared but Loki rushed forward, echoing his mother’s observation. “Everything that you have ever done had a purpose.”

Shaking his head slightly with the smallest of shrugs. “Every father dreams of what their children will aspire to be when they grow, as I am sure you have your own dreams of Indel and Talia’s future. This peace that I speak of…”

Loki argued his point even though he didn’t want to have this fear confirmed. “Every father is not a king. Nor is every king the All-father. A political tool--…”

“LOKI.” Odin spoke the word as a sharp bark. He refused to get lost in this argument again. Loki jerked back instinctively and Fenris lifted his head. “You are still twisting my words. Just. Listen.” Loki crossed his arms with a small huff but he did clench his jaw to keep from interfering. “I…wished to show how similar rather than how different Jötunn and AEsir are. That you could be raised whole and healthy could lead to an understanding between our worlds.”

Which didn’t make any sense to Loki whatsoever. “Then why hide my origins?”

This was a question Odin could answer easily. “As an infant, you were too vulnerable and Asgard was too bitter. As you grew…it was more important that you felt that you belonged than
Loki’s brow furrowed, bitterness in his tone as he asked, “When have I ever belonged??”

“Loki...”

“Why??”

Odin glared hard. “The reason that you were brought to Asgard is not the same as the reason you remained.” Loki had stiffened up again, hardening his heart against an emotional blow. He had always believed what Odin said in anger over what he would try to say calmly. “I brought home a child. I kept a son.” Loki froze and blinked, his mouth parting slightly in surprise. But Odin’s gaze had already turned distant, thinking of what had happened. “Then you became so powerful and the council so afraid I feared that knowledge could be used against you. That even I as a king of Asgard could lose my son simply because of something as trivial as blood.”

Loki blinked in shock. Trivial? Had his father actually used that adjective when describing the importance of blood ties? But then he focused on what was said. Shaking his head. “How would that be possible? The only way--...” Loki paled. And suddenly all the whispers and hints he’d been hearing about the Advisory Council made sense. There were edicts in place to forbid a Jötunn growing roots on Asgardian soil. It was a simple matter for a king to dismiss such an edict, or to alter it. He blinked rapidly before asking, “You empowered them, didn’t you?” Something flickered in Odin’s eye and Loki hissed without thinking. “How could you do something so stupid?”

Odin barely reacted to the insult, which was not a normal reaction, and his voice sounded tired. “The purpose of an advisory council is for them to offer advice. I have not had the advantage that your being here will give to Thor.”

Loki gave him a dirty look. “You had mother.”

Barely suppressing a wince. “A queen’s place is not as advisor.” Nor had Frigga carried the same gift for laws and edicts as Loki.

Loki barely listened to the excuse. “How long? How long has the Advisory Council held the power to overrule you?”

His father nodded slowly, letting Loki lead the conversation. “It must be a unanimous vote--you must understand, Loki, I saw it as a positive. A way to protect the citizens in case a future monarch became too greedy, too harsh or unjust.”

“Can they create their own?”

Odin shook his head but it was of little relief to Loki as he listened. “Once I have made an edict, it cannot be destroyed without their consensus. I may alter it, as I have done for your son...but I cannot do so for your daughter.” Like Hela being locked out of Asgard. Because instead of a damn edit bound in paper it was bound in magic. “Hopefully in the not distant future, there will never be another adopted child who must fear not being able to stay with the family that embraces them.”

With father’s permission or not he would be perusing those edicts carefully for a loophole. Although if Odin could alter them he would simply add a couple of addendums concerning adoption, either for Odin to sign off on now or Thor to approve later. A soft growl entering his tone. “Is Talia at risk?”

“No, Alfheim is on good standing with Asgard.”
Loki spoke slowly as he mulled that over. “Alfheim…because they perceive Indel as adopted instead of mine by blood he is at risk?” His fists clenched and his eyes flashed, meaning every word. “I will kill them. I will kill every damn one of them if I must.”

“And you would be exiled for it.”

The trickster’s lips curled cruelly. “The alternative is telling them exactly where he comes from—…”

“Loki.” His son slowly exhaled, grabbing a hold of his temper when Odin raised a hand and spoke firmly. “I announced the edict’s alteration precisely as you requested. He is not vulnerable as you were because he is known as a dark elf.” So there was nothing for they to take advantage of.

Loki nodded slowly in understanding. Until he dealt with them he wouldn’t be completely satisfied but his protective instincts had calmed. But then his shoulders hunched a little, thinking of all the erratic thoughts and emotions running through him during Thor’s exile. This was his chance to speak. Father had actually requested this time with him. “I had thought—…I wasn’t in my right mind. I had not just one thought.”

Folding together his hands, knowing where Loki’s mind had drifted. This talk was for his son’s sake more than anything, and it was obvious there was much Loki wanted to say. “What were your thoughts?”

Swallowing, eyes moving to examine the fire. “That you had not told me because you were ashamed to announce that a Jötunn runt was your son. Now that the secret was known to me, I was expendable…because what use is a second son to Asgard, after all? A-and when you spoke of peace…I was certain you’d send me there as an emissary of some nature, perhaps not even care if they killed me.” Then Loki laughed darkly. “And when it all went wrong, since you so easily banished your precious Thor to Midgard I thought you would banish this Jötunn runt to Jötunheim… and then forget about him.”

Odin spoke softly while shaking his head. “I would never have forgotten you.”

Loki’s lip pulled back enough to display sharp teeth, knowledge in his eyes. “But you would banish me there.”

“It was a possibility entertained and dismissed.”

The mage glanced away, his jaw tightening. “Because mother begged you not to do it.”

Odin corrected his son firmly. “She never knew I had even reached out to Jötunheim concerning you.”

Loki’s eyes flashed green. “You should have told me.”

The old king sighed tiredly, but he’d sworn to be as forthcoming as possible. “Yes, I should have.” Loki blinked in surprise, but the acknowledgement that his father rarely gave went a long way to soothing the hurt. “And when you let go—…” Loki’s eyes jumped to his father’s face since it was rare Odin didn’t complete a sentence. He saw such pain there that not even pride could disguise that it hurt his own heart.

“I didn’t leave with the intent in becoming your enemy.”

“No, you abandoned Asgard and us because I was unable to offer you a reason to stay.” Loki didn’t even know what to say to that. His father was right, it had been one of his strongest
reasons but not even he would say so unless specifically asked. Odin took a moment. “I knew that
the actions you took from then onward were my doing. Were it not for me, the path would never
have been opened to you.”

As gratifying as that statement was, as much as he wished to let that blame lay where Odin
wanted to place it, it wasn’t true. He wasn’t that petulant, arrogant child anymore. He was a trickster,
of course, he always would be. But he wasn’t a boy still learning to be a man and the lessons that he
was trying to teach Indel and Talia would make him a hypocrite if he did otherwise. “Some of my
actions were a result but not all of them.” Smirking widely. “And I will never repeat this so you
cannot hold it against me later but…perhaps, I fell because I was afraid of the fallout.” His own
words sobered him. “My actions were flawed…I may have planned Laufey’s death so carefully but it
was foolish of me risking yours and mother’s life to prove a point.”

“It was a point that I never required of you, Loki. I know that in your heart you are
Asgardian.” Another silence filled the study, reflective. Healing. Odin nodded to himself and
reluctantly brought up the next topic. “Midgard.” Loki grimaced but didn’t comment. “I accept your
reasons for your actions. You must accept that pride and anger made a bad situation intolerable.”

As if he weren’t ever known for acting or the lack of because of pride. Clenching his fists.
“…less…” Odin watched him and decided he was going to have to wait Loki out. Loki’s thoughts
kept moving and churning and when his father said nothing further after several minutes it bubbled
over. “I was the less favored son. The cast off--I didn’t want to be less! Better to die than to be
ridiculed for being so pathetic as to ask for help--…”

“Who said you were a castoff?”

Loki exploded from his seat, pacing and waving a violent hand in Odin’s direction. “You
did!”

“I have never uttered-…”

The son whipped around to confront the father. “You snarled me into silence at every
opportunity.”

Odin’s eye glinted. “Because I cannot combat your arguments and you have ever taken
advantage of that fact.”

Loki took a step, talking faster and his back stiffening. “You have ever dismissed my input
and opinions.”

“You pick the worst of times to provide them.”

The trickster was fully snarling now, leaning down to meet his father’s gaze. “How often
have you dismissed my abilities as a mage over Thor’s might with a hammer?”

Odin closed his eye. “That wasn’t my intent--…”

Roaring as he cut his father off. “It was completely your intent! You are just like Thor.
You try to encourage me to be like him by refusing to acknowledge my strengths because they are
not valued by Asgard. How many centuries have I spent scrambling to keep up, to win at a game I
was born to lose?”

“If you would--…”

“NO.” Loki made a decisive gesture, understanding thanks to G’dath physically why he
could never achieve an AEsir level of strength. It wasn’t because he was Jötunn. It was because even though he could appear as a tall though skinny AEsir he was in fact stunted. “I was born a runt and a mage. I will never hold AEsir strength. But I will always be smarter and faster than any of you. I will always be powerful, but not the sort of power you and yours values in a man.” Then his green eyes narrowed suspiciously. “I am still not convinced that fact, more than any other, doesn’t shame you.” Loki had been talking faster as he gained steam, now he yelled once more. “You threw my daughter away and would have done the same to me had I not been a prince!”

Odin stood himself. “You overreacted Loki, as always.”

Snarling with a snap of his teeth, his body poised as if to move to violence though he wouldn’t follow through. “So I should have just let them kill her?!”

Voice booming as he retorted to his son. “No, you should have waited to discover where your mother and I were going to hide her instead of running off to Helheim and risking your life. As proud as I am of that accomplishment I am more than horrified both of you could have died without either of us ever knowing it. If I hadn’t heard it was you, I would swear by the Norns it was an idiotic idea of your brother’s.” Odin sat down with a disgruntled huff.

That pulled Loki up short, staring with wide eyes for several moments. When he did manage to speak, his voice was so soft in comparison to the eminent violence of just a few moments before. “You were going to hide her?”

Odin looked affectionately irritated at this point. “Despite what you may believe, Loki, you are not the only person in Asgard capable of scheming.”

“I--…you never told me.” He was left to assume too much, and his assumptions always favored the pessimistic.

His father shook his head slightly. “Why would I tell you when the damage had been done? She was gone and her return was now impossible.”

Because it would have changed everything between them. But Loki was realizing that his father didn’t apologize for past actions either, even when he felt it was deserved. It figures that would be what he inherited from him. When Loki started again, his voice was soft at first but rose in volume as his remembered frustration grew. “But there was never anything I could do that pleased you. I was always told I was wrong, but never when I was right. O-or that it was wrong but not why! How do you expect me to do anything right if you never tell me?”

“You do what is right now.”

Loki snarled softly in retort. “Because Jane tells me. Jane listens when I am confused or not quite certain what I should do.”

Rumbling in disapproval at what Odin believed was a convenient excuse. “You are no imbecile, Loki. You are aware of what is right and what is wrong.”

Odin never could understand that Loki didn’t think on the same level or in the same way as everyone else. He and the AEsir focused on their honor and the glory of Asgard, in that order. Loki was a strategist. He wanted to win and carried no qualms in using any method necessary to achieve that goal. Loki shrugged casually. “By whose standards? I know what is right and wrong for Loki. She informs me when that conflicts with a larger, more important right or wrong.” Odin nodded to himself, deciding he was going to have to speak with Jane to understand a more productive way to interact with Loki in the future. He relaxed in his seat, waiting until Loki had
walked off enough of his temper to sit back down. A naughty smile slowly spread across Loki’s face, thinking about after Thor had left Svartalfheim to save the universe. “After Svartalfheim I had entertained visiting you in disguise.”

“And no doubt inform me of your death personally.”

Loki shrugged, looking casually at his fingernails. “It had been a tempting thought. Indel distracted me.”

“Loki.” With a small frown Loki looked up, hearing the seriousness of his father’s tone. “Do you understand if I had truly believed such a lie the result?” Loki’s brow slowly furrowed but Odin’s son was a clever boy. It didn’t take him long to figure out what Odin was hinting to. He didn’t reply, but Loki did swallow once. Loki was glad he was sitting, the foundation of the ground beneath his feet a little shaky. Not that grief at the news of his death could kill Odin. But that at the time he might not have cared. When nothing more was said Odin admitted quietly. “I did watch you from time to time.”

Loki clasped his hands and let his father move the conversation along. It had occurred to him if Odin could see through his spells while on the throne that he’d probably gained his notice at least once. Which made his imprisonment pointless. “Then why not simply let me go to begin with?”

Odin glanced at the fire. “You still have the Casket of Ancient Winters, do you not?”

Loki broke out in a cold sweat. He had no idea Odin knew he’d kept it. “Um…no?” He grimaced at his own pathetic attempt at a lie. Indel was old enough to lie better than that.

Odin glanced at him and let the lie go. As formidable as the cells in the dungeons were, none were designed to withstand the casket’s power. “But as I am a father, I am also a king…and to the court I could not simply allow your release with less than a year as penalty for your actions since you refused to offer to the court that your actions were not your own.” He would lose all control over Asgard if he did. “I never intended for the removal of your titles to be permanent. My hope was that one day my son would return to Asgard whole and I would be able to restore what had been taken.”

And he still didn’t understand why he was being forgiven. “My past is still as it is.”

Waiting until Loki met his gaze. “But you regret, my son. You have changed and you have grown. You are no longer a mischievous boy…why would I punish a man that I am proud of?” Loki’s brow furrowed again, still not understanding. “There are several reasons. Lady G’dath and Elder Trax came to you with a very specific request. They asked if you, Prince Loki, would save them. You answered the call to protect them, even without the formality of the title being acknowledged by Asgard. You earned your title back in that one instant. Your second act was regaled to me by your brother. My son using might and bravery to destroy the Chitauri device, the Skrull army, and to vanquish the Other. As to the third reason…when you believed that you could never come home do you remember what you said?” Loki’s mouth slowly opened in surprise.

He’d forgotten, but then his face flushed even though he tried to suppress the response. He remembered what else he’d said that night. “I--…”

Odin merely smiled slightly and held up a hand, not interested in hearing apologies for words that had been true at the time. “You have apologized, earnest and sincere.” Not to mention the members of court had been increasingly irritating lately and he found a strange satisfaction in scandalizing them.

Smiling slightly in return. “So…everything is cleared between us?”
“I welcomed you back as a prince, did I not?” Loki’s smile grew a little bit more, but it was more than just happiness. A tentative amount of trust. A glimmer of renewed interest in making his father proud. Of sharing his accomplishments with him and perhaps, one day in the future, in forgiving him. “Now, I was curious concerning one matter.” Loki warily raised an eyebrow. “Why is this little beast called Fenris and should I be concerned?”

One of the stories from Midgard talked of Fenris killing Odin during Ragnarok. For once in his life, Loki giggled without being drunk.

**Author's Notes:**

*Mystery solved! The big conversation has actually occurred. Words were actually used. More feels, of course, cause we gotta have those.*

**Next:**

*mischief aplenty; time's up*
ASGARD

The gardens of Asgard were a beautiful testament to how fertile the lands were. Flowers and trees from all over the nine realms were planted here. There were gardens and grounds open to all of Asgard, and others that were guarded and private.

The bench Loki was occupying was in a section of gardens deemed semi-private. Royalty and guests were welcome. The soldiers that casually walked the perimeter politely shooed away courtiers and commoners. He watched as Mischief, Indel, and Talia laughed and chased the three elflings that had made the journey from Alfheim with their families. Fenris was barking and growling, tugging on tunics and boots like a playful puppy.

His body annoyed him. Even with the rejuvenation of his magic by being home physically his strength came and went. He took it easy as often as possible without making it appear he was doing so. Just as now. Just a quiet moment of watching his children when in reality he was staying off his feet so Jane wouldn’t frown at him because she’d seen the bruises he was still hiding under glamour.

Loki was careful to keep it all off his face but his annoyance went beyond the physical. He had everything he wanted. His relationship with his brother was good again and he even had Thor’s regard. He and his father were on good terms, Odin actually interested in what he had to say and trying to mend the rift between them. Why the Hel wasn’t he content?

He didn’t even look at Azni when she patted his knee as she sat down next to him. The woman always knew when he needed to talk to someone. She and Jane were his two confidants because they both helped keep his head on straight. But this time he hoped Azni might have the solution because he didn’t know it. He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees and hands clasped. “Why can’t I be satisfied? Why isn’t this enough?”

Azni didn’t even look surprised at the question. The only surprise might be that it took so long to be asked. But then it had been a busy couple of days for Loki. “You spent a lifetime making due with scraps of attention and now you believe you should be content with what Asgard offers?”

He tilted his head slightly as he closed his eyes and sighed. “Anyone else would be.”

Now she smiled slightly. “Ah, but you are not just anyone. You are Loki of Asgard. You have the love of a woman who uncompromisingly puts you first. You have children who look up to you.”

Loki nodded as if in conviction but his voice was more resigned than anything. “Exactly. We have nowhere to go so I need to stop being selfish.”

She seemed to think with care before responding. “Compromise can be good. It promotes harmony. Unity. But only to a point.” Azni shook her head slightly. She’d met many boys like this over the centuries, but the only similarity between them was the way society tried to mold them into something they weren’t. “When who we are is being sacrificed, then it’s not compromise.”

Glancing at her with a small frown. “I’m not sacrificing who I am.”

“Then why are you unhappy?” He kept watching her, knowing as with everything she said and did she had a point. “Soon your father wishes to retitle Loki, the AEsir prince of Asgard.”
She put a gentle hand on his wrist and leaned closer. “You are dissatisfied because you want Loki, the Jötunn prince of Asgard to be acknowledged.”

Loki grimaced, thinking of all the political and social lessons that had been pounded into him over the years. “A vanity.”

“A necessity.” Azni corrected him gently, but believed it with finality. Gesturing to the children running around happily. “You cannot use their safety as an excuse for suppressing that side of yourself. A thousand years from now they will be taking their first steps into adulthood and the unhappiness will spill over because you will have run out of reasons.” With as impatient as he could sometimes be, she doubted he would last 10 years in Asgard if forced to hide who he was again. “Now is the time to strive for everything, Loki. You have accepted who you are. Your children and mate accept you. Give Asgard the same opportunity.”

Loki nodded slowly, glancing around in one slow sweep. “And if they cannot, what then? Where do we go?”

Azni wasn’t watching him, her brown eyes still focused on the children playing without a care in the world. “I remember those smiles. Those laughs. Here or on Alfheim made no difference to them. I understand why returning to Alfheim isn’t possible and I cannot excuse their conduct.” As much as she loved her people, they had disappointed her. “I remember quieter laughter and smaller smiles on Midgard, but that was because they were indoors.” She smiled, remembering those smiles before turning to give him her full attention. “Wherever you choose they will adapt. Jötunheim perhaps.”

Loki found himself considering it before slowly shaking his head. Indel would be fine. With the right clothing Mischief and Talia would survive but Jane, even with his lifespan, would always be human. “It’s far too cold for them.”

She smiled slightly and glanced at him. “You are the last remaining magician with true Jötunn blood. The planet has tunnels and your gift of magic could reawaken the knowledge of heating spells. And there is always Vanheim.”

His brow furrowed slightly. “Vanheim will only allow the immortals of the universe to claim land for themselves.”

Azni sounded as amused as she looked. “If you were to even hint to Queen Sigyn of your interest I am confident she might get down on her knees and beg you to settle in her territory.”

Loki grinned, picturing the stoic, graceful figure getting down on her knees. “What a lovely image.”

“You have a great deal of political pull, you just fail to use it to your advantage. Not to mention above immortality, the Vanir covet the magic users of the nine realms. You are considered by many to be the most powerful mage alive, who has fathered exceptional children. An exception would be made in your case.”

Loki thought about all that he knew of the AEsir. All the disregard he’d faced, purely for being a male spell caster. The fact that he was physically different only added to that problem. Adding a complication of his species to that would meet a depressingly obvious conclusion. “Asgard will not accept me.”

Azni slowly nodded to herself though not necessarily in agreement. She understood why he would conclude this but didn’t see it as reason enough for him to hide who he was. “You have
your brother and your father. Even without a title you still may visit them at your leisure. This is not about them. You’ve spent five years slowly stepping out of the shadows to bask in the sunlight. You’re dissatisfied because you can’t go back to that existence without sacrificing the man you’ve become.”

He smirked a little, watching Mischief do a hand stand and immediately they all tried to copy him. Mischief wouldn’t have the same problems he did, but Indel would. Ice magic would out him even if he would never physically look like the Jötunn he is. He wasn’t going to repeat Odin’s mistakes, forcing his child to suppress an aspect of his nature.

He sighed softly, feeling resigned with the inevitable conclusion. “I suppose I should enjoy the time I have left.”

Azni took his hand in her own, lightly patting the back of it. “Don’t give up on your people just yet, young prince.” His lip twitched at the label but like always, when she spoke he listened with his whole being. “I have a feeling if you ask Asgard, you might be surprised by the response.” He still wasn’t convinced, but he nodded obediently as if she had convinced him. Slowly Azni’s brow furrowed and he wasn’t able to determine if she was amused or concerned as she asked, “What are they doing?”

“Playing, of course.” His answer was easy enough, but there was a spark of mischief there. As if he were well aware of why she looked so perplexed.

There was definitely amusement in her eyes as she asked him carefully, “Isn’t that your father’s scepter?”

Loki’s eyes moved to watch them. His father’s scepter was taller than the both of them and quite heavy. Yet Indel and Talia were lifting Gungnir between the two of them, charging with it. But it was all in good fun. Mischief and the three elflings were running away from the pair, shrieking and screaming happily.

He had actually caught them sneaking out of his father’s study with it but decided not to take it from them. He could remember being up to similar antics at that age. “He should know better than to leave it unattended.” Particularly with his children running amuck. Once they tired of playing with it he would hang it somewhere high but noticeable. It would guarantee Odin would never be so careless again.

Azni laughed softly, patting his hand lightly.

Thor and Loki were side by side, reviewing maps of the city and terrain. The warriors 3 and Sif were on either side of them with several of the more seasoned veterans completing the circle. Loki reached up to rub the bridge of his nose with two fingers, annoyed.

It was all so predictable. AEsir tactics for protecting Asgard hadn’t changed in 10,000 years and it was exactly what Thanos would be counting on. This would not be one of the times where he would just bite his tongue. This gambit they couldn’t afford to lose. Cutting off whoever was speaking since he wasn’t paying attention any longer. “We need to modify defense tactics for this enemy.”

“Loki, they’ve worked for thousands of years.” Thor voice was a cross between chiding and exasperated.

Loki turned to ask his brother coldly, “Really? How effective were they a year ago?” Thor
flinched. He wasn’t the only one.

General Tyr was frowning thoughtfully, his expression almost unreadable as he asked, “You would have us alter tradition?”

“Yes.” He responded just as coldly, and didn’t give a flying fuck that he had rendered them all speechless with what amounted to blasphemy. There was a fair amount of horror on the surrounding faces but Tyr wasn’t one of them. Loki glanced at his brother. “Thor, you know AEsir tactics the best. I will propose a scenario of attack and we will determine where our defenses need to be strengthened.” The older warriors looked as if they might object, none of them speaking as Thor nodded and smiled as if it was the most brilliant thing Loki had ever said.

Jane watched them silently as they all congregated around the maps, planning and strategizing. This was the part that was beyond her. This is what separated her from Asgard and her being able to be Loki’s shield maiden seemed like such an unobtainable vow. She wasn’t a warrior like Thor and Sif. She wasn’t a strategizing genius like Loki. She was just plain Jane. Sad, lonely little Jane who’d fallen in love with an Asgardian prince.

“Are you well, Lady Jane?” Jane blinked and looked to the left to see Odin eyeing her curiously. She was shocked, certain Odin would be going over battle plans with the others. As if reading her mind. “Thor will be king soon and Loki his advisor, they need to learn for themselves without my interference. Might I have a few minutes of your time?”

“Of course, All-father.” Odin smiled and offered his arm which she took, crossing out of the war room and down the corridor to the side gardens. The walk was slow and peaceful, the calm before the storm as it were.

“I was hoping to gain your insight, Lady Jane.”

She’d been anticipating this conversation, it painfully obvious to her Odin was still at a loss when it came to Loki. She wasn’t sure why, but for both their sakes she was willing to do anything she could to help bridge that gap. Because as much as he enjoyed games and toying with misdirection, Loki seemed to have a similar difficulty with Odin when it concerned himself. “My insight, your highness?”

“You have a way with Loki, an understanding of him. I was…curious as to your secret.”

Jane just didn’t get the way AEsir thought. Loki was complicated beyond description but she would have thought a thousand years would have solved that mystery. She looked away for a moment, thinking to herself before shrugging lightly. “He’s…he’s Loki. I don’t know that I understand him better than anyone else but…I listen.”

“Even when I have heard him I have found he does not say what he means.”

Jane grimaced a little. There wasn’t a whole lot she could say to argue against that point. And the fact was that Loki was more direct with her because he trusted her. It was something she was hesitant to say to Odin’s face. Not to mention she liked when the trickster came out to play.

She thought for another moment, studying him before speaking with care. “I will talk with Loki about that. You will have to understand that…” She pulled in a slow breath before nodding once and letting her tongue go. “He plays games and offers half-truths with people he doesn’t trust.”

Odin nodded, the slight down turning of his lip hinting to sadness he was carefully trying to hide. “And you believe he will never trust me.”
Jane frowned, caution forgotten. "I never said that." Odin studied her curiously and she considered what Loki wouldn’t mind her telling him before speaking. "He wants to make you proud. He wants to be the son that you want, but the two of you are talking different languages. He thinks you want another Thor, and you praise him for acting like a Thor clone...eventually he gets frustrated and just...explodes."

Odin was already frowning. "I do not wish for Loki to act like Thor. I wish for Loki to be the best version of himself."

Jane didn’t think he was lying, he just wasn’t understanding that there were aspects of Loki that contradicted the AEsir way of thinking and living. But just telling him that wasn’t going to get through. She wasn’t certain, but she had a feeling if she said stifling his mischief was contradictory to Loki’s nature, Odin would still think it was something that could be changed and controlled. “Even if you told him that I don’t think he’ll believe you. He’s had a thousand years of being praised for acting like Thor and a thousand years of being punished or ignored for being himself.”

“Then you believe there is no hope.”

She shook her head quickly, not wanting to say or do something that would cause him to give up. “No. There’s hope. Loki wants to be here, he just doesn’t know how to take that first step.”

Odin was listening much more intently than his posture would lead one to believe. His first talk with Loki had been good, surprisingly so considering the disaster he’d been prepared for. But he was starting to understand that to maintain that momentum, those kinds of talks would need to continue. “And what would be that first step?”

“Your talk with him went a long way towards that but it has to continue...but I think you get that now.” She included him in a warm smile that was full of praise and encouragement. It suddenly struck Odin why he had approached Jane Foster. She understood Loki, inside and out, and the advice that she was offering him was what she practiced. He watched the smile slowly slip, her tone serious. “Things between you are better and civil, but if you want him to forgive you, you have to apologize.”

He felt his back stiffen as he asked, “Apologize?”

She slipped her arm out of his and backed up a step, amber flashing in her eyes. “If you really don’t know then this conversation is over.”

Odin studied her for a long moment, marveling at such change in such a short amount of time. He was so very wrong about her. If Loki had been destined for Asgard’s throne, she would have been a wondrous queen. Nodding slowly. “You refer to the situation with his daughter, which we have already addressed.”

“And?”

Odin blinked in surprise and when she lightly tapped the gauntlet around her wrist he sighed. “I have already made arrangements concerning those bracelets.” She just continued to stare at him and he nodded slowly. “But it is fitting that words of regret should accompany my actions.”

She wasn’t going to beat around the bush, because this next point was by far the cruelest. “And her funeral? All of Asgard was able to attend, including me, an outsider who didn’t belong. Where were your thoughts on your second son? The son that is always forgotten when it is convenient.”
His blue eye, normally piercing and seeing, was staring at nothing. "I can never redeem myself from that failure."

Jane looked as surprised as she felt. So that's where Loki picked up his poker face. She wasn’t staring into the heart of Odin. She doubted there was anyone alive who could. But layers had just fallen to reveal heartbreak and regret that he hid behind his formal, gruff exterior.

Speaking softly. "He’s forgiven Thor after one apology. You would be surprised how much Loki will forgive with the right words." Then she grinned, wanting to cheer him up. "Besides, Indel really likes you. He’ll soften Loki up for you."

Odin nodded as the layers hid him again, but he chuckled softly. "As effective as his father, no doubt. There was a time when Loki was as close to I as Indel is to him." And then he’d ruined that by letting his focus to the throne and raising Thor to be his heir shifted that focus away from Loki.

Jane’s voice pulled him from his thoughts. "He’s going to make his origins an issue. How you act will be a test of pass or fail."

"You do not believe he will wait until after the ceremony."

*What would be the fun in that?* Jane snorted and shook her head. "Not a chance. It wouldn’t be much of a test if he did that."

Slowly Odin nodded in understanding. "I see. Then I should prepare myself to intervene--"

Jane turned and held out a halting hand. "No. This isn’t about you. He knows you accept him as he is. This is about everybody else." She waved her hand vaguely at the rest of Asgard before reaffirming her attention on him. "He won’t deny you again, but you have to let him test Asgard or he won’t stay and I won’t even try to persuade him."

He absorbed this bit of information and took her advice to heart. "Then to pass this test, I must support him."

She nodded her head once sharply. "Publically and without hesitation." She slouched a little, looking guilty. "I feel like I’m cheating, telling you the answers…"

Odin could help but smile slightly. "A true mate to a trickster prince."

Loki hid a smirk when he felt a familiar build up of magic, the scent of the spell about to be released in the air. He was a mage, he could feel another mage’s spell. And from the feel of it, it was either Mischief or Indel. It was a static spell, relatively harmless. Like running through carpet with sock clad feet and then touching metal.

A familiar roar didn’t cause Loki’s head to turn from the maps. He started running in that direction instead, fatigue forgotten and knowing his boy had just done something he shouldn’t have because Mischief wouldn’t do it. He didn’t believe in a lot of rules for his children, enjoying their antics. There were two sets of rules. Those that they would discuss when their mischief was giving him a headache or making life difficult. Beyond conversation there really were no actual punishments for those rules. Like: *Never lie to someone better at lying than yourself.*

Then there were the second set of rules. They changed as the situation did. Those rules that he enforced had everything to do with their safety:
Never intentionally mispronounce a spell to experiment.

Never ride on the back of a crystal dragon (again Indel) without parental supervision.

Never piss off Bruce Banner on purpose.

Loki made it to the balcony overlooking the public gardens just as clothing ripped and a hulking green frame towered over the elfling who had just zapped him with a harmless but painful static electricity spell. The other Avengers were standing stiffly, not sure what to do that wouldn’t make the situation worse. A golden current of magic whipped around Jane with Odin at her side, her hand outstretched and prepared to act.

Fenris darted between legs, suddenly at Indel’s side and snarling up at the green being towering over both of them. His spiky fur was shimmering and shaking in apparent warning like a rattlesnake, teeth bared. Hulk bared his teeth in return at the wolf.

Indel’s eyes widened in a combination of fascination and fear, Hulk roaring a fraction of a second before Loki teleported in front of the elfling protectively. A large green fist aimed for Fenris shifted enough to miss Loki, Hulk scowling. He had enough of Bruce’s knowledge to know Loki couldn’t handle a direct physical attack like that, in some respects as breakable as a human.

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With a defensive snarl Mischief appeared and lunged, blade in hand and Loki grabbed him by the waist, picking him up off his feet. This behavior was more common for an AEsir adolescent protecting a sibling and Loki had been prepared for it. Using the boy’s momentum he swung and threw him in Thor’s direction who had leapt from the balcony to the ground below. Thor knew when Loki was running towards trouble it hadn’t been mischief of his own making and had instantly followed.

He reacted quickly enough to catch the boy. Mischief turned to continue the fight, snarling and squirming but unable to break free of Thor’s grip and not in control enough to realize he could just teleport. Interestingly enough, as wildly as he struggled not once did the blade still in his hand nick Thor.

The circumstances were eerily familiar to Midgard as Loki turned to stare the Hulk down. “ENOUGH.”

Loki didn’t say anything else, standing squarely in front of Indel who was hiding with wide eyes behind Loki’s legs, looking up at the massive green man. To his last breath he would defend Indel but he hoped it didn’t come down to that. The green behemoth had already proven his strength to the demi-god and he was reluctant to get into a fight that he would lose. Not that he was foolish enough to resort to a physical fight. His reception from Asgard may have been surprisingly good but he was still prepared for a quick escape with his family if needed. Those spells were primed and ready with a single gesture. A gesture he would use to whisk all of them out of harm’s way.

Hulk grunted before hitting his fist into the ground and glaring at Loki. “Boy bad.”

Loki nodded slowly. “And he will be punished accordingly, but not by you. He is my son and the responsibility is mine alone.”

Indel pouted up at Loki. “Daa-daa…”

Jane used a wave of her magic to nudge a surprised Steve to the side, she walking up to the thunderer who was struggling to hold onto Mischief. A simple touch of her palm to his cheek was all that was required to calm Mischief, his brow furrowing and his eyes blinking rapidly. She
shushed him and pulled him into a hug, glancing at Loki who gave her the slightest of nods that the
situation was under control. She nodded and walked away with Mischief at her side, still holding
him.

The green man’s mighty brow furrowed before his eyes narrowed at Loki. “Puny god…
good?”

Loki grinned by baring his teeth. “I would hardly think you or anyone else in the nine
realms would ever label myself as such.”

Tony slowly shook his head. “Janie has gotta fix those self-esteem issues.”

Loki glared at the inventor out of the corner of his eye. “I believe she is waiting for Lady
Pepper to address your ego issues.”

Tony slowly shook his head. “What’s to fix? I’m a god. Ego checked.”

The trickster retorted. “No, you’re a man with the ego of a god. I am a god.”

Hulk nodded decisively. “Protect boy. Protect woman. Puny god good.” He used the back
of his hand to lightly tap Loki’s chest and the trickster barely kept himself from staggering back over
Indel. “Greeny.”

Both of Loki’s eyebrows hiked towards his hairline. If that creature started calling him
‘greeny’ he might just lose his temper. Hulk turned and lumbered away a few feet.

Loki slowly released a breath before he turned to glare down at Indel who squeaked up at
him in fright. Indel’s head ducked to rub the heel of his father’s boot with the pad of his finger. “I’m
in trouble?”

His lower lip trembled when Loki’s angry voice washed over him. “Stand up.” Loki
wasn’t shouting, and it was worse because he wasn’t. Indel scrambled to obey, his eyesight blurring
as Loki picked him up and rested him on his hip.

*Dada explains everything*, even when Indel really wished he wouldn’t, unless he is really
mad. What he had mentally labelled ‘stern mad’. He wasn’t just in trouble. He knew it was big, BIG
trouble.

Loki turned his attention to Thor. “My son and I need to have a discussion about selective
hearing. Can I trust you will watch over Talia?”

Thor nodded slowly, grimly, as if he were tasked with guarding the nine realms. “Aye.”

“We will return shortly.” A flash of green and he was gone before anyone could even
think of objecting.

Talia tilted her head with a small frown, Fenris now at her side protectively. She stared at
Hulk before crossing the distance to him. The wolf tried to tug her back but she lightly tapped his
nose and he released her. Hulk grunted down at her and she just kept looking back up at him before
grinning. She leapt with all the sprite-full grace of an elf and within seconds was perched on his
shoulder.

Steve’s eyes widened in horrified surprise. Thor tipped his head back to laugh heartily.

By the time Bruce was back to his normal self, Talia was in Thor’s arms and a servant
appeared with a fresh shirt for the scientist. A flash and Loki had returned, Indel holding onto him tightly and his little face splotched with red from crying. Loki walked up to the scientist, his tone firm. “Indel.”

The little boy raised his head, tears back in his eyes but refusing to relinquish his hold on Loki even the tiniest bit. “I’m sorry I zapped you, Bruce, and I-I promise I won’t do it again.”

Bruce smiled reluctantly, hardly able to hold a grudge against a five year old. “It’s alright.”

Loki remained stiff. “And I can promise you it won’t happen again.” Bruce nodded in acceptance, his smile less strained. He didn’t know exactly why, but he knew it was a promise from the demi-god he could believe.

Indel pressed his face into Loki’s shoulder, arms wrapping tightly around his neck. Loki’s hand rubbed the boy’s back as he tilted his head slightly to the mortal and walked away. Bruce could barely hear the child’s whisper. “I’m sorry, dada.”

He watched the prince pause to run gentle fingers across a delicate ear. “I know you are, Indel, and you have been forgiven. Be mindful in the future that I do not tell you ‘no’ to spoil your fun. I do so to protect you.”

Bruce had to strain to hear Indel as his voice lowered to whisper in Loki’s ear. “Green Bruce was kinda scary. Does green Bruce scare you, dada?”

Loki replied with a dry tone. “Green Bruce had a similar discussion with me that I have just had with you after I had been foolish on Midgard. Needless to say, I have no intention of angering him again if I can help it.”

Indel’s eyes widened to saucers as he glanced at the scientist. Then back to Loki. Bruce grinned and choked on a laugh.

Loki silently watched Jane reading bedtime stories before he noticed they were one child shy. He saw Fenris out on the balcony and walked outside, finding Mischief curled up in a shadow. In a chronological sense Mischief was 300. He certainly had intelligence, along with the talent of a mage. But he was shy in a strange way. He seemed to make friends with children easily, but he didn’t like the spectacle that went with being in the royal family. Loki knew Mischief was dreading the titling ceremony like most would dread facing the gallows.

Loki leaned against the pillar next to Mischief’s shadowy nook. He looked out at the sun setting past the horizon before trying to reassure the boy. “Tomorrow is just another day.”

His young face was caught between a frown and a pout. “But he’ll announce titles…can’t I just avoid the gathering?” After a title ceremony was announced there was always a gathering. It would be hosted in the throne room, dignitaries mingling with courtiers and those to be honored.

Loki wrapped his left arm around him, rubbing his side as Mischief leaned into him. With the amount of spells Mischief knew, this boy was more than capable of doing exactly that. He was actually surprised Mischief hadn’t tried to hide on Helheim before now. He wouldn’t let him, but it was a contingency he was prepared for. “I need you to watch your brother and sister.” Mischief silently gave him a pained look. “You don’t have to talk to anyone. I want the three of you to stay close.”

Mischief frowned delicately, still unsure about what to call Odin. He’d been trying out
Loki nodded slowly even if he had thought the matter over carefully. If there wasn’t at least a little trust he never would have let Odin within 30 feet of his family. “I do. I don’t trust the rest of them.”

“Not even uncle?” And again Mischief wrinkled his nose, as he always did when he called Thor ‘uncle’.

The trickster smirked and tickled his side. “You know what I mean.” Mischief giggled and wiggled against him but didn’t try to escape. Squeezing him a little tighter. “You don’t have to call him that if you don’t want to.”

Mischief turned to lean the side of his face against Loki’s chest. “But Indel and Tali do.”

Loki wrapped both arms around him now. “But you are Mischief and Mischief does what is comfortable for him.” They both knew it was a title Thor was particularly proud of and preened every time he heard it. “If it’s easier to call him Thor then do so, he will adapt.”

A grin crept on Mischief’s face. He liked this. He wished all this wasn’t going on because he liked having Loki’s focus. But then his thoughts tripped forward to the inevitable and his grin slipped, whining softly, “Can I skip getting a title?”

Loki shook his head slightly as Mischief knew he would. Not giving Mischief a title would put too much focus on the boy as it had on Hela. “I need to keep you safe, Mischief. This is the one time I need you to do something you don’t want to.”

Mischief sighed softly, resigned. “I know…you’ll be there, right?”

“Of course. I’ll be just a few steps away.”

Tightening his fingers in Loki’s armor. “I won’t get sick, will I?” Because Loki at five had almost been physically ill after his titling ceremony. Mischief was sure he’d die of embarrassment if that happened.

Loki remembered that day well. He didn’t graduate beyond his fear of crowds until decades later. “I’ll have a soothing spell waiting for you.” Just like Frigga had had for him.

Mischief yawned and snuggled against him. “Okay.”

Kissing the top of his frizzy, black hair. “Get some sleep.” Mischief nodded as he yawned again and soundlessly padded towards the bed.

When Jane joined Loki out on the balcony he didn’t even pretend to act surprised. She had that familiar look in her eyes. “I have the feeling you wish to talk to me about something.” He glanced at her over his shoulder. “Why is that?” He asked almost playfully and her smile echoed his.

Fenris was leaning lightly against his leg and tilted his head towards Jane as he yawned widely. She scratched her fingers through his fur and with a last nudge he padded into the bedroom. Jane kept her focus on her prince. “Because you’re a clever man.”

His eyebrows quirked as he nodded. “Ah. Yes, that must be it.”

Loki moved his arm enough for her to snuggle against him as his eyes returned to looking out at the world he’d grown up in and apart from. It was late enough in the evening that the city was
illuminated in torchlight and the stars filled the skies. The kids were all piled together on Jane’s bed and neither adult had the interest in making them move.

As much as she had approached him, there was no denying he lightly clung to her. Jane spent a few minutes enjoying the wonder before her. Asgard was undeniably beautiful, but then she’d always thought so. She glanced up to see he was already watching her with the same amount of emotion he’d held looking out at the city. As if she were something beautiful and wondrous. She smiled and blushed, glancing down for a moment.

“Why do you do that?” He murmured his question and she didn’t even pretend not to understand what he meant.

She shrugged loosely. “I’ve never been seen as pretty.”

He blinked at her in surprise. “Humans must be blind, then. You’re beautiful.” She blushed again even as she glanced up and he stilled the pleased smile aching to spread. Because then she would have it confirmed that he enjoyed making her blush. Her eyes were filled with emotion, but they were also filled with thoughts. She was aching to talk but she didn’t want to spoil the moment. But since they couldn’t take this to the conclusion he was aching to bring this to he broke the tension first. He turned and hopped up on the rail of the balcony, letting his glamour fall as he did. “And what is our discussion of the evening, Miss Foster?”

They made it a point to talk every evening. Maybe for just a few minutes but more often than not for quite a bit longer. It was the foundation of their relationship and neither of them wanted to lose that. Plus they had both found that as much as they enjoyed their friends, most of them weren’t up to the intellectual challenge of where some of their talks deviated.

“Talking.”

He nodded his head slowly, playing along. “Mhmm…I believe from an oratory standpoint we are doing so right now.”

She half grinned while rolling her eyes at him. “Okay, smartass, how about communication with others besides myself.”

“No fun whatsoever.” He shook his head mournfully as he said this, but he knew he was only trying to stall the inevitable. Settling himself in to be just a little more serious. “I believe, just in the last couple of days, I have spoken with more people, other than yourself, than I have in centuries.”

She took his hand and walked up between his knees. “You have, and I’m proud of you.” He preened just a little under her gaze, feeling that pride. She made a conscious effort to praise his efforts, knowing without that encouragement he wouldn’t waste his time. But then she focused on her purpose of this little talk and he paid attention. “We both know that you have an easier time adapting to change than some other people we know.”

He raised a single eyebrow at her, well aware she intended to work as intermediary between himself and his family and silently thankful for that fact. “If you mean Thor and my father, then yes. I agree.”

“If I may make a suggestion?”

He nodded with a crooked smile. “Suggest.”

She pulled in a slow breath before proposing what she knew he was going to balk at. “Try
to tell the truth to your father.”

His gaze turned amused, his question honest. “Why?”

Jane wrapped her arms around him, head against his chest and smiling softly when his arms automatically wrapped around her. “Because you’ve both been lied to enough.”

He sighed softly but didn’t loosen his hold. “You know how my rules work. Why would you even ask this of me?”

She knew the rules, just as she knew they were subject to change at a moment’s notice. “If you can’t try to always tell the truth, at least try when it’s important.” Then she shrugged a little, her voice soft. “Because he can’t tell the difference.”

She felt his chuckle even through his armor as he asked, “And you can?”

“Yes. I can.”

His smile was much more genuine, even if she couldn’t see it. Yes. She could. It had taken a little time, but she was even better at spotting his lies than Indel was. She didn’t always call him on them but that just made him love her more. That she allowed him his games just as his mother had. “I will…consider it.”

Jane watched the torchlight flicker and the stars twinkle. “That’s all I can ask.”

Loki turned enough to watch the view for a little while. Long enough for the guards to change shifts. “After father announces for a title ceremony, there will be a gathering.”

She turned her head, resting her chin on his armor to look up at him. “So I should dress pretty?”

He lightly brushed her cheekbone with his thumb, his eyes twinkling wickedly. “Well, as lovely as I find you nude it is rather inappropriate.”

A wicked little glimmer lit her own eyes, proof positive he was a terrible influence on her. “I will if you will.” Jane didn’t even attempt to squash her grin when he blushed.

Loki growled playfully and pulled her up into his lap. “Wench.” It was a true testament of trust that she wasn’t even worried they would fall.

She curled against his shoulder, still amused. “Should I be surprised if your blue friend makes a spontaneous visit?”

He pantomimed as if he were considering it when in fact he had something else in mind. “As tempting as it may be, I have something else planned for the occasion.”

Jane shook her head. “Loki, stop tormenting your best friend.”

“Stark is not my best friend. He’s an annoyance I haven’t swatted yet.” The fact that she didn’t have to qualify his ‘best’ friend proved how much Loki liked Tony. But Fandral would easily agree that the hazard of being a friend of the God of Mischief were an inordinate amount of pranks.

The city surrounding the palace was large and expansive, yet even from their perch they heard an outraged cry. Jane looked up in time to catch the naughty little boy expression and sighed. “Loki, what did you do?”
He shrugged lightly. “Nothing permanent.”

Giving him a sad expression as she asked, “You’re not going to tell me?”

Ducking his head enough to nip on her bottom lip, grinning. “A pout does not become you.” She growled softly to Loki’s delight and tugged his hair enough to enjoy a proper kiss from him. Moving from her lips to her ear, whispering softly. “I paid Fandral back for all of his comments about my poor grace. He will be stumbling about as a new born colt for a day or so.”

Jane snorted a laugh while shaking her head. “Poor Fandral.”

“Attempt not to pity him too much. Tomorrow I will show you something that will interest you.”

She tilted her head a little, intrigued. “Just me?”

His eyebrow quirked, not about to divulge his secret. “Well it would hardly be a surprise if I told you.”

She pouted a little, then sighed in resignation. She knew he wasn’t going to give in. Instead of pestering she changed the subject. “Fine. What are you going to do to Tony?”

He chuckled softly, betraying how much he enjoyed his antagonizing relationship with the other man. “I will allow him his revenge with the Midgardian itching powder he believes I am unaware of. Then I will of course retaliate by giving him a falsetto tone for a day or so.”

She grinned in amusement. “Admit it, if I wasn’t your mate I’d have some serious competition.”

His eyebrow quirked in disagreement. “I do believe I would be competing with Pepper and I believe he tolerates her a little more than he tolerates myself.”

Running a finger down his nose, staring into his eyes full of mirth. “When you put your mind to it, you can convince anyone to like you.”

His lip twitched. It was quite obvious he enjoyed antagonizing some people as much as he enjoyed friendship with others. “Sif and Nicholas might disagree with you.”

NOWHERE

Thanos walked forward slowly through the entrance with reverence. He was savoring the moment as the few creatures that remained alive bowed lowly and fearfully. Malekith maintained his distance with a small frown. He wasn’t sure what he was sensing in the room but whatever it was, it was powerful. Let the Titan go first and if he died, Malekith would just focus on his own plans. The Aether may be lost to him but assembling this gauntlet would fit in perfectly for turning back the realms to a time long forgotten.

The titan felt almost giddy as he approached the pedestal, a shaft of magical light shining down on it from an unknown source. His giddiness slipped as he discovered the note and nothing else. He picked up the card slowly, teeth clenching. He read through it over and over again. His fist clenched, the strength in the mechanics of his suit crushing the parchment. “JÖTUNN RUNT!” His armor made him ten times stronger than an elf and he used it to shatter the pedestal with his fist.

Amused, echoing laughter filled the chamber and he turned as Hela flitted from shadow to
shadow. His glowing eyes widened in alarm. She couldn’t be here to see his humiliation. She purred her words, a whisper of shadowy nothingness. “You should have taken my offer…”

He tried desperately to think quickly, to keep her focus on him and no one else. “He is of no consequence!”

She laughed cruelly and he loved it as much as he feared it. His beautiful, cruel temptress. “And he has defeated you, proving you are worth even less than that.”

Thanos threw the note to the side, storming back towards his ship. “NO!!”

Hela taunted him but didn’t follow, her voice chasing after him through the tunnels. “You have failed…do you see now why I favor him?”

He spun around, glowing eyes wide and unable to pull in a breath, wheezing. “You said--…”

A dark tendril, cool and tingling, brushed against his jaw as she effortlessly circled around him. “I lied. The Jötunn is the God of trickery and deception. I am his to command. Farewell, Titan.”

Hela disappeared as soundlessly as she had appeared. Thanos roared, frothing at the mouth. He tapped a button on the gauntlet of his mechanical suit and shot into the air. The dirt and rock above his head was pulverized to atoms and he landed some distance away from the crater he’d created. “I will kill him. I will shatter him into so many pieces you will have no choice but to let him go from life.”

Her laughter, her words continued to echo through Thanos’ mind as he moved with purpose for his ship. He would make that runt regret ever crawling out of his icy dam’s womb before he would be satisfied. Malekith wasn’t stupid and was quick to follow, the ship’s hull closing a second later.

Thanos moved his vessel further and further away from the planet, yet still he felt the cut of her words, the humiliation at being defeated by a lesser being. Loki would have to die gruesomely and permanently, there was no other recourse. Sitting in his chair, able to command every aspect of his ship, he rapidly touched a few buttons and bared his teeth cruelly as a small silver ball was lobbed at the now distant planet.

Explosions of light filled the screen and laughter escaped his throat as the explosions were only a mild reaction to the implosions as the planet slowly folded in on itself. Then the three moons. He set a course as the singularity started pulling at the distant sun.

Those shadowy tendrils curled around him again. Instead of soothing him it inspired him. Hela whispered softly, her magic wrapping around her words in true persuasion. “Your only recourse would be to attempt to conquer Asgard…and no one has ever been capable.”

He glanced at the dark green eyes hidden within the shadow and nodded slowly, neither of them paying attention to Malekith listening from the corridor. The dark elf didn’t know why, but he knew she was using him for her own purposes. He also didn’t believe she wasn’t real, at least not of a true physical sense. But even if he told Thanos this the titan wouldn’t believe him, mad in the truest sense of the word. Silently he hoped she meant the titan’s eventual death and that worked well for him.

Thanos chuckled darkly, nodding again as he thought of defeating the undefeatable. “Then this is a challenge worthy of me. I will amass an army worthy of your glory.”
Hela moved about as if considering his proposal before turning to lean against a wall. “I’m listening.”

Describing his plan, at least the initial gambit to entice her. “They will break down the great walls of golden Asgard and slaughter the commoners while a second front will lay waste on the city.”

She purred again in satisfaction. “So many ripe for death.”

“They cannot all be destined for their Valhalla. My final tribute to you, my love.”

Hela laughed huskily, sending just enough seduction through the tendrils that he wouldn’t be able to resist now even if he wanted to. “And I will welcome you to my kingdom…milord Thanos…God of the dead.”

He smiled a smile cruel enough to shatter minds.

Author's Notes:

Those pesky puzzle pieces are starting to come together. I'll let you figure out if the picture is pretty or not ;)

Next:

Jane gets her surprise; Tony flips his lid; The gathering doesn't go quite as planned
Chapter 82

ASGARD

Loki led and Jane followed, her arm through his. She glanced curiously at Tony, wondering what he had to do with this surprise that Loki had been proposing. The children were all with Thor, getting fitted in formal pieces for the gathering being held in a few hours. She could tell Loki was less than thrilled with this bit of AEsir tradition and viewed this solely as a means to an end.

They had walked beyond the palace, taking a less traveled path towards those floating stones Tony had remembered seeing from the Bi-frost. “Uh, Locks? I’ve got better things to do than play chaperone.”

Loki didn’t even glance in the inventor’s direction. “Then turn back.”

Tony gave Loki a wary look. After a second of chewing on the inside of his lower lip he decided to tough it out, keeping pace. Loki hid a smirk. But for once his goal wasn’t to some type of mischievous end. The path ended at a circular platform, the stone at the center floating and moving around one another.

The stones were solid, each larger than a man and had to weigh 100 tons each by his estimation. The inventor was frowning, blinking rapidly before pointing and asking, “Anti-gravity tech?” Loki shook his head and Tony rolled his eyes when the mage wasn’t more forthcoming. “Look, Bambi, if you were just here to show your girl something pretty you could have left me out of it.”

Loki studied the man silently before smirking ever so slightly. Tony was frowning but made no move to walk away, watching as Loki gestured slightly to the left. The cloaking spell faded, revealing a set of stairs that went down into a lower level of the platform neither was aware even existed. Jane gasped in delight and followed Loki down those steps.

All three of them stopped at the bottom of the steps, able to see the room around them. Suits of armor were being suspended in midair, one if not several women around each piece. Tony and Jane both stared in amazement as engravings were pressed into the metal as if an invisible force was effortlessly chiseling the designs. Other suits were in the beginning stages, flat pieces of metal spontaneously rolling and fitting together.

Tony frowned and pointed up. “Are the floating rocks doing this?” Loki just looked amused.

A female AEsir paused to offer a bow to Loki, a fist to her heart. “My prince.” She was short for an Asgardian, with the typical blond hair and blue eyes. But it was apparent in the way that everyone deferred to her that she was in charge here.

Loki nodded to her in return. “Sorceress Valda. I was escorting Sorceress Jane and Enchanter Anthony so that they might see where Asgard’s true might lies.”

All the Asgardians at the various stations turned to offer Loki the same bow and Tony took inventory. “Soo...this is where the armor gets made.”

Valda turned and corrected him smoothly. “Actually, Enchanter Anthony, so much more is accomplished here. The more intricate pieces are made here, as well as armor that requires
enhancements and weapons that are magically endowed.”

“There are blacksmiths for the ordinary pieces.” Loki pointed upward. “The stone monoliths channel and focus the energies from Yggdrasil.”

Tony waved a dismissive hand. “Where magic comes from, got it. Uh, can we skip the fancy titles and just stick with Tony?”

“No.” Loki’s response was with a bit more growl to his tone than normal. Enough that it caught Jane’s attention.

Valda was shaking her head in agreement with Loki’s opinion. “I’m afraid not.”

Tony blinked several times in surprise before asking the obvious question, “Why?”

A touch of bitterness turned Valda’s lips as she responded honestly. “It is rare when we are afforded the respect we are due. We refuse to do so amongst one another.”

Stark wasn’t seeing any disagreement. With a huff he summed up his opinion to the trickster. “No offense, Locks, but your warrior culture sucks.”

“I am not inclined to disagree.”

Tony stepped around, looked at the various pieces of armor. “So are the big manly men too good to make their own suits? I’m noticing a lot of estrogen in the room.”

Valda’s lips pressed together in irritation but it was Loki that responded. “There are two main paths for one’s future. A woman with the gift is either trained to use it as a healer, apprenticed here to imbibe the metals, or taught spells for defense fortification. Those without the gift have the path of wife.”

“Sif.” Tony pointed her out only as an argument to the 2 path rule.

Loki inclined his head ever so slightly. “Her family made a rare exception. Even with her skill if she hadn’t been supported by my mother she would have been passed over and denied warrior status.”

Stuffing his fists in his pockets before shrugging. “What about dudes that are witches?”

Grimness pulled at his lips. “Men are trained to be warriors, with few exceptions.”

Tony grinned, his voice all tease. “That could be cool. A bunch of badass Harry Potters flying around here.”

Loki didn’t allow his mood to be lightened. “Yes. Cool. Except these men aren’t trained to use their magic to fight. They are given sword and shield and expected to use them as well as any who were never kissed by magic. Those men rarely survive their first battle.” Tony lost his grin.

Jane looked up at Loki curiously. “You did.”

He shrugged dismissively. “I cheated, and I’m eternally mocked for it.”

Irritation immediately flashed across her face, coming to his defense and retorting, “Using your strength isn’t cheating.”

“It is to them.”
Tony stepped in before the two of them could get started in their argument. “Soo…let me make sure I’m getting this right: you get mocked for doing magic and the chicks here don’t even get half the respect they deserve. The reason why there aren’t a lot of guy witches is because they get killed off by the status quo.”

“Thank you for summarizing so eloquently, Anthony.”

Stark pointed at Loki, but then made a circular motion with his finger. “But you, as in the larger all of you, are the ones who do all the work that makes Asgard the badass realm it is.”

“That would be correct.”

The inventor paused for just a moment before asking the obvious question. “Revolt?”

“Anthony, given that I am the son of the current monarch—…”

Tony made a scoffing noise. “Who has done jack shit to make sure you weren’t mocked.”

“…is it at all wise to propose such in my presence?”

A cocky grin spread across his face. “Probably not but at least I know where I stand with you.”

Loki tilted his head ever so slightly, face blank as he asked, “Do you?”

“Yep.”

The trickster’s eyes narrowed just a little but the human’s gaze never wavered. Tony had no doubts when it came to him. He found it rather interesting. “Hmm…anyway, the point was not to drag you both down here to start a revolution.”

“What was the point?”

Loki grinned widely and made a come hither gesture as he walked over to a small golden platform currently unattended. He waved a hand and images started to appear and hover in the air. But it wasn’t just pictures, it was calculations. Very familiar calculations. “These are the mechanics behind the Bi-frost.”

Tony narrowed his eyes thoughtfully before blinking in realization. “This is a computer.”

His whole body started leaning towards it.

Loki cut him off, his voice filled with contempt. “This is a highly evolved mechanical device that uses mathematics and Yggdrasil to carve a pathway through the stars.”

Tony completely ignored his attitude. “Translation, this is a computer run on magic.” His voice went up a little higher in excitement, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

The trickster rolled his eyes. “Basically.”

“Is this all it—…” Tony waved his own hand, just as he’d seen Loki do. A menu of sorts sprang to life. His eyes slowly widened and the looked that crossed his face made Jane blush. Stark was in lust, if not love. The inventor was suddenly a flutter of activity, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

The trickster rolled his eyes. “Basically.”

Jane looked at Loki questioningly. The trickster rolled his eyes, muttering under his breath.
“I knew I should have left him on Midgard.” Addressing her directly. “This you might find of interest.” He waved his hand and yanked the display away from Tony with that gesture. The rapturous expression vanished, protest on the tip of his tongue. Loki glared at the inventor. “My authority overrides your own.” Loki gave Jane a sly smile, pulling up different mathematical equations. Some of them were very common in the world of physics. Some she’d never even seen before and Jane stepped forward eagerly.

“Locks…buddy…pal…” Tony completed the gesture with his arm around Loki’s shoulders.

The mage glanced at him out of the corner of his eye but didn’t protest, lest the human have it confirmed people invading his personal space irritated him. “What do you want?”

“Access to hook this system up to JARVIS.”

Loki looked less than impressed. “Considering the number of times your JARVIS has been compromised by your own citizens…why would you believe I would trust you with such information?”

Tony refused to acknowledge that he was whining. He was, but that wasn’t the point. “Dude, c’mon. You can’t show me that kind of stuff and not let me play.”

The trickster used a midgardian phrase he’d picked up from Jane. “I will, if you will.”

“Explain.”

Speaking a little slower, his voice dripping with condescension. “I will give you access after you grant me the same to your JARVIS.”

“Uh…” Loki might as well have asked to dissect Tony’s first born. The look on the inventor’s face would have been the same.

Loki looked up towards the heavens and sighed. “I will not damage the construct. I will utilize magic to enhance the defenses.”

“I get to supervise.”

The trickster lifted a challenging eyebrow. “As do I.”

Tony unwrapped his arm around Loki’s shoulders and offered him a hand to shake. “Deal.”

Loki ignored the gesture, turning to his intended. “Jane—…” She waved a hand, deeply involved. He smirked and glanced at Valda. “A gathering will be held in 3 hours. If she doesn’t leave of her own accord, cut off her access in 2 hours.” Jane paused to glare at him over her shoulder and stick out her tongue before the siren’s song of the knowledge before her diverted her attention. Loki just smirked in amusement.

Valda performed that vow of greeting again, as a gesture that his orders would be followed. “My prince.”

Loki turned to navigate the stairs, Tony following him. “Now what’s the real reason you dragged me down here?”

The trickster paused to stare blankly at Tony for a moment. He knew the man was brilliant
so it occurred to him that some of his hints were more subtle than others. It did make him wonder if perhaps this was why his family didn’t understand him. It was something he would ponder later. For now he decided to give Tony a more obvious prod. “Our enemy’s strength is even greater than an AEisir’s. Considering your body’s fragility, is it not wise for you and your mortal friends to enhance your armor?”

Tony shook his head as he followed. “Man and I thought my communication skills sucked.”

Indel hid a yawn behind his hand, glancing at Talia who looked just as bored. Mischief stood behind the both of them, a bland expression on his face that Loki had perfected in court centuries ago. He kept the two of them close and shuttled them to Loki or Jane when the courtiers lingered for too long. The day after tomorrow Asgard would host the titling ceremony. This was the traditional gathering for those in court to gain a less formal introduction.

Less formal than court, but the occasion demanded decorative armor and flowing dresses. Sprinkled amongst the courtiers and nobles were those that had come to Asgard from Midgard. The Avengers pulled out their suits and Natasha was barely tolerating her dress. Sigyn had also been invited, of course, and she was not one to pass up on an opportunity to observe.

Jane had discovered a lovely dress of rich blues and ambers that she suspected Loki had made for her. A strained smile of politeness found Jane’s face when Sif approached her. The warrioress was in polished armor but unarmed. Everyone here was. But Jane knew enough from what Loki had told her that she would bet there was a weapon somewhere on Sif’s person.

Sif nodded to her in greeting. “Lady Jane.”

Nodding in return, voice stiff. “Lady Sif.”

Sif seemed to be debating with herself for a moment before nodding to herself sharply. “I had hoped that we might be able to talk.”

Pepper stepped up to Jane’s right and slip her arm through the physicist’s. She was in a lovely cream gown and seemed to fit in well with the other AEisir. “Then by all means, Lady Sif. Talk. Perhaps an apology might also be in order.”

Darcy took position at Jane’s left, looking quite beautiful in red and girls on ample display. “So get started, chicka.”

Sif looked absolutely stunned. “An--…”

A blond courtier joined their group, her typical blond hair and blue eyes making her rather ordinary compared to all the other beauties of Asgard. But her supple curves made up the difference. “I am Courtier Tia, Lady Jane.”

“A pleasure, of course.” Jane was suddenly feeling sick to her stomach. Sif she disliked for Loki’s sake, not to mention her children. But Sif wasn’t always intentionally insulting. This one she knew just from looking at went out of her way to hurt people.

Darcy gave her a head to toe glance. “Wow, Cruella De Vil. All that’s missing is the puppy fur coat.”

Tia gave Darcy a blank stare of confusion before turning her attention back to Jane. She pretended to be oblivious to the tension. “Those of court were certainly--…surprised to hear the news
of the…receptacle of the prince’s affections.”

Sif curled her lip slightly in disgust at the courtier. As artfully as the words were said it was not an appropriate topic. Ever. Jane’s tone was almost bland. “An interesting choice of words.”

Darcy glanced at Jane. “Yeah. Interesting. She basically just said you gargle his--…” Jane nudged her friend who shrugged. “Just saying.”

Tia glanced amongst the ladies as if she were distressed. “Well, surely the prince informed you--…oh dear.”

Jane realized Loki must be rubbing off on her because she was amused more than offended. “I have been informed and I am certain we will be well rewarded for our chastity when the king sees fit to allow our marriage.”

Pepper felt her lip twitch, murmuring soft enough that only Jane heard. “That silver tongue must be rubbing off on you.” Jane’s lips quirked subtly in amusement. Giving Tia a pained expression. “Well, it was lovely to meet you, Lady Tia.”

Tia, however, was not one to take a hint when she had more than one line of attack ready to go. “Indeed. And then you will inherit such…oddities for children.”

Jane remembered girls like this from high school. Snotty little bitches that delighted in making others feel like shit beneath their shoes to make themselves feel better. That particular shot threw her and the amusement evaporated. “What??”

Pepper’s jaw dropped while Darcy shook her head. “Bitch, oh no you didn’t.”

Sif stiffened, eyebrow arching and just daring her with her eyes to continue. It wasn’t just an insult against Loki’s family. It was an insult against the royal family. “Whatever could you be inferring, Courtier Tia?”

Tia gestured vaguely in the direction of the trio, or more specifically to Mischief. “Well there must be something wrong with the eldest to have the youngest named as the prince’s heir.”

There was a distinct growl in Jane’s tone, who spoke before a stunned Sif could even think to respond. “You overstep yourself, Courtier Tia.”

Continuing her thought but the tiny little smile curling her lip made it obvious this was all intentional. Perhaps hoping Jane would try to physically attack her to show the court how uncouth mortals were. Perhaps to just enjoy a few tears as she put the mortal before her in her place. Perhaps just because she was a bitch. “But that is the tragedy that comes from having such a father, I suppose.”

Jane’s eyes flashed amber and Tia went flying back with a scream, hitting and sticking to a pillar several feet above everyone’s head. Temper in her eyes and magic circling around her, Jane calmly approached while Loki leaned back against a far wall and clapped in delight. Those in court looked curious, but hardly surprised. Tia had a gift for angering people.

Thor approached his brother quickly. “Loki, you must stop her before matters spiral out of control.”

Tony, standing next to Loki, snagged a wine glass. “Stop spoiling the moment, thunder. Every guy appreciates a good cat fight.”
Loki tilted his head slightly. “Besides, I hardly think Tia is a match for my lady.”

The thunderer, never one for caution, looked grim. “And if she challenges Jane?”

“Then I will meet her in the ring.” The trickster’s reply was succinct and honest.

Jane’s steps were even, stopping half a dozen feet away. “Please, repeat what you said about my children.” Mischief, Indel, and Talia all shared a look.

Indel was the one who smirked first. “Get her, mama.”

A man who looked only a few years younger than Odin rapidly approached. His clothing was fine enough and his armor polished enough that she assumed this was someone from the Advisory Council. “Wha-w-w-what is the meaning of this?? Release my daughter at once!”

She didn’t veer her gaze from Tia. “You need to teach your daughter some manners. I will not put up with anyone insulting my children.” Tia’s father, Brynjar, looked at his daughter with his face full of disappointed rebuke.

Tia gasped and squirmed against the magic keeping her in the air. “You are not even AEsir!”

Jane lifted an inquiring eyebrow. “That matters?”

Brynjar put a hand lightly on Jane’s arm and gasped as his grip was wrenched off of her. The hand that had wrapped around his wrist released him only to shove him. He was thrown across the distance, bouncing off the pillar and crumbling to the floor in time to absorb the impact of Tia’s fall. Loki snarled softly against Jane’s back at the man who dared to put a hand on her.

Her hair a mess, her dress ripped, Tia pushed herself up enough to shriek at Jane. “I challenge you to an honor battle!”

Activity in the room quieted. No one looked surprised and the light elves were watching intently. “I accept.” Jane snapped her response without hesitation. She had no idea what an honor battle was but she was confident enough in her abilities against this petty little bitch.

Tia sneered the word, speaking as if her victory were obvious. “Magic cannot be utilized in the honor ring, mortal. You will die most painfully.”

Jane kept her tone even, unafraid. “I was taught to fight by a prince of Asgard. Do you think you scare me?”

Loki didn’t take his eyes off of Tia. He knew how this was going to play. Whether it was Jane or someone else took her place in the battle, Tia would announce her father as her alternate. He knew Tia was an ambitious little bitch and her father was well past his prime. The most likely conclusion would be that he would die and she would use sympathy to try to win herself a seat with the Advisory Council. “Besides. I am her sword and will be taking her place.”

“Loki!” Loki didn’t look at Jane. She should know by now he would never let her walk into a battlefield alone.

Tia tilted her head up slightly, defiant. “M-my father will be taking my place.”

Brynjar paled but didn’t reply. It was clear to Loki that this man did in fact love his daughter. Pity. It was also clear to him the sentiment wasn’t returned. Loki nodded slowly.
“Agreed.” Turning to bow to his father who had watched all of this from his throne without commenting. “Father. Set the terms, please.” Fenris had been sitting silently next to the throne, looking quite vicious and yet as if he belonged guarding the throne.

Odin’s jaw tightened, wanting to object to Loki doing this as much as he could see Thor’s similar instinct. But refusing to declare the honor battle would be disastrous, both for Loki’s standing in Asgard, as well as their relationship. “The honor battle has been declared and accepted in front of witnesses. The participants have been chosen. In two hours’ time the ring will be equipped and the spells I will personally see to. No magic within. Skill and skill alone. Declare your weapons.”

Brynjar stood up shakily. Tia declared the challenge so he would announce his two weapons first. “Axe and shield.”

Odin nodded grimly, well aware that 3,000 years ago Brynjar had been brutal on the battle field with an axe. “So be it.”

Loki didn’t look back, having already formulated what would work for his strengths and weaknesses since his scepter would be all but useless. “Throwing knives and a bucket of water.”

There were gasps and surprised expressions but he was allowed any two objects not magical. Odin nodded slowly, his expression giving away nothing of his thoughts. “Granted. The armory will be open to both participants at their leisure. This gathering is concluded.”

Jane had all but dragged Loki to her chambers by his wrist. Granted, he had allowed it since she wasn’t strong enough to accomplish it without his cooperation. The children had followed and as soon as she closed the door she walked with him into the bathing chamber before closing and soundproofing the room. She whipped around, almost shrieking her question, “What are you doing??”

He crossed his arms, amusement on his face. “Defending your honor, as is my right.”

Jane slapped a palm to her forehead, chest heaving before shaking her head once and exclaiming. “Loki! Oh my god, you’re supposed to be the reasonable one. I don’t want you dying for me!”

He raised a single eyebrow. “Such confidence in my skills. Besides, I believe human females force their males to love, honor, and cherish…being reasonable is not part of that agreement.”

She exhaled with a whoosh and sent him a dirty look. “You know what I mean.”

Loki’s lips quirked a little now that her initial temper had been worked through. “I do. But you will simply have to accept that a shield maiden does not stand on the battlefield in place of her warrior.”

“This was between me and that Tia woman. You dragged that poor man into this.”

He rolled his eyes at her, slightly annoyed that he was being held responsible for Tia’s dirty work. “You assume too much, Jane.”

“I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t--…” Seeing that she was working herself up into a second round of temper, he cupped her face between his palms and kissed her. Her fingers instantly sank into his hair as she returned the gesture.
Only when their kiss had changed from fierce and passionate to something more slow and sensual did he pull back. “This has little to do with you.” He gasped softly as she nipped along his jaw. “She targeted you, knowing that if an escalation occurred she would have the probable cause to challenge you.” That statement stopped her from continuing to tease him, listening. “You would not hesitate to respond, just as she knew that I would stand in your place. This is about killing her father, nothing more.”

Jane blinked in surprise as that strange leap of logic made an appearance. “Why? How do you—... I’m going to learn to stop even asking that.”

He smirked before teasing her in turn, his teeth nibbling carefully on her earlobe before whispering. “Tia is a petty little bitch who covets her father’s position on the advisory council.”

Jane tilted her head back with a gasp of her own, asking, “And this doesn’t offend you?”

His nip along the shell of her ear was just a little harder than he intended and he instantly soothed the sting with his tongue. Her soft moan pleased him immensely. “I’m highly offended for her actions against you, even if I can appreciate her manipulative capabilities.”

“So what happens now?”

Loki’s mind drifted to things they couldn’t do before he sighed softly and pulled back after kissing her temple. “As my father stated we will have an honor battle and typically as two enter the arena only one will exit.”

Jane started nibbling on her bottom lip before asking cautiously, “Do you have to kill him?”

He tilted his head a little in consideration. “That will depend on him. It is not a necessity in order to win, but some men have more pride than sense.”

She lifted her own eyebrow as she asked, “Some men?”

He smirked immediately and puffed out his chest. “You knew I was arrogant and proud before you consented to my suit.”

“And charming, and handsome, and sweet—...”

He objected to that adjective most vehemently. “I am not sweet!” Her fingers were already tangled in his hair. With a grin she used her grip to tug his head down, kissing him to quiet him. As he always did he melted against her, unknowingly proving her point that at least with her he was undeniably sweet.

Odin didn’t even wait for the safety of the study, addressing Anya from a semi-secluded balcony. “Anya. Has that prior matter been confirmed?”

Anya already knew what matter they were discussing. The question of a rumor that Tia had abused her position as courtier unforgivably. She didn’t hesitate to respond with the rather disappointing truth. “Merely a vicious rumor, sire. Nothing more.”

“Pity.” He murmured this almost quiet enough that she didn’t hear him. She sent him a questioning look but didn’t ask for clarification. He decided to elaborate anyway. “It would have been a convenient reason to solve a noxious problem.”
“I find her behavior today more worrying than any rumor.” Seeing his brow furrow ever so slightly she continued. “She is willing to use the princes to further her own ambition.”

He blinked quickly before commanding her softly. “Explain.”

Anya pulled herself up a little. It didn’t occur to her at the time. Only in hindsight. “Challenging Lady Jane. This result was a foregone conclusion. There has been no formal announcement yet but everyone from the courtiers to the servants know Prince Loki will choose her for his bride.”

“You think her intent had been emotional blackmail against Loki that went awry?”

Tapping feet alerted both of them to someone’s approach. The fact that the taps occurred seconds before Sigyn came into view indicated she had either heard everything, or had been walking soundlessly as light elves were prone to do and the audible approach was merely a courtesy. “Lord Odin.”

Odin turned and nodded his head to her slightly. “Lady Sigyn.”

She didn’t even pretend not to have overheard them with her first question, “You truly have no respect for the vicious capabilities of a woman, do you?”

“Our conversation was not meant for others.”

She looked amused, not chastised. “If the matter was private it would behove you to conduct it behind closed doors. You have chosen a public arena, therefore your conversation is also public.” Odin’s lack of expression hid his reaction but his gaze remained silently on her so she continued. “Her intent is obvious. Lady Jane was challenged, Courtier Tia knowing full well one of the princes would stand for her. Which provided the perfect opportunity for her to volunteer her father.”

“He is a member of your Advisory Council, my lord.” Anya knew that Odin didn’t necessarily need the reminder but she said it anyway to give strength to Sigyn’s point.

“And even from a glance I know her to be ambitious.” Sigyn knew because she herself was ambitious. But unlike Tia, there were acts she wouldn’t commit in the name of that ambition. “Her father is a well-seasoned man who should fall easily under either of your sons’ skills. Prince Loki is less likely to let him live, which makes him the ideal prince to target. What I find dangerous is her lack of respect.”

“For her father?”

Sigyn corrected him smoothly. “For your family. Only someone without familial loyalty will sacrifice a family member for politics. And only someone dangerously foolish will involve one of your sons. There is always a possibility that her father would prevail. That she would be willing to sacrifice a prince of the realm is someone I would not turn my back to.”

Odin absorbed this knew information and agreed with it completely. He was also annoyed with himself that he didn’t spot this possible problem sooner. “There is little that can be done now. Why do you believe her father’s death would be to her advantage?”

The light elf’s lips twitched in amusement. Not amusement in the outcome. But that Tia was foolish enough to believe that Thor would let her live should his brother fall. “With her father dead, they will look for a replacement and she has conveniently set herself in prime position to assume that role.”
Odin’s lips pursed ever so slightly before asking, “You would suggest I encourage my son to spare his opponent’s life?”

The Vanir queen was quick to shake her head. “Not at all. Prince Loki reminds me of one of my relatives on my mother’s side. Encouragement such as that would only encourage him to do the exact opposite.”

Amusement ran across his face. “A contrary relation?” His son, after all, was quite contrary.

Sigyn tilted her head ever so slightly as she considered the word. “She is not truly contrary but G’dath is quite determined to walk her own path. Telling her of what she must do doesn’t gain a favorable response from her.”

“You are related to Lady G’dath?” Even to his own ears, Odin sounded a little hoarse. The smile that crossed Sigyn’s face was similar enough to the healer’s that he was amazed he’d missed it.

Instead of responding verbally to Odin’s question, she smiled that small elf smile. “I will attend this honor battle to no doubt watch Prince Loki’s victory. Lord Odin.”

“Lady Sigyn.” He watched Sigyn depart before glancing at Anya who hadn’t moved. “Regardless of the outcome, today is the last day Tia will be a courtier. Ensure that her room is packed for her expulsion from the palace.”

Anya wasn’t quite able to hide the pleasure on her face before she bowed low. “Sire.”

“Loki, you don’t—…”

Loki glared over his shoulder at Thor, Hogun checking over his armor to make sure it was fitted and buckled properly since this was the heavy armor from the armory. Fandral was seeing to his throwing knives, making sure they weren’t dull and Volstagg had already delivered the bucket of water within the arena. “Do not dishonor me, brother. You choose to stand at my side. That doesn’t mean you fight my battles for me.”

Thor was still struggling to find that balance between standing at his side and stopping short of overprotectiveness. But it was a struggle that Loki appreciated. “I am concerned for you.”

Winking at the thunderer. “Just wait. The fun hasn’t even started yet.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Geez, Thunder. You sure know how to bolster a guy’s confidence.”

Sif huffed at Thor. She’d assessed Brynjar and he was hardly in his prime. “Thor. Loki may have chosen to settle accounts outside of the arena before now but the outcome of this fight is hardly worrisome for him.” Loki smirked at her. Maybe he would be less antagonizing to her today.

Tony had on his thinking face as he watched the last of the pieces get locked into place. “So Bambi, why is it that Pointe Break doesn’t need a different set of armor when you do?”

Loki was wearing heavier armor because even a glancing blow from a battle axe could do serious damage without it. “My strength is my speed. Most AEsir armor slows me down so my standard armor is designed to be light. The lightness compromises the overall integrity.”

The inventor shrugged. “Huh. Makes sense. Maybe you could get one of the magicky chicks to make you something that does both?”
The mage lifted an eyebrow at the human. “Armor takes time to create.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “I meant later, smartass.”

A deeply concerned look crossed Loki’s face, speaking intently to the inventor. “We have spoken concerning you insulting yourself, Anthony.”

“Ha ha.”

“You assume I have a later.” Loki looked down at his gauntlet, adjusting it as he said this.

Thor immediately leapt in with a word, full of reproach. “Loki.”

Tony nodded firmly, jaw set stubbornly. “Damn right I do. Besides, you better or your daughter is kicking your ass.” Loki just sent the inventor a cold look until he took the silent hint and strolled over to the spectator side next to Pepper.

Pepper was shaking her head, a horrified expression on her face. “This is so barbaric.”

Sigyn, who was not too far away, glanced in her direction. “Perhaps to some cultures.”

“You approve of this?” Pepper craned her head around, both eyebrows raised as she asked.

The light elf shrugged ever so slightly. “This is not my realm to approve or disapprove of. Each realm has its own unique approaches to curb dissention in the ranks. This is theirs. That there may be fatal consequences curbs the frequency of these types of challenges.” Pepper still looked absolutely horrified so Sigyn offered something more. “This is a culture that celebrates its warriors. A culture, intentional or not, that hones temper and aggression to the killing edge. A people of such extremes only respond to extreme consequences.”

Brynjar and Loki stood on opposite sides of the arena, Odin sitting with Jane next to him in a private box that rose above the arena and looking anxious. Darcy and Erik had been convinced to help keep the kids out of this, Loki making sure it was a promise his children had no choice in obeying.

Loki nodded and let Brynjar enter first, a spell at the boundary wrapping around him to ensure there was nothing magical on his person. He moved forward easily, the spells not stopping him. Loki pulled in a slow breath. The moment of truth. Physically he was weak but as a Jötunn he was stronger…he was just noticeably blue. This was also a personal choice. If he survived, he would soon find out if Asgard could accept a Jötunn as a prince of Asgard. At the moment he appeared as he always did, a simple glamour hiding the Jötunn form he’d chosen. But no magic, not even the AEsir glamour he wore over his Jötunn skin would slip past his father’s spell.

He took slow steps forward, Odin’s golden magic churning around him to chip away at the glamour until he let it go. Gasps slowly filled the arena, seeing him as he truly was. The heavy armor couldn’t hide everything. The area around his red eye a darker blue from the bruise that was slow to fade. His wasted frame was the most dramatic difference, other than pigment. Odin’s eye widened in surprise even as Jane’s proud smile wobbled. Tony tilted his head in confusion.

Logan grunted, standing on the left side of Sigyn. “Huh. And I thought I’d met every blue pain in the ass in the universe.”

Tony frowned suddenly. “Damn, Locks, don’t you ever eat?”
Sif’s eyes ran over the drawn features and swallowed, glancing at Thor who looked grim. “Alright. Now I worry.” Thor didn’t feel any better over the victory, all of his focus on Loki.

Brynjar was absolutely beside himself. “Sire, I object to this…this…”

Odin’s eye glinted dangerously. “I remind you that you seem to be referring to my son. What words were you about to utter?”

Brynjar seemed to visibly reconsider his words before trying again. Many would assume he had a problem with Loki as a Jötunn. In actuality he had a great deal of respect for King Odin and his family. He hadn’t been aware of Loki’s physical condition. But he couldn’t simply say that without shaming the king’s son. “His origins were not known to me prior to our agreement to an honor battle.”

Odin felt slightly amused. “You never asked, so no falsehood was offered.”

“It was implied…”

“When?” Eyes turned to Loki who was watching Brynjar intently. He’d detected the lie. He suspected that Brynjar had more objection to his physical condition than his species. That little fact may be what would convince him to spare the older man’s life. “I am Loki of Asgard. That is a statement of fact. I am Odinson.” Odin sat up a little straighter that Loki could so easily say that now. “King Odin is my father. Queen Frigga was my mother. My brother is the crowned prince Thor and your future king. If you say I am not entitled to belong to the family that accepted me, then you say the same for all other children adopted from other families and distant realms. Is that what you are implying?”

The audience that had been silently watching with interest, Volstagg included, now issued a series of growls and grumbles. AEsir may be the dominant occupant of Asgard but it was occupied by other races, either adopted or married into the society. The objection was withdrawn.

As Loki watched Brynjar move he swiftly came to the conclusion the axe had been a favorite weapon of his in his prime. Unfortunately he was centuries beyond that and it would be nothing but a hindrance. He could defeat him in three moves. But even as he thought this, he dismissed it.

This was an AEsir honor battle. It wasn’t just about winning. He imagined if that were Talia. He would never let her grow up into such a spoiled, selfish, nasty little bitch but that was beside the point. If positions were reversed and he was someone like Thor, he would want to at least have the opportunity to fight as well as he could, even if the battle was lost.

Odin nodded and let his voice boom over those present. “The honor battle has been declared. The weapons and armor has been selected. The battle will conclude when a victor has been declared, either by word, blood, or death.” Thor’s jaw set grimly. He knew his brother. Loki had to win because the alternative was too horrifying to contemplate. Loki would never yield by word. Brynjar would either have to be satisfied with drawing blood first, or there would be no victory until his brother was dead. “Begin.”

Loki kept the throwing knife held loosely in his hand, watching as Brynjar gathered himself. He seemed to be silently debating if he even needed the shield. Decision made, shield still on his forearm, he gripped the axe with both hands.

A brilliant warrior he may have been, he broadcast his intent and it was too easy for Loki to back up a single step to avoid the swing of the axe. Brynjar overestimated the force of his swing...
and was pulled to the left, off balance. Loki felt everyone lean forward, expecting him to take advantage. He didn’t. He waited.

With a grunt, handle now only in one hand, three swings came in rapid succession with the Avengers all holding their breath. Logan had his eyes narrowed slightly, studying and nodding a little to himself. The swing from left to right and back again was almost fast enough to be one move, so Loki just bent backwards to avoid it. With an arc the axe came down and Loki threw himself to the right.

It took Brynjar a few seconds to yank the axe out of the ground, which was good because Loki discovered why he hated heavy armor. It not only slowed him down, it made it really hard for him to get back up once he was down.

Loki swore softly before a layer of ice coated over his skin and the armor shattered. Growling, he rolled and threw himself back a dozen feet, Brynjar just staring at him. The bruises. But it was more than just that. He could see his scars. They all could.

Thor’s jaw tightened, swallowing once but refusing to make a sound. Sif, having been present for every one of the brother’s excursions, drew the conclusion that Thor and the Warriors 3 just had. They had all suffered injuries over the centuries, but nothing to that extent. They may all be young in comparison to the other noble warriors but they all knew the signs of torture when it was on artful display. The Avengers all looked grim, seeing for themselves what they had been told.

“My King—…”

Bruce frowned but headed off Brynjar’s objection. “Biology isn’t magic. His temperature plummeted, the sweat on his body freezing instantly, which in turn shattered the armor.”

Odin nodded, wishing he could just call this a draw but this was the game Loki wished to play and he would abide it. For now. “Agreed. The conditions stand. The battle continues.”

Brynjar was hesitant now, but after a moment he returned to offensive moves. The swings were shorter and more precise, adapting to Loki’s style. Loki smirked suddenly and winked at Sigyn, about to repeat a move she taught him. The Vanahem Queen had been silently observing but now she watched with interest. With a smirk Loki ran towards Brynjar. The man flinched in anticipation of the impact, staring and eyes following as Loki leapt forward and over him.

Loki flipped in the air, landing on his feet. Jane’s lip twitched, knowing that move had been all for show. But it was more than that. It was his reassurance to her that he would be fine. She relaxed suddenly.

Over the next few minutes Loki ducked and wove around the axe as if it were a dance partner. But when Brynjar’s strength started to flag Loki stopped toying with him. He’d led and Brynjar had followed. He backed up a step and tipped over the bucket of water. Ducking under a swing aimed for his head, his fingers touched the rapidly moving puddle of water. Everyone watched as the water froze, the frost and ice spreading under both their feet and flowing to the other side of the arena.

With a yell Brynjar lost his footing and fell over, the shield on his arm shattering. No one cried foul. No one could. The bucket of water had been declared as one of his weapon choices. The unconventional usage was fair. With one foot Loki pressed down on the handle, making it impossible for Brynjar to lift the axe or free himself. In one hand he held his knife, reversed and pointed downward to finish the kill. But Loki didn’t deliver the final blow.
Someone like Tia would have finished off her opponent with cruel delight.

Someone like Brynjar would have at least delivered one blow to draw blood.

But he was Loki and he followed his own rules. His goal wasn’t to kill. Jane had taken care of humiliation. He was aiming for defeat because he didn’t have a problem with his opponent. His problem was with this man’s daughter. Speaking softly as a hush fell over the crowd. “Do you yield?”

Brynjar nodded after a long pause. “I yield.”

Loki stepped back before turning smartly to face his father. Odin nodded and stood. “The honor battle is concluded. Loki Odinson is the clear victor.”

Tony ignored the stunned silence, whistling through two fingers and grinning. Loki glided forward on the ice under his feet, bowing his head respectfully. “To the victor go the spoils.”

Odin nodded in return, pride in his eyes. “And what price of victory would you care to extract, my son?”

Loki glanced at Tia and smirked before reaffirming his attention on his father. There was much he could ask for, from humiliation to servitude to expulsion from Asgard. The only request that couldn’t be asked for was death. It was the reason honor battles were not held every day. The price of defeat could be great. “I wish for a true, honest apology from Courtier Tia to Lady Jane. Now and in front of witnesses…upon pain of exile if she should ever insult my family again.”

Odin would have preferred to just banish her and be done with it but Loki’s request was more than reasonable. “The terms are acceptable and just. Courtier Tia, you will carry out the sentencing immediately, or face immediate exile from Asgard. For all time.”

Tia couldn’t have been stiffer if someone had shoved a rod up her ass. She hid her anger and disappointment, coming up to the private box where Jane was still sitting next to Odin. Jane rose stiffly, Odin watching Tia silently.

The courtier performed her bow formally and correctly, and Jane could almost hear her grinding her teeth. “I apologize most profusely for overstepping myself with my conduct. I solemnly vow that it will not occur again.”

Jane felt something strange and feral sweep through her, her eyes almost glowing amber. “Good. Because next time there won’t be an honor battle.” Tia paled, reading the intent very clearly. And what Jane Foster may or may not be capable of, her mate was.

Tia bowed again and took a step back. “Lady Jane.”

Odin glanced at Loki who was watching Jane. Only when she gave him a nod did he seem satisfied. Odin held up a halting hand before Tia moved further. “You will present yourself in court at half past the hour, Lady Tia.” A sense of foreboding swept over Tia.

But she curtsied with a murmured ‘sire’.

Loki stepped out of the ring, his glamour instantly sweeping away all but the scars, which he never bothered to hide. He walked towards Jane. He tried to walk towards Jane before getting swept up into a tight bear hug. Loki squirmed for a moment before snapping at his brother. “Thor, I refuse to be smothered by you before I have had the opportunity to kiss my intended.” Thor chuckled but surprisingly took the hint and let Loki go with a last ruffle to his hair.
Tia stepped in front of him and he was tempted to slap her to the side. But he didn’t, curious what she had to say. “You could have stopped that battle moments after it started.”

Loki shrugged but decided the truth was too tempting not to utter it. “I could have.”

“What did you not?”

Feeling Brynjar a few paces away but not turning to look at him. “His daughter was watching. If I was ever that outmatched I would hope my opponent would offer me the opportunity to at least put up a good fight for her honor.”

“I…” She frowned, her expression making it obvious she wasn’t used to being at a loss for words. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s a battle of honor. Even I understand.” Now. He understood now. He wouldn’t have just a few years ago. But talking with Jane and fatherhood had clarified a lot of the confusion he’d developed over the years. It still wasn’t a philosophy he lived and died by, but he at least understood now. Glancing at Brynjar before reaffirming his attention on her. “Let me ask you this...out of all the men in your family, why did you choose your father to stand in your place?” Realization lit Brynjar’s eyes but Loki never veered his gaze as he sneered at her. “People like you will never understand.”

Loki started walking again, his shoulder hitting hers and making her stagger out of his way. He refused to veer his course again. He was exhausted so after a little bit of show he would give in to Jane’s fussing and let her tuck him in for the night. Hel, he might even just give into temptation and sleep in the same bed with her and the little ones.

…because Asgard’s response was going to be brutal in the morning.

Author's Notes:

Nice and long for you all, too make up for the delay. For someone who asked for a mini-Tony meltdown over tech...you're welcome :)  

Next:

Asgard's response: everything Loki expected and nothing he’d allowed himself to hope for
Chapter 83

ASGARD

Tia studied herself in the mirror, making sure she was presentable. There hadn’t been enough time for her to change into something a bit more solemn so she could play the part of contrition. Mentally she sighed, wondering how long she would be forced to grovel for this catastrophe. In the reflection she saw Brynjar come up behind her. “Father.”

Normally Brynjar was a gentle man, his face full of worry. The expression on his face was unfamiliar to her and the hissed words surprised her. “Daughter have you given leave of your senses?”

She turned and gave him a cold look. “You told me once to never surrender my dreams.”

Surprise flittered across his face. “I was speaking of a husband. Of a future—…”

Tia tore the mask of the dutiful daughter away, glaring at him with disdain. “You are just like Odin and the other old fools of the realm if you think my dreams are so limited.”

Brynjar was nothing but horrified, his voice rising as he asked, “You would risk a prince’s life over something so trivial??”

She felt no remorse as she stated brutally. “Less than a year ago his life meant nothing. Therefore, I risked nothing.”

Both of them ignored the guards at the double door entrance to the throne room. He stumbled back from her as he paled, looking horrified. “You speak treason, daughter.”

Tia crossed her arms and sniffed dismissively. “Not at all. I speak fact.”

Brynjar looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. He may have left the warrior’s path some time ago but the instincts never completely faded. Those instincts were warning him now. “Prince Loki of a decade ago would never have let me live. Is that why you are disappointed?”

She huffed and adjusted the necklace around her neck. “I am disappointed that now I will have to smooth over ruffled feathers.”

“As am I. I am disappointed I have raised such a child.” But he felt certain Tia’s late mother would be proud of her daughter. Perhaps he was disappointed in himself more than anything. He ignored the sneer that crossed Tia’s face before she hid it. “I wish you luck, daughter.” She blinked at him in surprise. “You are about to enter the All-father’s domain. You are going to need it.” He turned and left without another word, his shoulders slumped.

Tia frowned but wasn’t able to respond as Gungnir thudded and the double doors to the throne room opened. With a scowl at Brynjar’s retreating form she swept forward with grace, her pace slowed a little to see that except for the two interior guards the room was almost empty. Almost.

To her right all of the courtiers had been summoned, all of them lined up so that they silently stood next to one another. They all stared at her, their gazes full of reproach and little else. There was no one to her left. At the last step before the throne stood Thor, staring down at her coldly. On the throne Odin sat stiffly, Gungnir in hand and blue eye narrowed at her.
Tia swallowed her fear and performed a low curtsey. “You summoned me, All-father.”

Odin gestured slightly for her to rise, waiting until she did so before speaking. “There are matters to be discussed, pressing enough that they could not be paused until open court in the morrow.”

She lowered her eyes demurely and asked softly, “What is your will, sire?”

Odin felt a flash of amusement but didn’t allow it to cross his face. Tia was not nearly as good in playing a part as someone else he knew. “I wonder, Lady Tia, if you considered the matter thoroughly before calling for an honor battle.”

Tia glanced up with a surprised frown, asking almost hesitantly, “Sire?”

The king didn’t react to her confusion. He barely reacted at all beyond explanation. “Your champion yielded. Prince Loki set the terms of restitution to his satisfaction. But there is the matter of the initial honor battle to consider. The victor is granted a boon, but there is a penalty for the one who lost. As it was you and not Brynjar who called for the honor battle, it falls to you to offer such restitution. But my son is not yet the head of his own house. Until such time, calls for restitution are demanded by the elder members of his family.”

Tia blinked rapidly several times, that little fact unknown to her. “I am a courtier, sire. There is little that I have to offer.”

“You have your name.” Now a cold little smile curled the corner of one side of Odin’s lips. He nodded a moment later. “Yes, I do believe that will be an excellent place to start.”

“You cannot—…”

Odin cut her off easily, his voice booming. “Cannot? You would dare to tell the All-father of Asgard that he cannot do something?” Tia cringed but was given no time to formulate a response. “Although I am hardly surprised, given your recent actions.” Now a snarl wrapped around his voice, his gaze sharp enough to pierce flesh. “Do you believe that I take your actions lightly? You endangered a prince of this realm for your own selfish purposes.”

The courtiers all murmured, looking down their noses at her and Tia felt her face heat. Tia sputtered, shocked by the attack and said the first thing that popped into her foolish head. “A frost giant—…”

“MY. SON.” Odin was on his feet as he roared this. Tia stumbled back several feet and the courtiers all jumped. Thor was the only one who didn’t react to his father’s temper. And Odin had clearly lost the battle with that temper. His grip on Gungnir tightened. “He is mine in all the ways that are important. The next man or woman before me to insult his origins will be used to test Gungnir’s accuracy.” Eyes widened as faces paled. Even Thor glanced at his father out of the corner of his eye but didn’t allow his surprise to show. Odin pulled in a deep breath and thumped Gungnir against the floor. “As father of Prince Loki, I demand that your status of courtier be stripped from you.” That cold smile worked its way back onto Odin’s face. “A request your king will grant.”

Thor verbally stepped forward, making certain his voice carried so there could be no doubt in what he said. “As elder brother of Prince Loki, I request her expulsion from the palace.”

Odin sat back down and a thoughtful look crossed his face, looking Tia over as if she wasn’t in the room and responding to his son. “A woman such as this poses a danger to the royal family. The request will be granted.”
“…my lord…” Tia all but whimpered this but didn’t dare say anything further. She could feel her eyes burning and tried to blink the sensation away.

“As you can see, Tia, there is much that can be taken from you. But you have jeopardized more than just the unity of a family. As cold of a fact as it may be: a son is replaceable…a prince is not.” The courtiers murmured amongst one another, subsiding when Odin raised his hand slightly.

“You care not for the lives of others, so why should I care for yours?”

Tia swayed on her feet, feeling lightheaded and sick. Silent tears tracked down her face as she asked, “I’m…I’m to be executed, sire?”

“No.” Tia looked instantly relieved. “There is a lesson to be learned. Death is hardly the appropriate teacher. Humility, however, is a much better instructor.” That relief morphed into wariness. “General Tyr has agreed to make use of you. From this moment on until such time as the lesson is learned you will be his indentured servant. I care not what he does with you so you would do well to do as you are told.”

“How--…”

Odin spoke with a clipped tone and Tia immediately shut her mouth with a click.

“Servants do not question. Servants obey.” He found a bit of delightful irony in this as well, for all of her lack of respect for the palace servants. More than just humility was needed. This lesson, if she was willing to learn it, would perhaps show her that servants were people, too. “Escort General Tyr’s new servant to her master’s home.”

It was a humbled and scared Tia that was led away. A gesture from Odin and the courtiers all filed out. Each one of them made certain to bow low to Odin. He had no doubt news of this development would stretch far and wide.

Only once the double doors closed again did Thor glance at his father and ask, “How long will her servitude last, father?”

Odin didn’t even think as he rose from the throne and walked down the steps. Court was ended. He was ready for supper and to call an end to this day. “That is up to Tia.”

For a celebratory drink their table was shockingly quiet. Everyone was thinking deeply, sipping their mead and considering both the past and the present. Fandral was perhaps the least shocked but also the most effected. Not over the relative ease that Loki had won. That hadn’t surprised him. It was over the scars. Loki would have had them on his return from Midgard after his defeat. Why hadn’t anyone known about them?

Tony walked up to them with Pepper on his arm. “Whoa, somber occasion or what?” Darcy trailed up to them seconds later.

Darcy rolled her eyes at the inventor, sliding in next to Hogun. “Not everything is Mardis Gras, tin-can boy.”

Pepper frowned slightly. “I thought you would be celebrating.”

“Is it true?” Heads slowly turned to stare at the warrior that had lumbered up to their table, his expression thunderous. Fandral and Volstagg’s expression held confusion while Hogun’s was unreadable.

Sif took another slow drink before speaking. “Is what true?”
“Loki. Is he a fr—…”

“He is a Jötunn just as I am an AEsir.” Sif maintained her glare until the warrior took the hint and shuffled away. Sif sighed through her nose before hitting her fist against the wood. “He knew this was going to happen.”

Tony had been watching the warrior leave with an unreadable expression before glancing back at Sif. “Uh, who knew what?”

“Loki.”

The inventor’s brow furrowed, speaking slower. “Try using more words, bond chick.”

Pepper gave a pained sigh. “Tony…”

Sif glared at Tony without saying anything for a moment. Then with a sigh she glanced at Fandral. “Why does he always pick the worst times to completely forget his diplomatic training?”

“What are you accusing him of now?” Thor had entered the tavern, hearing Darcy’s question. He moved to the table while listening.

Sif sounded slightly defensive. “I’m not accusing Loki of anything. I am simply stating a frustration.”

Darcy pursed her lips ever so slightly. “Uh huh, and you can think of a better time for him to come out of the closet?” Tony snorted.

Hogun studied his tankard, speaking softly and without inflection. “I believe Sif is stating that there was an alternative to revealing his origins. A more political approach. He has had over 700 years to plan.” Thor’s expression seemed to both lighten and darken at the same time.

Sif noticed and asked the thunderer curiously, “Thor?”

Thor sighed reluctantly as he took a seat. “He was not told.”

Volstagg almost spit out the mead he’d drunk, sputtering, “What do you mean he wasn’t told? Of course he was told.”

Tony’s eyes moved back and forth. “Who was told what when?”

Thor mechanically rattled off the tradition as if reading it off a piece of parchment. “Any child that is adopted into a family. It is Asgardian tradition that at 300 they are informed of their true origins so there is time to adjust.”

Now Tony nodded in understanding. “But big daddy skipped that tradition, didn’t he?”

“Aye.”

“What??” Volstagg and Sif chorused this at once, then glanced at one another.

Darcy was looking like the missing puzzle piece had just slotted into place. “It was New Mexico, wasn’t it? When you were exiled. That’s when he found out.”

“How do you know this?” She was right, but Thor asked out of curiosity more than anything.
She just shrugged. “I found out I was adopted when I was 16. It wasn’t exactly an accident but it hadn’t been planned. I had a meltdown. Major. Started doing the stupid kid stuff that was more destructive to me than them: running away, smoking more than just tobacco, sex.”

Pepper looked sympathetic. “You felt betrayed.”

Darcy shrugged a little. “Well yeah, there was that. I was also pissed as hell. But I was madder at myself than them. Sixteen years and I never suspected. Never questioned it. I felt like a gullible idiot. I got over my freak out eventually but it took a while. Multiply my freak out by a thousand…yeah. I get it.”

Fandral was quietly studying his fingers. “When we went to Jötunheim. He seemed to… change, just after that.”

Tony felt defensive all of a sudden. “How would you react? You find out stuff like that after being taught all your life Jötunns are monsters, your dad drops into a convenient nap so he can’t explain, and your supposed friends stab you in the back so they can cuddle with your big bro.” Thor winced. “Hell I’d still be pissed. You assholes got off easy.”

Sif’s fingers sank deeply into her bound hair, staring hard at the table surface. After Jötunheim what she had interpreted from Loki as aloof dismissal for Thor’s mortal plight had been shock. The rage and malice that she had felt as Loki had sat on the throne hadn’t been directed at them or Asgard but she hadn’t believed that at the time. It was just like Hela had shown her. Her interpreted version of the truth was jaded and distorted by her own beliefs and perceptions. She ran a hand down her face before facing Thor. “You know how they are going to respond. As soon as your father holds court the Advisory Council will be screaming for his expulsion.”

Thor nodded slowly, grimly. “Then I will attend court to inform them my brother is not leaving my side again.” Sif and the Warriors three exchanged looks. Thor wouldn’t be the only one attending.

“Possessive much.” This was said in stereo, Tony and Darcy sharing a grin.

The Advisory Council was in outrage and it showed. Not the most intelligent approach when in the All-father’s throne room but it revealed their upset most eloquently. All of them were present but they weren’t the only ones. Both sides of the throne room were filled with the most influential warriors and their families. They were the warriors who had been fighting and training the AEśir for all their long lives. They were the ones shouting at the council and one another.

Odin sat upon his throne, feeling every single one of his years. Loki couldn’t have waited until after his official title ceremony. He almost chuckled. Of course not. His youngest did things in his own way, by his own rules. Fenris was stretched out next to him, a familiar shadow who rarely left his side. Currently the wolf was quietly glaring at the noisy people.

He wished he hadn’t held court today, he not even on the throne for two minutes before this nonsense started. But he couldn’t delay it since the title ceremony was tomorrow. The council he could command to subside but the warriors were an entirely different problem. They were here because of what they had seen. These were the warriors that were celebrated with victories over the centuries. The warriors that had earned titles as nobility for their various feats of courage and sacrifice. They held sway over the rest of Asgard. He held their loyalty but only to a point. He could be facing a civil war if today ended badly.

“Milord Odin, I object most strongly—–”
“Sire, accepting of such an offspring in society is not nearly the same as expecting us to bow to him!”

“Mind your tongue when addressing the All-Father.”

“There is no disrespect intended--…”

“It is with the utmost respect that--…”

“SHUT UP.” Wind sharper than winter blew through the rafters, swirling around into a form of green before Loki emerged, holding his scepter and dressed in his old armor of green and gold. He’d asked for the others to stay out of this. Jane was not happy with him. Actually, none of the women in his life were happy with him, including Talia. The only reason he was here alone was because this nifty little parlor trick of his he hadn’t taught Indel yet. His eyes glinted coldly as he looked over them all, seeing the hate and fear in their faces. It was all so familiar and everything he expected. “I am Loki, of Asgard. The man that I am, the species that I am, has not changed…”

“Jötunn.”

“Monster.”

Odin stiffened, a steely glint in his eye as his hold tightened on Gungnir as he searched for who had said that. Loki smirked bitterly and bowed mockingly, arms outward halfway. “As I said… what I am has not changed. I fought by many of you in battles, even if you feel I was not needed nor wanted. I trained with you. I bled with you. I returned to Asgard to die beside you, if needed…but it is for you to decide.” He stood tall and proud, meeting eyes glaring back at him. “I am of my father’s house, and I will hold his name with pride. But I will not force you to follow a prince if you cannot see past this.” His skin flushed blue, his crimson gaze pinning them in place. Green swirled around him, words and magic blending together. “I call on Asgard to decide. Either I am your prince...or I am not.”

Reluctantly Odin nodded, allowing Loki’s stance to hold.

Brynjar took a step closer and bowed to his prince. “The terms have been set and we agree.”

One by one, the members of the advisory council turned and he nodded. Not all of them. Brynjar didn’t turn. In fact the older man took a step towards Loki so his stance couldn’t be questioned. Some of the others that had watched the honor battle didn’t turn. But it was most definitely the majority. The warriors glanced at one another and stood their ground. But a dozen that had fought against Jötunheim for too long couldn’t see past the species and turned their backs as well and the old bitterness swelled in his chest before fading. Loki turned and smiled at his father, crossing the distance before bowing deeply in respect. “You will always be my father.”

It all happened at once. Brynjar turned his head to gaze with disappointment at the others. Odin swallowed to reply just as Thor’s familiar boots thumped with purpose towards the throne room but Loki had already left.

Erik was frowning rather intently at Jane. “They can really deny a title and kick him out just because of his species?” Jane helped Indel into his coat, her lips pressed together in an irritated line. Erik muttered, not soft enough for the words not to be heard. “Enlightened my ass.”

G’dath growled at all of them. “I don’t agree with this.” An echoing growl vibrated through the room by the other light elves. Azni was strangely calm, as if she was waiting for
something. With a heavy frown Talia ran over and threw her arms around Loki’s leg.

Loki shrugged lightly as he rested his hand on her head, burying the rage aching to be released. He’d known this would happen. He was angry with himself more than anything that he’d hoped he was wrong. “Asgard has decided. I made the bargain with a magic vow. It’s done.”

Darcy’s brow was furrowed, many emotions flittering across her expressive face. “Your dad’s like the king of the gods. Can’t he just dismiss it?”

The trickster sighed at Darcy. “Not without dishonoring himself as an oath breaker.”

Tony scowled, his arms crossed tightly over his chest. “Like hell I’m staying here if you’re not.” Loki’s lips twitched.

The assassins glanced at one another, neither of them happy with this outcome. They would stay to save the universe, but after that they would be all too happy to return to earth. Bruce had already removed his glasses, staring rather sightlessly at the far wall. It all felt so familiar to him and for once he couldn’t even scrape together the emotions to be mad.

Steve sighed softly, his arms also crossed. Tony noticed and immediately let his arms hang at his sides. Steve agreed with the rest of them. He’d spent long enough watching and listening to figure out that Loki was a very unconventional person. The demi-god carried the pride of a prince. This was a man who could rival Stark in intelligence and was a better strategist than Fury. He was also as mischievous as a child but was as protective of his family as a bear. Add all that to an inferiority complex and it made for someone easily misunderstood. But someone Steve found himself liking. “We promised to help them.” He didn’t agree with what boiled down to racism but he was on the fence about what was the right thing to do. Loki shouldn’t be forced to leave. But was leaving these people to die right?

Tony snorted at the Avenger. “My promise doesn’t extend to them. I’m here to help him. They can kiss my ass, Cap. No, really. I will drop ‘em and they can kiss my ass.”

Indel frowned up at the inventor. “Why would you want someone to kiss your—–”

“Indel!”

Indel glanced at Jane before correcting himself. “Butt?”

Tony looked down with a wicked gleam in his eyes but Pepper cut him off. “He’s five! Tony Stark, don’t you dare.” Jane scowled at the man and herded Indel away protectively.

Indel tried to crane his head around. “But why? Mama?”

Jane sighed down at the boy who wouldn’t stop asking until he received an answer. “I kiss your booboos to make them better.”

Indel’s little head cocked as he thought that through. “He has a booboo…on his butt?”

Turning his head again and pointing at Pepper. “Did the lady spank you for being bad?” Tony’s ire broke as he started laughing while a blush stole across Pepper’s face. Loki saved anyone from having to say anything further, producing a book that Indel was eager to take.

Mischief sighed as he watched Indel comb through the fount of knowledge before him. “Asgard sucks.”

The boy had three hundred years of memories, not including the last couple of days. No
one in Asgard talked like that and Indel hadn’t had enough time to corrupt his speech with slang. Loki slapped a hand over his face before growling. “STARK!”

Tony’s eyebrows hiked up before turning tail for a strategic retreat. “Oops, time to go find your sexy daughter’s boyfriend.” Bruce just sighed and slowly shook his head as he watched Tony duck out the door at a run.

Loki talked rather calmly through his fingers at Pepper. “If I find him first, I will hurt him.” Pepper heard enough truth in his tone that she decided to go find the inventor first.

Mischief glanced at Talia who gave him a small thumbs up and the pair shared a grin. It was fun irritating their father. Jane gave the pair of them a mock frown.

Queen Sigyn ignored the drama, focused on the stance Asgard was presenting to the nine realms. “If this is to be the standard Asgard now affords, they will lose a lot of support from the nine realms. Vanaheim will only be the first to withdraw aid.”

Loki nodded to Sigyn. “I agree. Which is why I will be coming to Vanaheim with my family, to negotiate that understanding. This war is more important than a title. After victory, then we can focus on ways to make those fools suffer.”

Trax took in the other faces and nodded. “And we would wish to join you.”

G’dath was still growling, glancing at Azni who was just sitting there. “Will Alfheim turn a blind eye to this?”

Azni smiled slightly at the agitated healer. “I am waiting for Asgard to decide.”

Bruce frowned slightly, glancing at Jane who shrugged. “I thought Asgard had.”

The servant’s door opened, Anya freezing to realize the rooms were full of people she was not expecting. But she was a clever woman and it didn’t take her long to understand what was going on. Not with the travel clothes Jane had helped the children put on. “Sire? You depart from Asgard already?”

Loki smirked just a little, well used to Anya. His chin lifted a little. “Asgard has decided they do not want me as a prince.”

She looked less than impressed. “Begging your highnesses’ pardon but I was never asked. Am I not a part of Asgard?”

Hissing at her but prepared for one last act in hypocrisy before he retreated, his skin flushing blue. “Would you follow a Jötunn prince, AEsir?”

Jane stiffened at Loki’s side, looking from one to the other. Anya crossed her arms, still looking unimpressed. “Considering I changed and diapered your royal bum when it was blue your appearance hardly shocks me.” Clint started laughing before Natasha slapped a hand over his mouth.

Loki blinked at Anya in shock, skin fading back to pale in his horror. “What??”

She shrugged a little, well aware of their audience. “Servants are just as adapt in keeping secrets as you royals are.” Huffing softly at him that his shock hadn’t faded. “You were but a wee thing, just like any other babe, but sometimes you were blue. You’ll pardon my impertinence but it was a private sport amongst the servants to see who could inspire you to turn blue. The late queen’s hand maids tickled you but…” She turned away suddenly, putting her hands over her face. Both
Loki and Jane leaned forward just as Anya turned back around. “Peek-a-boo.” Jane giggled, gasping in delight as Loki did too, instantly flushing blue for a few seconds.

Darcy snorted. "That's freaking adorkable."

Erik frowned at her and asked, "Don't you mean adorable?"

Darcy shook her head. "I said what I meant."

Anya was grinning, pleased. “I could always inspire you with a game of peek-a-boo.”

The shock faded but the frustration didn’t. Not with her, but with the rest of them. Loki threw up his hands. “Fine. One person in all of Asgard wants me here. What wonderful incentive.”

Anya gave Jane a look, the latter rolling her eyes. “Might I?”

Jane gestured grandly, having an inkling of what Anya had in mind. “Be my guest.”

Loki looked back and forth between the pair of them. “What?”

Anya took firm hold of his wrist and started leading him. “This way, your highness.”

Loki glared at Jane over his shoulder who just adjusted a still reading Indel on her hip as she followed, Mischief and Talia trailing, and made a shooing motion. “Keep walking.”

Darcy made a whip cracking noise and grinned at Jane. “Oh come on, he’s totally whipped.”

Loki stopped walking and the procession froze as he slowly turned to glare over his shoulder, his green eyes sparking. “I am about to lose my sense of humor with you.” Darcy opened her mouth and Jane was quick to shove her back. Mischief put a hand over her mouth and all four of them smiled angelically at Loki. When Loki was no longer indulgent, his actions quickly crossed the line from mischief to malice. With a last glare he let Anya tug him along.

Everyone else followed with a shrug, G’dath frowning at Azni. “How did you know?” She just smiled silently.

Loki threw a suspicious look over his shoulder at Jane, annoyance with Darcy gone. “As of when did I become your property to pass off to others?”

Jane raised an eyebrow at him. “Someone needs a nap.”

He snarled back at her. “I’m in a horrible mood and it has nothing to do with being tired, thank you.”

Anya led them through the servant passageway to the city beyond. “Sire, just indulge me a few moments longer.” Loki huffed but subsided. Down the main thoroughfare they walked, Loki stiffening self-consciously as he became more aware of the fact that he was allowing a servant to drag him around like an insolent child. People were coming out of their houses and places of business, whispering and pointing and following. Anya pulled him up onto the platform that usually held the stocks, making a gesture to the crowd. “Gather everyone around, Prince Loki has an important question to ask Asgard.” The crowd multiplied, children riding on adult shoulders to see. More people pressed in, running down side streets as word quickly spread. The square was packed with hundreds of people in a matter of seconds, more trying to squeeze in as hundreds became thousands. Anya glanced quickly at Loki who was looking less and less confident by the second and
gestured to Jane who didn’t hesitate in stepping next to him. “Alright you lot, listen closely. A question was asked of the upper class but Prince Loki wishes to know what we, Asgard, have to say. Sire.”

The elves were spread out amongst the sea of others. Sigyn was standing to one side with Logan standing next to her. The two of them shared an intrigued glance with one another before reaffirming their attention on the platform.

Loki looked over the faces of the people he rarely got to see. Servants. Teachers. Butchers. Blacksmiths. The simple people who worked tirelessly for the few elite. Seamstresses and farmers. The border guards and newly trained warriors. Pages and merchants and many, many more that he couldn’t even guess what they did. He didn’t see cynicism and derision. He didn’t see contempt. He saw curiosity. In the children he saw adoration. In the teachers he saw respect.

Stiffening his spine, his magic amplifying his voice. “You know of me, Loki Odinson. Many of Asgard hold nothing but contempt for me, it is no secret, and they are right to do so. I have committed crimes against Asgard, you, and my father. I am an escaped prisoner…and yet the All-father has seen fit to forgive me. But not all are as generous. They object to my being in Asgard, much less the All-Father wishing to give me my title as prince. They fear me as a mage. They mock me for being a trickster. I disgust them for what I am. So I told them to choose. Either I am a prince of Asgard, or I will leave and never return. But Anya is right, I proposed before the king to let Asgard decide, and I have not given the rest of you that choice.” Shifting to Jötunn, his magic swirling around him as it had when the vow was made. “Will Asgard, will you, show your allegiance to a son of Odin who is also a Jötunn prince, or not?”

There were no screams. No sneers. There was curiosity. Awe. A child pointed and giggled in delight. Then an old man took a knee and bowed to him, fist to his chest. Loki gasped softly as others soon followed. More and more bowed and chose. Loki glanced down at his hands to be sure but he was definitely blue. He glanced at Anya who grinned shyly and bowed to him just as the rest. More crowded into the square, recognized him by his clothing and knelt without even pausing at his skin.

The swirl of green shone and burst with light before fading. The vow had now been completed with Asgard’s choice. Fenris wagged his tail with enthusiasm. Jane smiled up at him and whispered. “There’s your answer.”

Loki shook his head in confused disbelief at Anya. “Why would you follow me?”

She was the first to rise, her tone earnest and her eyes sincere. “We love the aristocracy. I have no complaint for my lot in life and I’m proud of it. But you knew I wanted to better myself. You taught me the languages of Alfheim and Vanaheim. You listened. You’re the only noble that ever has.”

“Plus everybody loves you once they get to know you, Bambi.” Tony was grinning unrepentantly from the crowd, Pepper next to him. Loki might forgive the inventor eventually for corrupting his children’s speech patterns.

Fandral tipped his head in Loki’s direction. “I’m a warrior, prince, but I’ll never be an aristocrat and I wouldn’t want to be. Too much responsibility and besides…the other nobles just never took the time, sire.”

Anya nodded in agreement. “And you may be known throughout the land as a trickster but you always took care of us when we needed aid. We never even had to ask.”
“Prince Loki?”

A little boy was waving his hand, sitting on his father’s shoulders who was still bowing.
“Yes, little one?”

“Did you give my fader shoes?”

Loki smiled sweetly at the child. He couldn’t resist children anymore. “Yes.”

There were nods all around. Anya made a sweeping gesture. “And that makes all the
difference to us. You look after us. Even when you weren’t here you were still taking care of us and
disguising it as a trick on the aristocrats.” Tony glanced around and vowed he was going to have to
get the full story later. “We bow to the All-Father, and we’ll gladly follow Prince Thor when he
becomes king…but you, sire, are our prince. Am I right?”

“Aye!!”

Talia climbed up the steps and lifted her arms to be held, Loki doing so automatically.
People slowly stood back up, watching and waiting. Slowly a wide, terribly frightening smile spread
across his face. Jane knew that look. So did Fandral if his expression was any indication. “Uh oh…I
know that smile.”

Tony glanced at Pepper. “This is the part where he does something that gets us all killed.”

Loki ignored everyone and rubbed his hands together. “I need parchment. I have an idea.”

Indel and Mischief giggled while Jane nodded with a resigned sigh. “Yep, that’s what I
was afraid of.” It took a great deal of control for Loki to resist sticking his tongue out at her.

“My brother is not leaving Asgard!”

That had been the first of a round of growls, snarls, words…etc…etc…

Odin had a headache. Not that he wasn’t tempted to be down there in the thick of things
but he was slightly more patient than Thor. He could just clear the court but Thor needed to focus his
anger on someone, let it be on the culprits responsible. Sif, Volstagg, and Hogun had taken up
positions surrounding Thor, lending their agreement against the opposition.

Heimdall was already under orders that Loki wasn’t going anywhere so when the
Gatekeeper notified him he’d go to the gate and hopefully persuade his son to stay. Until then he’d
give enough time for Loki’s initial ire to subside.

A page slipped through the door, bypassing the half-moon of people around Thor and
soundlessly climbing the steps of the throne. The adolescent boy bowed and held out a parchment.
Odin read it quickly and with a frown his gaze moved to the outer gate before deciding to act. He
broke protocol as he never did. He moved from his place, ignored the council and walked out the
doors. A few members at the back noticed and scrambled to follow. Through the corridor he walked,
determination in his gate. The guards opened the doors for him, surprise on their faces that he had
come himself.

He walked the path of the inner courtyard, seeing that a crowd had gathered at the outer
gate. As Odin walked a hush fell over the crowd. “Why have you all gathered?”

Eyes looked to her and after a reluctant moment Anya walked beyond the gate towards
Odin and bowed deeply, Fenris at her side. “Sire. We have been told that before King and court your son posed to allow Asgard to decide if he should be welcomed back as prince. That his proposal was further approved by your Advisory Council.”

Odin slowly nodded to her. “You have heard correctly, Anya. The majority has spoken.”

Anya’s green eyes sparkling with mischief glanced at those behind her before speaking. “Begging your pardon, sire, but the majority is beyond the gate and would like to speak for Asgard.”

One of the council members looked slightly constipated. “The--…they are commoners!”

She stood a little taller, slightly indignant as she asked, “Are we not Asgard?”

He sneered at Anya. “You are the stones that we tread upon. Stones that should know their place.”

“I do not wish to step beyond my place. I only wish to maintain a vow made by king and court.”

Odin nodded and stepped slowly towards her. “Agreed.” He moved until the people gathered could see and hear him clearly. He had to hand it to Loki. When his boy wanted to inspire people, for good or for ill, his results were impressive. He only wished he’d thought of something so brilliant.

The council member looked confused. “Sire?”

Odin ignored him. It was high time he heard the will of the people. “People of Asgard. I stand before you a man born to wear the crown of Asgard. Now as I enter the twilight of my life my legacy will pass on to my sons. As I look over the faces before me I see AEsir…but I also see Vanir. Elf. There are other races, other lineages, but we are all Asgardian. My eldest son will be your future king, but he is not my only son. I acknowledge having two sons. Your late queen acknowledged two sons. Your crowned prince acknowledges a younger brother. The second son of Asgard…he is the trickster of the nine realms. The most adept mage every created since the beginning. The God of Mischief and Chaos…who also happens to be Jötunn. What say you, Asgard? Are we to finally bring home our wayward son? Are we to title him and welcome him? What say you??”

Fists raised to the sky and a cheer rose through the crowd.

Odin glanced with amusement at the council member. “And the majority has spoken.” He glanced at Anya as he passed and paused for a moment with a small frown. A green eye winked and with a slight smile Odin nodded and swept back into the palace.

Only once Odin was out of sight did the council member step forward. He grabbed Anya by the back of the neck once Odin was back inside the castle. “You will truly regret your course of action, servant.” Fenris bared his teeth and growled but wasn’t given an opportunity to react.

The council member’s jaw dropped as a familiar figure stepped away from the crowd, her blue eyes amused. The council member was thrown back, the girl he had held rippling before armor replaced cloth and black hair replaced blond. Loki tilted his head slightly. “As will you.” The council member jerked back as if burned but it was too late. He couldn’t scream and the sound that he did emit had a good many of the crowd laughing.

Tony doubled over and started clapping. Loudly. “Donkey! He made him a donkey!”

Loki’s lip quirked in amusement as Indel ran up and wrapped his arms around one of his
The council had agreed to the terms but they certainly weren’t happy about the result. Odin had decided to send Thor into the thick of it to see if he could control them. He sighed softly to himself. Diplomacy was still not Thor’s strength. A swirl of green was the only warning he had before Loki appeared next to him, leaning against the arm of his throne and sending him a very familiar grin. The kind that usually had him regretting getting up that morning. “Loki--no. Whatever it is, no.”

Loki pouted just a little. “You haven’t even heard what I have to say.”

The All-father held up a hand. “And for the sake of my sanity I do not want to hear it.”

“Jane approves.”

Odin gave Loki a second glance before sighing softly and asking, “What is it?”

“I thought of the perfect coronation present for Thor.”

It had been centuries but he remembered that mischievous, playful tone from Loki’s youth. The kind of tone that made it almost sound like he was singing. Loki would never be that boy again, but he wasn’t grinning with an evil glint in his green eyes either. Since no one was paying attention to either of them, too busy objecting with a frustrated Thor in their midst, Odin raised an eyebrow at his youngest. “If it is anything like the last time--…” The day Loki had decided to allow Frost Giants into Asgard to bring a preemptive end to Thor’s coronation.

The trickster waved a hand. “I’ve graduated beyond such schemes, father.” Odin’s heart gave a pleasant throb to hear that title spilling so easily from his son’s lips. “I promise, this present he will like.” Presenting the piece of parchment as if it were a holy relic. “Since until his official crowning you are king, the bylaws state you may appoint a new advisory council for him up to one year prior.”

He’d known that Thor could choose new council after he was crowned but this news intrigued him. Actually it was such a small bylaw he’d completely forgotten. Frowning since none of these names were familiar to him. A few of the family names were. “And who are these people?”

Loki shrugged carelessly. “Commoners.”

Odin looked over the edge of the paper with a less than pleased expression. “Loki if this is to be your conduct for responsibly advising your brother I will send you back to Midgard with the mortals until you mature.”

Frowning, eyes narrowing. “Either you trust me or you do not. Father.”

Blue eye glinting. “Then answer truthfully: is this a scheme of yours or not?”

Loki opened his mouth, then frowned to mull over the way the question was phrased. His father was right to be wary, since many of his schemes started off so innocently. But he wanted a better relationship than what had been before and Jane had explained being truthful when it was important would help him achieve that goal. “Well, yes, but not as a humiliation to Thor. I intend to humiliate the slavering masses behind me.” Odin frowned and Loki hurried to explain. “I spoke with each of them. Scholars. Teachers. Philosophers. Some of them have spent extensive time in different realms. Two of them helped me form trade agreements with the dwarves a hundred years ago. I pledged to advise Thor and I will, but these people will help to build him up, not stab him in the legs. “Make an ass of yourself and this is the result.”
Odin nodded slowly. “You pledged to do so as a prince of Asgard.”

He grinned brightly, the kind of grin Odin hadn’t seen in such a long time. “So I asked Asgard and they decided to keep me, Jötunn or not.” His grin turned sly. “But then you already know this, father.”

Odin lightly patted his cheek with his palm affectionately before glancing at the warriors beyond. The ones that had made their rejection known. “And the warriors?”

Grin turning maniacal. “Oh, I already know what to do with them.”

Odin turned his attention back to the parchment, his word final. “You are not allowed to kill them.”

“But--…”

His father cut him off effortlessly. “No.”

The mage purred softly with a shrug, proving he was his mother’s son. “They will wish I did by the time I’m done.” Odin heard the familiar purr but he made no comment.

Odin frowned. “You want to retain Brynjar?”

Loki didn’t comment until Odin lifted his gaze. “He’s proven his loyalty. Nor is he concerned with my species so at the moment he’s useful.” His grin wobbled a little. “Interestingly enough I’ve been speaking with Eir and she already vowed to you to medically castrate the next man who proposed the binding bracelets. A fact your council is well aware of. Your secret weapon I believe since an intelligent man is afraid of her.” Loki felt Odin reach for his forearm, the hand tightening and so much apology in that gaze he didn’t need to hear the words. Loki’s grin strengthened as he shrugged again.

He would need to talk with his son soon because what had happened was never occurring again, but not now and certainly not in front of them. Instead Odin focused on the unfamiliar phrase: ‘secret weapon’. “Where did you gain that odd phrasing?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Midgard. I blame Anthony. He’s corrupted my speaking ability beyond hope.” Odin still didn’t look even close to convinced. He huffed. “You were more fun 500 years ago.”

Odin looked less than impressed. “Five hundred years ago your pranks were little more than innocent ruses and harmless fun that wounded pride and ego, nothing more.” Loki muttered something under his breath. “Speak properly, Loki.”

Crossing his arms over his chest. “Tis nothing I can repeat in court.”

The All-father kept his tone even. “Loki, I want your plan in detail.”

Loki just sighed. “Fine. I will need your leave so Heimdall will send me to Jötunheim anyway.” Because the Gatekeeper had chosen the worst time to actually be concerned about his welfare.

Putting a hand on his shoulder, his usual warning tone to at least attempt to temper his youngest’s actions set aside for concern for him. “Loki?”
Loki glanced up with a small frown, reading the concern there and a little surprised. But then Jane had been telling him repeatedly that a lot of Odin’s actions were his flawed attempts to protect him. “Helblindi and I have an understanding.”

Odin felt surprised that Loki had talked with the Jötunn king. And proud. “Which is?”

Loki snapped his fingers and a flame leapt into his palm. Grinning at Odin while playing. “Once Thanos is defeated, we return the Casket of Ancient Winters. It is fair.”

“A weapon—…”

Loki blew out the flame and focused all of his attention on his father. “He wants to restore Jötunheim, and I believe him. The planet is dying without the Casket. Defeating an enemy and allowing that enemy to slowly die from neglect are two entirely different matters.” Eyes narrowing again. “Unless there is a different lesson you wish to teach me about the kind of man I should aspire to be.”

Odin blinked twice before the tension in his shoulders eased. Indel learned by example. He had seen it for himself. As clever as Loki was, he too learned by what he saw over what he was told. He could see now why Mjolnir had found Loki worthy. His son was now on the right path to become a truly wise leader. He slowly nodded in agreement.

Thor wandered over when he was directed to by one of Loki’s shadow sprites, the three of them conversing over the parchment before Thor tipped his head back to laugh loudly. The thunderer clapped his brother on the back before wrapping an arm around his shoulders and squeezing. “Brilliant, brother!”

Heads turned, bodies tensed as the two brothers stepped to the side and stood as a united front, with arms crossed over their chests and arrogance in their poise. Odin stood and loudly thumped Gungnir on the ground. “Until the coronation day I am still king…and the time has come for a few improvements to Asgard. Everyone in the Advisory Council is summarily dismissed, so that new blood may assist Asgard’s future king.” Jaws dropped while Thor and Loki shared a look. “And every warrior here today…” He glanced over at Loki who mouthed five. “…will be in the training yard in five days hence…so that we might all prepare for the coming war. This audience is concluded.”

The advisory council were in mass, screaming in outrage before stuttering to a frozen halt when Odin slowly narrowed his gaze. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t do anything. He just looked at them and extinguished their objections with the nonverbal reminder that as of now they were little more than commoners who could all hang for all he cared. Literally.

The two brothers shared a look, thinking the same thing. They wanted to be like that when they grew up.

Loki crooked a finger. “Brynjar, if you would.” He hesitated before obeying when Odin didn’t object, standing where Loki pointed. Loki smirked and patted his armored shoulder lightly. “You’re going to enjoy this.”

Normally when an audience was concluded, everyone left. The men were frozen, unable to speak but unwilling to just retreat. Then the warriors turned on the former council members with growls and weapons at the ready. Sif, Hogun, and Volstagg all glanced at one another before joining in. The two brothers grinned in unison, waiting until Odin swept out the side door to the corridor before pulling out their own weapons. Thor lazily twirled Mjolnir while Loki casually twirled his staff, the twin blades unsheathing. Brynjar’s eyes widened in surprise, suddenly glad he’d earned the
Loki smirked devilishly at his brother. “What is the wager?”

Thor nodded slowly in agreement. “The usual.” Whoever won would declare their prize. Typically it was something small. The joy came in the fight, not the victory.

Green eyes flicked to the remaining men before clarifying. “The most hits wins?”

The men all tensed, breaking out in a cold sweat when an echo of that smirk touched Thor’s lips. “Aye.” They didn’t wait to hear anything else. They ran.

Jane looked out on the balcony overlooking the forests of Asgard. It was breathtaking. Then she felt her breath catch as a familiar figure molded himself behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. He dipped his head down to kiss her neck before whispering in her ear. “I’m ready.” She turned with a slight frown and a ghost of a smile crossed his face before he pulled her into a secluded nook. He wasn’t ready. He would never be ready. But if he was really about to ask his father to formally court and marry her, she had a right to all of him. He held her tightly and she wrapped her arms around him, listening to the nervous thumping of his heart. “Indel is my son…and not just by my choice. I—...I’m a changeling. I can be any manner of creature and apparently…Norse Mythology may be closer to the truth than I like to admit.”

He swallowed and held his breath and Jane frowned slightly to herself before asking. “What is a changeling?”

A reasonable question in his opinion. “It means that I can alter my shape at will…but I do not have to hold the shape of a female to conceive a child.”

Jane blinked but she didn’t feel as surprised as she thought she should be. But then again she’d been well prepared considering all the fantastical things she’d seen Loki accomplish. It took her less than a few seconds to process his status as a changeling before acceptance easily followed.

But then her brow furrowed. Norse Mythology? Wait. The myths that said that he was ‘mother’ to an eight legged horse. She knew he wasn’t but that hadn’t been his point. She felt her eyes widen in understanding before her frown deepened. The math wasn’t adding up for her. “You were here for over a year but you said Indel was a newborn when you found him on Svartalfheim, unless Indel was older than you think…”

A year in the dungeons. Not the most enjoyable time but he did get some reading accomplished on top of being bored to tears. “No, he was only a few days old. He was born before I journeyed to New York. I have no idea how.” He shrugged to himself, talking as he thought. “Thanos has the technology but…Indel has my ability to use ice magic. Even if he cannot turn Jötunn blue, that is a Jötunn ability. And my magic recognized him before I even decided to keep him. He is my son.”

He’d seen the titan make and carelessly toss aside his creations. He threw away anything not useful to him. Incubate Indel until he had a need for the son of the trickster. And when the Other foretells that the trickster will die the child becomes useless, returning him to the decimated planet his appearance dictated he belonged to.

But Jane was focused on something else. “Then who is the mother?”

Closing his eyes and ducking his head to hide his face in her hair, whispering. “I am.”
Jane felt like she’d suddenly split into two different people. The scientist in her had a million and one questions. But then she felt a hint of his emotions, riding within the current of the magic connecting them together. Fear…and shame.

She swallowed those burning questions as logic was swept away in a tidal wave of rage. Looking out, Jane slowly clenched a fist. Not willing. He was too ashamed. He’d been under Thanos’ control then. She didn’t even have to ask to know that he’d been forced since nothing he’d done during that time had been his choice. She didn’t want to ask, but she knew it was something he needed to say. “Do you know who?”

Loki nodded slowly. “Unfortunately.” It was one of many memories that he’d shoved to the side but he’d never forget. The truth was clawing at his throat, begging to tell her.

Jane held him tightly, feeling his aching need to speak. “Who is he?”

Shuddering slightly. “Malekith.”

The elf that almost killed her and nearly succeeded in using the Aether. How?, was all she could think.

“I’ve seen some of Thanos’ toys…” She’d said that out loud? “I’ve seen him punch holes in the universe to other realities. Pulling someone from the present to the past wouldn’t be that difficult for him.”

She supposed anything was possible with the right equipment. “How would Thanos know to do it?”

But Loki had already considered this. “The Other was a seer. Of all the tricks they are capable of, seeing an eminent death is too easy for them.”

So Thanos yanked Malekith just before he died to wherever he and Loki were in the past. It still begged the question of why but perhaps it had been at the Other’s insistence as well. Rage rushed through her veins and it was a wonder her magic just didn’t explode. Voice hard. “I am your shield, Loki. If you cannot kill him, I will.” He jerked back in surprise, back hitting the wall, staring down at her in wonder. She met his gaze evenly. “I’m not really a fighter. I know. I really wish that I could. I may not be able to do it, but I know Thor would be happy to.”

No disgust that he feared he’d see. No disbelief as to the impossibility or that he was lying. Just fierce devotion. Protection. Love. The fear drifted away like ash on the wind and he leaned down to kiss her hungrily. She stood up on her toes and threaded her fingers through his hair and chased away the rest of his demons.

She pulled back once his green eyes had lost that hunted, hurt look and he was just watching her in that loving way she’d come to crave. She was curious what was so different about now as opposed to any other day he could have told her. “Why tell me this now?”

The shyness didn’t appear. Instead it was the passion she’d seen that he hid from most. “Because I want father’s permission to marry you.”

No more waiting. Even if Odin said no, he would marry her anyway and refuse his title. He wasn’t exacting, as if her refusal wasn’t even an option. “No other secrets then?”

His hand captured hers, his thumb rubbing the ring that never left her finger any more than the locket left her neck. He brought her hand towards his face and kissed the palm, his eyes never leaving hers. “No, I’ve given you everything, my love.”
Every girl talks about what they’re going to wear when they get married. They envision their perfect match. The setting. The words. The tears and the joy. She’d never wasted her time with such things. He wasn’t asking with words. He wasn’t on one knee but this was Loki. That wasn’t in his nature. He wasn’t poetic but on the occasion when his words for her were full of flattery and flowery they were sincere.

He loved her.

He needed her.

He would die for her.

Who needed to hear words when she had that?

She could see it all. His mind. His heart. His soul. It was all bare for her inspection. She brought up her free hand, the palm against his cheek and he leaned into her touch. “I love you, too.” The man who believed in her. The man who had brought her to life. The man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. She smiled and gave him everything in return. “Yes. I will marry you.”

Author's Notes:

I think I got the full gambit of emotions on this one. The Advisory Council getting kicked out was particularly satisfying for me.

Next:

A day of titles; Loki and Jane have some quality time.
Chapter 84

MIDGARD

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Charles Xavier turned his head in the direction of the voice. He still wasn’t sure how he’d gotten here. Since it was still unknown when war would spill over onto earth Charles had decided not to leave New Mexico just yet. It was as if he’d been in one place and he’d suddenly rolled his chair into another after only a matter of a few feet. Hela had her legs crossed at the ankle, leaning back against nothing. He took another look at their surroundings, surprised to see peaks and valleys painted like the Arizona desert which sharply became a deciduous forest.

“Where are we?” He asked as his eyes continued to roam around him.

Hela smirked just a little as she answered, “Midgard.”

He looked up but the sky was a little too blue and the flowers that surrounded them held petals that were a strange neon pink. He didn’t often point out an obvious lie but there was definite disbelief in his tone. “This is earth?”

She grinned and nodded her chin in the direction behind him. He wheeled himself around before blinking in surprise. His school. It looked exactly like the expansive estate with the grounds surrounding it. Yet it was out of place being surrounded by a pale blue stream on three sides. Not to mention they were not even close to the right location.

Hela speaking caught his attention but he didn’t look back at her listening as he looked over the building that shouldn’t be there. “Magic at times will mirror the principles of energy. What Loki did used a tremendous amount of magic. But magic projected out always comes back. His body, no body, is capable of absorbing so much so it was channeled into this.”

Charles frowned thoughtfully and spoke only after giving the matter a little bit of thought. “Then we are not on earth.”

She shrugged a little, kicking a rock as she walked up to his left. “Technically we are. This is New Mexico, but slightly out of phase with your world’s space and time. This is proof that there can be two objects occupying the same space at the same time.” She gestured in a sweeping motion. “Even an overlapping dimension needs scenery so I took the liberty.” This was a dimension of thought, unstable and changeable to someone like herself. Before she had come here it was a blank canvas. Now it was something else.

Now his eyes sparked with understanding, wonder in his expression. “Two dimensions overlapping one another, but each one different and independent of one another.”

She reached down to scoop up a handful of sand, his eyes watching the individual grains moved at an impossibly slow rate through her fingers. “Time is practically nonexistent here. Enough time to accomplish everything you want.” Enough time to escape the ravages of it on his own body.

“How large is this place?”

She made a slight face at him, as if the question was silly. “As large as your world.” As large as his world, but a pure version of it. No pollution. No crime. A chance to begin anew. A world for people like himself to go to start over. It couldn’t stay that way because people would
never be pure, but it would be a true chance at a new life for mutants who wouldn’t have to hide who they are. “You might bring your world’s Dr. Strange. He might have some ideas on how you can safely invite someone here without endangering whatever you build here.”

“Why?” She’d always enjoyed humans like him. Like children, always questioning the world around them, never satisfied with one answer. And those questions, instead of leading to answers, continue with more questions.

Usually she would just go back to Helheim and leave the question unanswered. If she wanted to install a little fear, she might say this was a test to see if humans would decimate yet another planet. Just this once she offered him the truth. “This is what Yggdrasil wants. I’m just the messenger.” Then with a smile that was equal parts naughty and nice, she vanished.

ASGARD

“You seem content, All-Father.”

Odin stood on the balcony that overlooked the path from the castle to the outer gate. He had left Gungnir in his formal study under lock, key, and magical wards. He turned and inclined his head slightly towards her in greeting. “Et’ana Azni.”

She smiled that small elf smile and stepped up next to him, able to see clearly what it was he was observing. The once noble figures were still clothed as such simply because that was all they had accumulated over the centuries as Odin’s counsel. Now that they were former, disgraced former at that, they were being shown the door without the stipend that would normally be granted for a retiring figure from such a position. “Ah. Overseeing the departure of your former advisors.”

Not all of them. Brynjar had found his way into Loki’s good graces and would be staying in the palace indefinitely. His face didn’t give away his pleasure but his voice did. “An occasion I have long anticipated.”

Azni nodded slightly to herself. Her thoughts drifted from a wrong long overdue in being corrected to the near future. “You will be crowning your eldest soon.”

Not soon enough as far as he was concerned. He could see by Loki’s urgency in directing the strategy meetings time was running out. Thor knew the soldier numbers needed and the formations to minimize casualties. Loki supplied the possible enemy responses for them to counter. But his youngest was usually more subtle when guiding unless there was no time for it.

His son would be welcomed back a prince of Asgard before the day was over, but it would take time away from planning for war to hold two events. It would be possible to hold the titling ceremony and Thor’s coronation on the same day, but he knew enough now to know efficiency and practicality had to be sacrificed so that both sons would feel equally important. Each occasion deserved to be marked and remembered.

“Aye. I fear war will be upon us too soon, but after our victory I will step down and Thor will ascend.”

Azni nodded slowly. “Additions to your family…your eldest to take the throne…your youngest will most likely be married before the year is over…quite the busy year.” Odin blinked in surprise before realizing he shouldn’t be. It was plain to see for anyone who took enough time to look how deeply their feelings ran. There was no denying that soon he would be welcoming a human into the royal family. He stifled a chuckle of amusement. His father will be railing through the
feasting hall of Valhalla in outrage when that day came. He looked at her a little more closely as she continued speaking. “Alfheim will stand. The order has already been sent, calling the legions together. They will be arriving within two days.”

Odin nodded slowly to himself. “Alfheim and Asgard against whoever chooses to defy our combined might.”

“And Vanaheim.” Since Sigyn was still here it was obvious she would lend her support.

He glanced at Azni. “Queen Sigyn has assured me her spell casters will be on Asgardian soil before sunrise, followed swiftly by their forces.”

The small smile was back on her face again, layered with equal parts amusement and secrets. “Now all that remains is Jötunheim.”

*Who had she been speaking with to know of that?* But he didn’t ask the question. “I am…reluctant to allow him to go.” He was also reluctant to express his thoughts with anyone. But from what he knew and believed, Azni was a woman without an ulterior motive. Still, that he spoke out loud surprised him.

But Azni nodded slightly as if the decision was made and no longer in his hands. “But you must. He has as much to learn from this experience as your warriors do once Jötunheim’s king agrees.”

Odin turned to give Azni his full attention. “My warriors?”

“The Jötunn have never fought on this soil. It would be…educational if they were to visit to adapt to this climate. Perhaps four days from now.”

His voice rumbled softly. “Is this your subtle way of telling me what my son intends to accomplish?”

“I didn’t think I was particularly subtle.” There was definitely quiet humor to her tone now. But then she glanced back out to look at Asgard. “Will you watch for the arrival of your son’s new council?”

He shook his head slightly in the negative. “It will be a process that will take days. I do not have that much freedom with my time as of yet.”

A man who spent his entire life focused on his duty as king. She shook her head slowly to herself, speaking her thoughts out loud. “Whatever will you do with your days once you step down?”

Odin stood a little straighter, hands behind his back. “Thor is ready for the mantle but he will need advice.”

“Which he already has.” Unlike an AEsir, a light elf was a little more skilled in deciphering facial expressions. Even for someone as skilled in masking his thoughts and feelings, she could see what he was trying to hide. He was torn, still believing that diverting his attention away from the throne once the mantle was passed to Thor was a betrayal to Asgard. “All those years ago you had a son because as king you would need an heir, or lose the throne to the next upstart who challenged you and won in combat. To groom that heir takes time and focus. No man incapable of diverting their attention in more than one direction should have more than one child, particularly if both are sons. And yet when you found Loki that was your desire. Your selfish desire you believe that no king should admit to. You found a boy who was beautiful and special, a child that wouldn’t
be destined for the throne. But even as an infant you could see he was clever. Clever enough to be an
advisor for your first born. But children are not convenient. They’re selfish and demanding and even
as adults that need for parental focus often doesn’t fade.” Her voice softened a little, which insured
he was listening. “I think your second son deserves some of that focus he’s long been denied.”

Words that Frigga had been saying for centuries. Truths that he’d been reluctant to admit.
He spoke quietly, for once questioning what he had been taught by his father. “You believe Asgard
should be made to suffer from my son’s mistakes because I didn’t counsel him?”

She gave him a look similar to ones he’d seen Frigga have ready for Loki or Thor after
they had said or done something particularly foolish. “When AEsir reach a certain age, they are
armed and taught to fight. Another age and they begin the journey of finding themselves through
triumphs and losses. But eventually children become men and women and parents must step back
enough to allow them to make their mistakes. They will both always need you, even if life sweeps
them away from you for months or longer at a time. There are no more chances, All-Father. If you let
him slip away again, he won’t come back.” Her expression turned serious, glancing back at the
inside of the palace and they both knew the end result. It would be a loss that Thor would never
forgive him for.

He wondered if this would ever get easier. He was constantly second guessing his own
decisions and that wasn’t in his nature. To change the habits of a lifetime in a few short months was
almost impossible but his son was worth it. He could admit to himself she was right, taking her
warning to heart as much as he had Hela’s. Odin’s shoulders slumped the slightest bit in defeat. He
could see why Loki listened to her. “Do you have such difficulties with your children?”

The question wasn’t meant to sting but it did and Azni exhaled slowly. “I have outlived
my family. No one should be forced to live beyond their children…but I feel my time approaching
and I welcome it.” Then she smiled slightly. “But yes. My children were all quite different and it was
a struggle sometimes to know the right path to follow.”

Odin nodded slowly to himself. He knew what it was to feel your years crushing down on
your shoulders. Elves went on simply because age never caught up with them. If this war didn’t kill
him, eventually it would be his age. The sound of bells filled the air, signaling breakfast and without
a word he held out his arm for her. She silently nodded, slipping her arm into the crook and letting
him escort her.

Loki scowled at Thor who was casually flipping a coin in his hand as he approached. He
and Jane stood next to one another, able to look over the balcony to see the rising sun. The
thunderer’s expression held a hint of teasing smugness but Loki was quick to snap at him before he
could say anything. “Don’t say it.”

Jane gave him a startled look, not seeing Thor coming up behind her, “Say what?”

“I uttered nothing, brother.” Thor punctuated the end of his sentence with another flip.

Loki refused to allow his face to contort into a pout. “Yet again the golden son wins…and
yet again he cheats.”

Thor decided to fight the urge to roll his eyes at Loki’s petulance. “That is your forte,
brother, not mine.” Loki didn’t take offense since it was the truth.

“Loki?”
Loki’s scowl at Thor deepened even as he answered Jane’s question. “We made a wager yesterday.”

Thor grinned even as he shrugged. “Loki lost.”

“I was disadvantaged!”

“As was I, brother.” Loki crossed his arms over his chest in a sulking gesture.

The pair of them had made a wager concerning the Advisory Council yesterday. But there were rules since it was against their honor to seriously injure a commoner, and with their dismissal that was exactly what those men had become. They could bruise, but not truly harm. Thor would argue that tapping someone with Mjolnir without actually harming them was as difficult as Loki pulling his magically enhanced punches. Loki would disagree considering the number of council members dismissed had been an odd number and Thor had decided to use one of the council member’s head to hit another.

Jane held out a hand and with an easy smile Thor pressed it into her hand. It was a simple gold coin. She’d seen a small pouch full of them in Loki’s study. She handed it back to him, her brow furrowed.

Thor shrugged again and explained without waiting to be asked. “The consequences are little. It is that I won that annoys him.”

She glanced at Loki again who still looked agitated. “Ah.” But rather than point out that Loki was acting like a child she changed the subject. “How long before the titling ceremony?”

“Such events are held between midday and early evening—…”

“Just in time for Asgard to gorge itself on food and drink.” Thor’s brow furrowed a little as he slipped the coin into a small compartment in his armor. Loki’s voice had a vicious edge to it now. “Brother?”

“Fine.” The word had been all but snapped at Thor. Now they both knew Loki had more on his mind than just a lost bet. But they both knew from experience there was no coaxing it out of Loki if he didn’t want to speak. Instead they just silently stared at him. After several minutes he gave them both an annoyed look. “When has that ever worked?”

Thor started to grin. “It just—…” He cut off sharply when Jane stepped on his foot with her heel. It didn’t hurt but it was as direct a hint as any that Loki had ever given him over the centuries.

Loki’s look turned black. But then he ground his teeth together, glancing at the double door entrance in the distance that led to the feasting hall. An uncomfortable silence filled the area between them before Loki started speaking slowly without looking at either of them. “I intend to present Jane as my choice before father.”

A wide, jovial smile spread across Thor’s face. “Loki, that’s wonderful.”

Still the trickster didn’t move, asking quietly, “And if he says no?”

Thor blinked in surprise several times before exclaiming. “Brother, father will utter no such thing.”

Now Loki turned to give Thor a pointed look as he asked, “And if he intends to test her?”
“From what I have heard concerning your time on Alfheim, if even a quarter of it is truth he will not.”

Jane had been silently listening but now she piped in. “What have you heard?”

Thor glanced from one to the other. “Your children spoke of your daring rescue to save Loki’s life.”

Loki rubbed at his bicep with his left hand, his expression turning thoughtful. “Now all that remains is to arrange a slight scuffle.”

Jane was frowning again as she asked, “Scuffle?”

“Traditionally one does not simply walk up the king and announce their betrothal.” Loki’s gaze was a little distant as his mind turned over possibilities.

Thor took over with a more complete response. “When a prince or princess presents their choice to their king, there is the need to prove they are worthy.”

A malicious little smile curled Loki’s lips as he said softly, “Perhaps we could drag Tia back to the palace so Jane could demonstrate her fighting abilities.”

“Loki.” It was hard to tell if Thor was actually rebuking the trickster or not. At this point neither of them had any sympathy for Tia.

“It was just a thought.” Loki shrugged as he studied his fingers. Which could mean it was a thought quickly dismissed…or a very real possibility.

Jane’s expression turned curious as she thought about her magical display. “And why doesn’t my little demonstration at the gathering count?”

“Magic.” Thor and Loki both said this at the same time, although Loki did so with a disgusted sneer.

A thoughtful look crossed Thor’s face and Jane felt an inkling of trepidation settle when she saw that look. She didn’t have time to protest, physically or verbally, as Thor wrapped an arm firmly but carefully around her waist and pressed his lips to hers. She had just long enough to widen her eyes before the world exploded around her.

The breakfast banquet had full attendance. Today was the day after all. After too long the royal family would finally be complete again. Odin was at the high table, surrounded by children whom his son had very trustingly left in his care. It didn’t hurt that trust that Fenris was keeping careful watch under his feet. His sons and Jane were not in attendance and he was curious as to why. “Where is your father?”

Indel shrugged and took a big bite of his ham steak, grinning and chewing. “Dunno. Uncle Thor wanted to talk to dada and mama.”

Mischief didn’t glance up from his plate. He HATED eating at the high table where everyone could stare at him. He’d rather be invisible but if he did that now, he’d do it tonight so he was trying to resist.

Talia shook her head quickly, drinking carefully from her goblet before leaning over to whisper in Indel’s ear. He frowned a little, glancing at her before whispering back. Odin turned his
attention to breakfast, letting them enjoy their secrets and remembering fondly such breakfasts between Thor and Loki a thousand years ago.

The ground beneath their feet rumbled and shook, the torches in their iron holdings wobbled and Odin was suddenly reminded of how rarely it did so unless Loki was particularly upset. The warriors stopped eating, eyes moving around. The Avengers stood up as a unit, Steve hearing something and glancing at Wolverine whose nose twitched.

Thor had been known for throwing open the doors on occasion, loud and boisterous as he entered the dining hall. Never had he been thrown through the wall next to the doors, leaving an almost perfect imprint of his body as he went sailing onto the table. Warriors and courtiers scattered as food went flying. Odin barely raised an eyebrow as a snarling, very blue Loki entered through the doorway, magic whipping around him. Obviously magic had picked Thor up and thrown him, although what could make Loki that mad that he would physically assault his brother to such a degree was still a mystery. Thor sat up with a surprised expression, backpedaling across the surface of the table and sending the settings falling as Loki leapt on top and followed, a Jötunn ice sword forming around his hand as he moved.

Eyes widening, Thor moved faster just before his brother touched the front of his armor, the metal actually bending under the depth of the cold of his skin, which should not have been possible. The warriors three stood there with their jaws hanging open. Indel peered over the table with a grin, scooped up by Odin so the boy was able to see. Mischief sat on the table next to them, Talia in his lap.

Loki leaned down to bare his sharp teeth in a growl, red eyes flashing. “MINE.”

His arm moved back to stab Thor, halted by a gentle touch to his back. “Loki.” His head whipped around, growling again and Jane just smiled up at him, unafraid of his current state. She was smart enough to wrap her own magic around her skin to keep from getting accidental frostbite. “Let your brother go. He’s being an ass, but it was with good intentions.” It hadn’t been her plan that was for sure. How could Thor not know Loki would react like this when he’d kissed me?

Jane may be human but her instincts had been highly tuned. She felt Sif move before she heard the Asgardian. She whipped around while pulling out the dagger from the invisible sheathe Loki had made her promise to always wear. Her stance left her perfectly balanced to defend Loki. Hearing Jane had brought reality back but now Loki understood. It was a ritual, that the royal family would present their choices to the king, showing that their intended would defend them as their equal. Thor wanted to piss him off enough that he would react like a warrior defending his mate. Leave it to Thor to decide that a choreographed moment wasn’t good enough compared to a violent dance. He’d been so furious he hadn’t seen his brother, he’d seen a rival. A slow smirk curled Loki’s lips, the ice sword melting away with the blue of his skin before he let Thor thump back on the table. “Idiot.”

Darcy started fanning herself next to Erik. “You are getting me one for Christmas.” Erik just silently shook his head.

Sif didn’t pull her weapon, just watched the pair of them as Loki flowed to Jane’s side. But then her moving had been nothing more than showing just how Jane would respond. Jane broke her stance to glance at him and he lightly kissed her knuckle before guiding her to the high table. Loki spoke proudly, loud enough for everyone to hear. “All-Father, I present to you for your consideration Jane Foster of Midgard, as future shield maiden for Prince Loki Odinson of Asgard.”

Another quick glance before suddenly deciding to say something whether it was
appropriate or not. Jane reversed the positioning of their hands. “All-Father, I present to you for your consideration Loki Odinson of Asgard, as future husband to Jane Foster of Midgard.”

Odin was absolutely beaming and there was a ‘huzzah’ that filled the air. Odin put Indel back in his chair as he stood. “Let it be known throughout Asgard: the betrothal of Loki Odinson and Jane Foster shall commence.”

Indel was frowning thoughtfully as he asked, “Does that mean you will be my really real mama?”

As soon as Odin nodded in agreement, Jane smiled happily. “Yes, it does.”

The boy grinned toothily. “Good, then I want a baby brother.” Talia nodded her head eagerly in agreement, still in Mischief’s lap who hid his grin in her hair. Jane hid her blushing face in Loki’s chest who looked a little like someone had hit him in the head with a brick.

No more. Maybe in a thousand years he’d think about it but those three, not including when Hela had her immature moments, were more than enough.

Tony smirked wickedly from the table, watching Sif rescue Thor from a dish of gravy. “Huzzah!”

Jane glared around Loki before her eyes narrowed at the inventor. Oh she was getting him back for that one. “Did you get the plaque installed yet?”

Cup halfway to his mouth, Tony paused to frown at her in confusion. “Plaque?”

Tapping her finger to her lips as if she was thinking about it when she knew for a fact he had. “Let’s see…I think you were having a Loki hole in your tower engraved to say: best ass kicking courtesy of a rage monster.” Then her voice turned saccharine as she asked, “Wasn’t that it?”

Loki whipped around and glared viciously at Stark who squeaked before hiding behind Banner. “Janie! You weren’t supposed to tell Papa Smurf.”

Jane rolled her eyes as Loki’s narrowed in true anger. “Oh yeah, that made it all better.”

Bruce just huffed and sat down at the table. “Forget it, Tony, I’m hungry.”

The inventor tugged gently at his elbow as he whined. “Locks! Old buddy. Pal. Comrade in--…”

Loki’s hand gripped the front of his neck and picked him up off his feet, purring dangerously. “I am certain I can find another window around here somewhere.” Loki frowned slightly, feeling an odd buzzing where his skin touched Tony’s. Interesting.

Steve sighed. “Please put Stark down, Loki.”

The trickster quirked an eyebrow at the hero. “Why? You have to admit, he is more of a nuisance than an asset.”

Tony gasped, “…hey!”
Steve fixed Loki with a slightly disappointed look. “Because I’m starting to like you and it would be a shame to go back to hating you.”

Loki seemed to contemplate this for a moment before releasing Tony with a sneer who collapsed to the floor. “You are right, of course. A friendship is not worth ruining over an annoyance.”

Panting hoarsely, the finger marks around his neck disappearing in a matter of seconds. “Right. Here.”

Loki knelt down, his green eyes drinking it in and realizing Tony’s magic instinctively healed him. This he was going to have to control immediately. It sounded like a wonderful effect, until an injury occurred that meant his magic would focus on it completely and leave him nothing to defend himself with. But this wasn’t the place to bring this matter to light. Instead he nodded decisively to his friend. “So you are. I tell you this truly, wholly, and with utmost sincerity…Sif!”

Looking up over her cup. “Loki?”

Still staring at Tony but clearly speaking to her. “I just realized I was exactly like this human down to the attitude so you have my sincerest apologies for being such a colossal pain in your ass.” Jane slapped a hand over her mouth to muffle her giggles.

Sif’s lip quirked, realizing this was more than just Loki teasing his human friend. It was a clear signal to Jane that she was no longer on his shit list. “You weren’t that bad. At least you can fight.”

Tony pouted. “You all suck.”

Loki’s lip twitched and he lightly patted Tony’s face before standing and pulling him to his feet. Glancing around at the AEsir and everyone else just silently watching, he took a page from his brother’s book and reached for an unoccupied tankard of mead, raising it high as Jane leaned against his side. Looking at her with a smirk, free arm wrapping around her. “To a thousand victories…and may we never know defeat.”

“AYE!!”

“I thought you don’t get sick anymore.” Jane said this softly, her hand rubbing in gentle circles.

Loki hadn’t gotten sick yet…and the emphasis was the yet of that statement. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, bent forward and pale skin holding a green tinge to it. It was only a matter of hours before the title ceremony and the castle was already abuzz with activity. Jane had sought him out to get a sneak peak of what he would be wearing, maybe enjoy a few kisses, only to find him bent over his knees and breathing in controlled measures. His reply was mumbled through clenched teeth. “I don’t get sick after.”

Thor’s coronation had been nothing, mostly because he knew it wasn’t going to last long but also because the occasion had little to do with him. This was another matter entirely.

Jane nibbled on the inside of her lip, pausing in rubbing his back soothingly. “I’ll get G’dath—…”

“No.” His reply was just quick enough that she knew it was less about the healer being able to help and more about his revealing a weakness to anyone other than her. It was embarrassing
to him since this nonsense should have faded with his shyness as he aged. “I’m fine just... give me a few minutes.”

She rolled her eyes affectionately. “Stubborn.”

Loki’s eyes were closed, taking in slow breaths. After a few seconds he did reply. “Pushy.”

“Willful.”

His eyes slowly opened, remembering this particular game well. He knew what she was doing but the fact was it was working. “Assertive.”

“Obstinate.” Her tone had a slightly imperious twist to it.

His hair, recently washed but un-styled, had fallen forward and he looked up at her through the strands and spoke the next word slowly. “Officious.”

“Officious? Really?” She didn’t particularly care for that one but the stakes just rose. Her counter offer had been be more impressive or he’d win. She smirked his smirk, a naughty little twinkle in her eyes. “Pertinacious.”

He growled and pulled her to him, nausea forgotten and she giggled in delight as she sat in his lap and ran a finger down the bridge of his nose. The only man she’d ever known whose turn on was a battle of wits.

This was a good day. The ceremony and all that aside, in a physical way he was feeling almost normal. No bouts of tiredness and he’d taken a quick nap earlier to maintain that feeling of ‘normal’. Normal enough for what he was about to propose. He nipped at her naughty fingers before cupping her face, voice husky. “Temptress. After all this I want to show you Vanaheim.”

Jane smiled. There was still so much to do with the war coming but she was agreeable for whatever planet he wanted to show her. “Once we--...”

“No. After this. Tonight.”

She could see the barely maintained restraint in his eyes now that they were officially courting. She knew exactly what he wanted and found herself frowning just a little in concern. “I didn’t think we could.”

Nuzzling her temple, enjoying her sharp inhale. “Vanaheim is the exception to most rules.”

Jane frowned. Wait. What? What the heck did that mean? “I don’t get it.”

On any other day, in any other circumstance he wouldn’t be inclined to indulge in this particular bit of hypocrisy. But if the war truly ended the way he believed it would he was going to make the most of his time. “I believe you humans have a saying that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”

“Ye-es.” She was giving him a wary look, still confused.

He rolled his eyes in disgust. “The nine realms have a similar philosophy of Vanaheim.”

Her jaw dropped open as she asked incredulously, “Seriously?”

Loki shook his head mournfully before shrugging. “Hypocritical but not something I am
opposed to taking advantage of. Helheim would be a delightful place for the little ones to spend the night.” And well protected under Hela’s watchful eyes. She would spoil them rotten but he wouldn’t have to spend a moment worrying about them.

Jane frowned a little, refusing to believe that a man who was such a stickler for AEsir law would just let something like that slide. “And your father won’t object?”

His nose started to curl before he spoke. “Not that I believe my mother and father ever engaged in such activities…icky, as Indel would say…but if memory serves he took advantage as well. I could threaten to bring that up if he seems resistant. In court.”

A slow smile spread across Jane’s face. Well if it wouldn’t wreck their future together she certainly had no objections. “What did you have in mind, prince?” She caught the barest flicker of surprise in his eyes and pulled back with a huff, pushing herself to her feet. “Loki if you truly believe I would say no I will be forced to smite you.”

“A gentleman never assumes…” She wasn’t buying it. Sighing and holding his arms outward when there wasn’t anything he could say to convince her otherwise. “Fine. Smite me.”

Amber sparked in her eyes as she rushed forward and for just a moment he thought she was going to try. Then he was on his back howling as her fingers found all the worst places to tickle. He could have ducked out of her way, but then that would defeat the purpose of being caught. She was on top of the bed over him, her knees on either side of his ribcage as her fingers attacked. Then he went for the backs of her knees and soon the pair of them were rolling on the covers, giggling and wrestling.

“I think I’m too young to see this.” Tony had opened the door first, to see if his friend needed any help with anything. Pepper had followed him and Darcy had met both of them outside the doors to Loki’s rooms since she couldn’t find Jane.

“Then close your eyes, weirdo, it’s cute.” Darcy gave him an eye roll as she said it, grinning as she watched and having no qualms about it.

Tony glanced back at Pepper, not able to decipher the look on her face. “I suppose you find this cute as well, Miss Potts.”

“Tempted to follow their example, Mister Stark.” Tony blinked but he wasn’t stupid and quickly followed after Pepper who was walking with a particular sway of her hips.

Darcy sighed forlornly but closed the forgotten doors to give those two some privacy. She needed a man.

Loki breathed slowly, his fists clenched at his sides. He could hear the crowd already. He wasn’t sure about the aristocracy but he knew the great halls were filled to capacity with the citizens of Asgard. Indel looked up and smiled crookedly, looking like a young prince in deep blues with silver accents. His favored greens with gold accents were on his own form.

As his declared heir, Indel would accompany him down that long walk towards the throne where Mischief and Talia would already be in place. A title ceremony, as important as it was for a young royal, was a relatively short affair compared to other ceremonies since there wasn’t all that much to it. Father would say a few words, the correct response always being to agree. Then they would stand as a family before the throne. Simple. Quick.

Only there were quite a few people receiving titles today, which would drag things out a
bit. He would love if this could also be a wedding, but there wasn’t the time and father would never agree to it. As binding as the courtship was, even with their bond, a minimum of one month between acceptance and ceremony was mandated by magical edict set forth before Odin’s father was king.

“They’re all really loud, huh?”

Smiling a little at Indel, forcing down his nervousness. “Well, I suppose there are quite a few people here but we mustn’t let them see that we are afraid.”

The boy nodded slowly. “I remember…just keep watching grandpa and he will make me brave.”

Loki frowned just a little at Indel in curiosity as he asked, “Who told you that?”

Shrugging, playing with the edge of his tunic. “Uncle.”

Loki muttered under his breath. “…wish he’d told me that…” A large, calloused hand lightly clapped his shoulder, the arm attached to the hand remaining and he jumped in surprise. Since when had Thor ever been able to sneak up on him? Snarling at him. “Stop doing that.”

Thor was smiling and easily ignored Loki’s ever changing moods. He wore his formal armor and looked every inch a future king. “I was briefly detained but I see Indel has already reassured you, brother.”

Glaring lightly over his shoulder at the thunderer and tugging at his light armor. “I have no need for reassurance, oaf. I was a prince once before.”

The trickster wasn’t trying very hard to hide his lie, even a harmless one. Thor shook his head at his brother. “Still incapable of sincerity, as always.”

Loki put an imperious note in his tone. “Our positions are reversed on this eve. It is your task to offer reassurance, for which you are failing miserably.”

Thor winked at Indel who giggled at their antics before lightly tugging Loki close by the back of his neck, whispering softly in his ear. “You have made this family very proud, Loki. All you must do is put one foot in front of the other to be a prince of Asgard, but you will always be a brother and a son to us.”

Loki swallowed but didn’t dare respond. He wished mother was here. So much he would change to have her here. But then he glanced down at Indel. This boy, however, would not be sacrificed to have her back. His hand came up to squeeze Thor’s wrist lightly. He didn’t turn but Thor knew. Patting Loki’s back, Thor slipped on his helmet and walked down the red carpet with the procession, Mjolnir in hand and a cheer of greeting filled the air.

Indel giggled. “His hat’s funny.”

Loki smirked slightly. “Just wait until you see mine.” It was their turn, everyone else already in place. Pulling in a deep breath, he held out his right hand for Indel to slip his own small hand into and the two of them shared a small smile before walking.

Eyes forward, head up, back straight. Loki was the picture of dignity with Indel at his side grinning and waving, apparently deciding to be shy another day. Soldiers in their golden armor lined both sides of the carpet but they were spaced far enough apart that the audience on both sides could easily see them. The audience side to the left of the throne held spaces reserved for almost everyone he was close to in on manner or another.
The light elves were all grouped together, Trax standing with G’dath on one side and Azni on the other. The Avengers, Tony missing from the group, were all lined up. Wolverine had his arms crossed, brow furrowed as he looked around. Darcy and Pepper were standing next to one another, Erik standing awkwardly next to Pepper. On the opposite side Sif, Volstagg, and Hogun stood in a line, wearing their best armor.

And there she was, standing slightly apart from the others with Anya standing at her side. Jane was a vision in a flowing cream colored dress with amber accents. She was smiling in such a way that he knew it was all for him and it bolstered his confidence.

Thor was smiling proudly, standing on Odin’s right, one step down from the landing before the throne. Talia was standing in front of him, standing up on the balls of her feet anxiously and dressed in soft gold. Mischief shared the step with her, wearing a green tunic from Loki’s childhood that Anya had altered with silver accents instead of his preferred gold. Fandral was smiling on the left, two steps down with Tony on the next step down. Loki and Indel stopped at the bottom step and knelt down, side by side. A glance up from Talia and when Thor nodded, she and Mischief moved swiftly to Loki’s left and knelt.

The crowd quieted down as Odin lifted a hand for silence and rose from his throne. “People of Asgard, you have come forward today to witness the bequeathing of royal titles to not just one, but three worthy sons of Asgard. In addition, a lovely daughter of Asgard, an honor not held to us in many, many centuries.” The cheers rose in volume for a moment before falling quiet once more. “Long have I held the hope that Asgard would be whole once more, a dream now fulfilled with the return of Asgard’s second son: Loki Odinson.” More cheers. Metal gauntlets hitting armor before the quiet descended. “And to welcome not just himself, but his heir as well is a gift beyond measure.” He turned his gaze to Loki. “Do you acknowledge that your name is Loki Odinson?”

Loki raised his head, meeting his father’s gaze and his voice carrying. “I do acknowledge.”

“Do you further accept that you are a son of Odin as you were a son of Frigga and are a brother of Thor?”

The family that he thought hadn’t wanted him. This time was different, for it wasn’t blood that held them together. It was a choice. His heart quickened and he swallowed once. “I do.”

A small smile started to form as Odin spoke, the words traditional but as important as any vow. “Loki Odinson, do you pledge your life to guard the nine realms as a prince of Asgard? To preserve the peace and to pledge yourself only to the good of the realms?”

He’d had this ceremony before when he’d been five. This was different now, the words more important and more impactful. He knew the proper response but this time he offered it with understanding of what it entailed. “I so swear.”

Odin gestured with Gungnir and shining gold armor appeared on Loki’s body, his cape the emerald green that all remembered. A soldier stepped forward with the horned helmet that had Thor smirking just a little bit. Loki sent his brother a quick scowl before clearing his expression as he rose and walked up the steps, kneeling again on the landing.

It was symbolic, in a way. He walked up to the steps as any citizen of Asgard was allowed, wearing armor that anyone could wear. Only the closest to the family walked up the steps towards the throne. Only those of royal descent wore the cape and metal armor that went with the prestige. Just as only family stepped onto the landing before the throne. The exchange between the two brothers was not lost on their father. Odin may or may not have accidentally thumped Loki’s forehead with his forefinger as he put the helmet back on his son’s head.
Indel giggled behind his hand to see his father’s helmet.

Odin held up a waiting finger and nodded to Tony who smirked and broke protocol, stepping to the left for a case. A gentle murmur went through the crowd. Odin started speaking and there were glances within the crowd as they all paid attention. The breaking of protocol was always important. “As all here know, there are certain rites that a prince is honored with over the years to show their worth before king and court. A long overdue acknowledgement will now be honored.” Tony stepped forward with Loki’s scepter, only now it had been modified with a weaving of elven metal, adamantium silver and elven gold mixing along the staff. Odin took the staff and held it above his head as Tony stepped back. “This scepter had been created by the finest mind of Midgard, and enhanced with Alfheim craftsmanship. It is more than just the staff of a powerful mage, it is a scepter of the second prince of Asgard. It is a symbol of strength, made by a metal that cannot break, and held by the conqueror of Helheim.” Eyes widened and jaws dropped.

A stunned silence filled the throne room. No one moved. No one really breathed. Then Sif stood up just a little straighter, bringing up the metal gauntlet on her wrist to hit rhythmically against her breast plate. Others soon joined the rhythm until it was a pulse of sound that reverberated through the realm. More than just the welcoming of a prince. The warriors were welcoming one of their own.

Odin acknowledging the weapon was more than just a formality, but a declaration that Loki was just as recognized and capable of ruling as Thor. Thor would still wear the crown as the eldest, but never again would it be said that Loki was unworthy. Putting emphasis into each word. “Rise Prince Loki Odinson of Asgard.”

The cheers thundered through the hall, overwhelming in their power. Odin gestured to his left, fierce pride in his eye. Loki took his scepter and stepped to the first step before he sent a smirk over to Thor. He found brown eyes from a beaming face, Jane clapping enthusiastically. She was the only one he allowed to touch his scepter and it hadn’t even occurred to him she’d conspired with his father and he assumed Azni to get the modifications done in time. He had a feeling Tony might have had something to do with it, too. He grinned toothily and winked at her.

Indel looked up and grinned as the applause quieted. Odin crooked a finger and Indel quickly climbed up the steps, standing in front of him on the landing with a bounce. Chuckles sporadically moved through the crowd before they quieted. Odin put a gentle hand on the boy’s head. “Do you understand your name to be Indel Lokison?”

Indel nodded under his palm. “Yes, that’s me.”

Odin fought to keep from chuckling. This little boy was going to be a treat. Indel reminded him of Loki, but he held a sweetness to him that Thor had carried as a very young child. “And from this day forward, you are to be raised by your father Prince Loki Odinson in Asgardian image.”

Nodding. “Uh huh.”

The boy was five, no one expected eloquence during their initial ceremony. “Then I hereby acknowledge you as a member of this family, son of Loki, grandson of Odin, nephew of Thor. You are hereby Prince Indel Lokison of Asgard.” Indel grinned and turned to look at Talia who rose and moved with quiet grace up the steps. Odin transferred his hand to holding it lightly on her head. “Do you understand that your name is Talia Lokisdóttir?”

Talia nodded silently and he smiled. Jane had explained that there was no possibility Talia would speak during this ceremony.

Odin raised his voice to carry. “From this day forward, you shall be raised by your father
Prince Loki Odinson in Asgardian image. I hereby acknowledge you as a member of this family, daughter of Loki, granddaughter of Odin, niece of Thor. You are hereby Princess Talia Lokisdóttir.” They both looked at Mischief who wobbled just a little as he rose and joined them on the landing, his face flushing. Odin put his hand on the boy’s shoulder, feeling him tremble slightly and gently squeezing. He was well aware of how shy this boy was and had no intention in prolonging this. “Do you understand your name to be Mischief Lokison?”

Mischief nodded but knew he was old enough that he couldn’t get away with not speaking like Talia could. “I understand.”

Odin’s voice became a distant drone, speaking when there was a pause and just wanting it to be over so people would stop staring at him. Using Gungnir, Odin gestured and silver armor similar in style to Loki’s appeared on his form. Mischief was too young for a cape and helmet of his own until after he entered his proving ground, but armor was the next step for his siblings. When Talia and Indel were older they would receive their own armor to begin training.

Talia gripped Mischief’s hand, signaling as the applause thundered that it was over and all three of them ran over to Loki. Mischief tried to hide behind him, Loki pulling him tightly to his side and whispering a quiet soothing spell. Talia and Indel turned, both holding onto his right hand within the safety of their father’s embrace. Loki locked eyes with Jane again, sharing this moment with her. She belonged up here with them. Soon, was all he could think.

Heimdall spoke, his voice booming. “I present before you the royal family of Asgard. What say you?” Fists over hearts, all bowed, and the ancient magic that tied the sovereign and his family to Asgard and its people strengthened.

Author's Notes:

*We have a prince, ladies and gentlemen! Now if only Thanos would cooperate and die life would be good.*

Next:

*A trip to Vanaheim; A trip to Jotunheim*
HELHEIM

It was so sweet it was making her nauseous. When the Bi-frost had faded, Hela was able to see Loki and Jane standing next to one another with three children around them. Fenris’ tail was wagging, already sniffing around but never venturing too far. Jane’s fingers were threaded through his and the pair of them kept giving one another little glances.

Indel bounced up to Hela, not even pausing at the glamour on her face. “Guess what?!!”

She didn’t miss a beat. “Thanos has discovered he craps skittles and has abandoned his insanity to end the universe in order to chase the rainbow?” The boy paused in his bouncing to stare up at her, his already large green eyes widening. Hela smirked and ruffled his white hair before taking a step towards the pair and giving Loki an innocent expression. “Just visiting?”

Mischief gave her an angelic expression. “We’re having a sleep over with you.”

She didn’t veer her gaze from Loki as she asked, “Says who?”

The boy replied with an impish light in his eyes. “Tony said that’s what they’re called when adults want to dump their kids on unsuspecting fools. Surprise.”

Hela and Loki exchanged a moment of silence just staring at one another. A silence she chose to break first. “With the understanding that you will be picking them up by morning.”

Annoyance flashed in his eyes, there and gone. Fast enough that only she would catch it. Hela knew it wasn’t because he didn’t want to retrieve his children. She knew he wanted to leave them here until after the war was done. But that would interfere with her plans so she wasn’t about to accommodate him.

Loki’s jaw tightened almost imperceptively before he got control of his expression and he smirked. “Of course.”

Hela gestured for the three of them to step back with her before giving Jane a wicked look. “Have fun.”

Jane wasn’t quite able to pull off a smirk, but it was close enough that Hela blinked in surprise. Just before Loki gestured to Heimdall all three of them darted forward to get hugs. As they drifted back towards Hela he raised his eyebrow at her in a silent invitation. She just smirked and lightly crossed her arms over her chest. She was not about to gain a hug from him now when the souls of Helheim could observe. With a last glance and a gesture, the pair of them were taken away.

“Come on.”

Indel’s fingers found her hand and refused to let go, asking bluntly, “What happened to your face?”

Answering him with a blank expression. “I was horribly burned fighting with a fire demon.”

“Really?”
Her lips twitched in amusement before she admitted the truth. “No. It’s a glamour.”

Indel tilted his head a little before he shrugged. “Oh.”

Hela paused, looking over each of them carefully to impress the importance of following her command. “And you will not point that out. Not everyone here is friendly.”

Mischief rolled his eyes. “We’re not stupid, Hela.”

Indel was frowning before he asked, “Like the courtiers?”

“Yes.”

Talia drifted towards Hela nervously but Indel just made a face, not at all impressed by the Asgardian courtiers. Indel looked up at her as they walked slowly with her away from the Bi-frost point towards the dark palace of Helheim. “Why is dada taking mama to Vanaheim?” Hela could think of a few reasons. A few reasons that she wouldn’t be going into detail with them. While she had no qualms in sex education she knew Loki would have an absolute tantrum.

Mischief grinned. He was 300. He knew a few things. Not many things, but enough to know what adults did when kids weren’t present. “To do kissing without us around.”

Indel turned to look at his brother, still holding Hela’s hand. “So? It’s icky but…so? Why can’t we come?”

Hela’s lip twitched as she looked down at Indel. “Do you know why father kisses Jane?”

His little head shook vigorously. “Nuh uh. She’s mama now.”

Hela was well aware of the title ceremony. She was also aware of the engagement. The pair were as good as married but that wouldn’t be what would make her call Jane mother. “Not to me she isn’t. Not yet.”

“When?”

Little boys were notorious blabbermouths and there was no conceivable possibility in creation she was going to say anything yet. “Soon.”

“But when? Hela, when?” When Hela didn’t respond Indel pulled in a slow breath so he’d have enough air. “When? When? Whe--…” He scowled up at her as she smirked at him over her shoulder, his voice stolen from him.

Her eyebrow lifted at him, finding his scowl amusing on such a little face. “Your father and Jane may indulge your nagging. I will not.” He stuck his tongue out at her before grinning and letting go of her hand, running towards Garm who backed up a few steps warily. Hela glanced at Mischief. “Do you ever find him annoying?”

Talia dutifully nodded because little brothers were annoying. Mischief shrugged. “Sometimes. But then father finds all of us annoying…especially when we do it on purpose.” He smirked evilly when he said the last part. Hela just laughed.

Indel pouted at Garm before running back to Hela and holding up his hands in a beseeching manner. After a second she sighed and relented. He was ready with his question as soon as she released him. “How come he’s scared of me?”
Hela rolled her eyes. Garm was not afraid of children. He was intimidated by Loki and he was afraid of her but those were the only exceptions as far as she knew. “He’s not afraid of you. He’s afraid of me if he does something that harms you.”

Indel turned to give Garm a considering look. “Oh. Can I ride him?”

Garm growled, glaring at the boy. “No.”

She gave Indel a censoring look. “No. It’s not polite to climb onto people if they have not invited you to do so.”

The boy shrugged. “Is he a person? I thought he was like Fenris-oomph.” Fenris’ tail whipped to the left and knocked Indel down, the wolf growling softly at him and walking away. Indel stared at the wolf, brow furrowing and rubbing at his bruised bottom.

Indel looked up at Hela with tears welling up in his green eyes and with a sigh she picked him up. She rested him on her hip, her left arm around Mischief’s shoulders to pull him along. Talia was still holding his hand, waving goodbye to Garm as they passed. Hela corrected the boy gently. “Everyone who has a voice of their own is a person, no matter their appearance.”

Indel sniffed, his lower lip trembling dangerously. “Why did he knock me down?”

Hela only felt a little sorry for him. He was very young, so she decided to explain carefully. “Fenris was upset because you insulted him by saying that he was not a real person.”

The boy was still pouting. “He didn’t have to knock me down!”

“But unlike Garm, Fenris cannot speak…” Hela paused to give the wolf a considering look. Fenris’ hackles rose, lips pulling back to expose his canines. Hela rolled her eyes and started walking again. “It was just a thought.” Indel started poking at the skeletal side of her face with his finger and she let him.

Talia had been thinking carefully about Hela’s question for why their father kissed Jane. “Cause papa loves mother, right?”

Hela nodded to the elfling. “Correct. Love is a good reason for kissing. Well sometimes when adults love one another, they hide for quiet kisses.”

Indel growled softly. “Hela, I’m not a baby.”

She gave him an amused look and felt like patting him on his adorable little head. “I’m aware you’re not.”

He gave her a questioning look that had a lot of hope. “Are they making a baby? A baby brother?”

Hela almost dropped him, staring at him. “What?”

Now he was starting to look confused, as if he were getting his facts mixed up that he’d heard but that didn’t line up logically in his mind. “Does the sex thing happen before the baby or after?” Mischief bent over, shoulders shaking in silent mirth.

Hela could help but squeak, “Did father really tell you about sex?” No way. She would be surprised if Mischief even knew all the ins and outs (pun intended) of sex.
Indel shook his head quickly. “Nuh uh.”

Her eyes swung from one child to the other. “Then who—…G’dath.” Both Indel and Talia nodded rapidly. Hela snorted a laugh, certain the healer hadn’t been graphic, but not terribly surprised the topic had been brought to her. A healer was much more practical when it came to questions concerning normal body functions. “Loki is going to kill her.”

Talia frowned. “Why?”

Answering her first. “Because.” Because she would mention that when Loki returned to pick them up. Oh to be the fly on the wall during that confrontation. Swinging back around, expression firm as she stared at Indel. “No, I’m not going to talk about sex with you.”

Indel shrugged as if he didn’t care before his expression turned excited. “We get to stay up late, right?” Because Tony had reassured him it was one of the rules of a sleepover. Staying up and eating sugar…and something called Truth or Dare.

Slowly lifting an eyebrow, her words chosen carefully as she gleaned that little tidbit from his mind. “You have a bedtime?”

“Ye-…” Mischief put a hand over Talia’s mouth and shook his own head quickly.

The two brothers caught on quickly. Indel started bouncing excitedly against her hip. “And we get to have dessert for dinner.”

Pausing in her steps, head tilted slightly as she stared at the child curiously. “Father gives you dessert for dinner?”

“Only on Tuesdays.”

She gave him a toothy grin. It was fun that they were so quick to learn the rules to the game. “What a coincidence that today is Tuesday.”

“Yep.” Indel chirped the word with a big smile.

Loki would frown at her. Jane might throw a fit, the more concerned of the two of them about their eating habits. But wasn’t the whole point to spoil them a little?

VANAHEIM

Somehow Loki had arranged for a small little cabin by the lake for them. Heimdall had been kind enough to set the Bi-frost down not far from their destination. It perhaps took a little longer than necessary, the two of them holding hands and strolling. As much as they loved the children, they were both relishing the time they now had to themselves.

She leaned against his arm a little more heavily and he immediately wrapped his arm around her to pull her in tighter to his body. Under a bank of trees they both paused, Jane’s head shifting to lean against his chest as they watched the sun slowly set in the distance.

“It’s like Alfheim.”

A small smile touched Loki’s lips. “I know.”

She glanced up to see his eyes alight with mischief. He flicked his gaze to the right and she followed his hint with her own eyes, gasping to see that the cabin was very similar to the one they’d
left behind. “Magic?”

“Of course.”

His hand came to rest on the small of her back as he guided her towards their destination. On the porch they both paused and he opened the door with a flick of his wrist. It was difficult to say who moved towards who first yet their lips met and moved in harmony. After a time he pulled back to lean his forehead against hers before indicating behind her with his eyes. Curiosity peaked, she turned.

Inside the cabin there was a small banquet of foods already in place on the table. But no place setting. By the fire that was burning brightly in the fireplace, dining arrangements had been set up for two. Loki may deny it until his dying breath that he was romantic but she just felt herself melt.

Soon they were both on a large blanket that Loki had unfolded, eating amongst soft conversation. Loki carefully cut a small bite of his steak, holding it out towards her with his eyebrow lightly quirked and a teasing tilt of his lip. Her brown eyes warmed as she leaned forward to slowly accept the food, closing her eyes to enjoy chewing and ruthlessly teasing him in return.

She picked up a glass, the wine light as she swallowed. A droplet clung stubbornly to her bottom lip and when she absently licked her lip Loki lost the game. He surged forward, cupping her face to kiss her and she smiled against his lips.

Curiosity rushed within her blood as he leaned in further and coaxed her into slipping slowly back. What sort of lover would he be? Was he as skilled with giving pleasure as he was in wit and humor? She shivered and felt gooseflesh on her arm as his fingers trailed slowly up the limb. A knowing smirk pulled at his lip as he eased back from the kiss.

He wasn’t in any hurry and it showed, stretching out next to her instead of covering her with his body. The only betrayal that he wasn’t as collected as he appeared was the slight tightening of his jaw. He started mapping out her jaw and neck with gentle kisses and Jane gasped as she felt his magic caress her own. She groaned as she felt his tongue dip into the hollow of her throat. “…soo evil…”

She felt his smirk this time against her skin before he lifted his head, wicked delight in his eyes. Her eyes widened and she gasped while arching her back as he cupped her breast, his thumb brushing her covered nipple. His voice was silky and filled with a continuous purr. “Evil, am I?”

Jane nodded her head several times, grabbing for the lapels of his tunic and dragging him down for another kiss, murmuring against his lips. “I love you so-o much…you evil man.”

His thumb never paused as he pulled his head back, until she decided she’d had enough. She growled softly and tried to rise, pouting with an unhappy sigh when he pulled back further. “Ah, ah, ah…” Only when she settled back down against the blanket did his thumb return to its ministrations and his smile grew. “Now then. I will at some point during our evening satisfy your every desire more thoroughly and completely than in your wildest imaginings.”

He was in a playful mood. Great.

“But only after we play a little game.” His tone was light but his green eyes were full of passion. Her eyes narrowed a little bit at him and his thumb added a little bit more delightful pressure. “At the conclusion of the game there will be words expressed of love and devotion, from now until the end of time…” Her spine just melted completely, hearing the sincere undertone. His eyes flicked towards the various pieces of furniture in the room and even contemplated the ceiling for a moment.
“…perhaps our lovemaking will get creative. After all, that is the purpose of magic.” Jane nibbled on the inside of her bottom lip to keep from begging. He was torturing both of them but he couldn’t resist just a little bit of fun. “To the game, then. What is my nickname?”

His hand stilled and he just looked down at her in amusement. After a moment it occurred to her he actually expected her to form words right now. Evil. “Um…Locks?”

Loki sighed and his hand fell away, Jane moaning unhappily. He moved to start kissing along her temple but it was so chaste in comparison she found herself desperately wanting more. She reached for him and he captured both hands at the wrist. He murmured against her temple. “Let’s leave Anthony out of the conversation and concentrate on AEsir nicknames.”

She growled at him but he just smirked. Blinking rapidly as she thought. “Liesmith.”

He chuckled and rewarded her involvement by returning his hand to a much appreciated destination, releasing her own so she could explore. “Warmer.”

She was starting to feel a little warm and wiggled against him, making him suck in a startled breath. “God of Mischief.”

“I may be losing that title to you, soon.” He moved down further for a searing kiss and she gasped for air against his lips. But apparently still not the right answer. “Warmer.”

Then he returned the French kiss she’d shown him on Alfheim and she got it. Groaning. “S-silvertongue.”

She felt his smile before he pulled back enough to whisper softly against her lips. “Correct. Now you have a choice, my darling girl. I can delight your auditory senses with that tongue…or I can show you another meaning behind that nickname.” His look was so wicked that she knew exactly what he meant.

She could feel her face burning hotly but she knew what she wanted. She kicked ‘reserved Jane’ to the side because that woman didn’t belong in his arms. Her voice was soft, a hint of a challenge there. “…make me scream…”

When challenged by the woman he loves, Loki was not one to disappoint. His expression only turned wickeder as he slipped his way down her body. Her fingers slipped into his midnight locks as she held on for dear life.

A little while before dawn, Loki blinked open his eyes to look down at the woman he was spooned against. Even in sleep Jane had a small smile gracing her lips. He smirked just a little, pleased. Actually he was pleased with the whole evening. Anti-gravity spells really were quite useful.

His mind was always furiously working, plotting and planning but for now he was content to just stay here and be. His love. His other half. The part missing from his being that he’d been unconsciously searching his entire life for. Lightly he moved a lock of hair that had wandered across her face and tucked it behind her ear. He’d spent hours memorizing her body. If this was to be their first and only time, he wanted it to be enough to last her a lifetime.

The cabin was more than just a product of his magic. It was his along with the land attached to it, approved by Queen Sigyn. There was a chest tucked into a nook. It contained everything he normally kept in dimensional storage, with the exception of the Casket of Ancient Winters. Upon his death the deed to the cabin and the contents of that chest would transfer magically
He stayed silently awake, watching as dawn slowly broke. The rays of sunlight drifted into the cabin and he watched as the highlights of her hair shone in the light of a new day. She murmured his name as she stirred and he felt his heart skip a beat. She blinked once before her brown eyes found him, a slow smile gracing her lips as she spoke his name just a little louder but filled with such love it made his eyes burn before he blinked the sensation away.

Loki leaned down to kiss her again, a soft kiss of love instead of trying to reawaken her passion. He’d already planned to spend a few more hours here before retrieving the little ones and returning to Asgard. There was much to plan for the next leg of the journey and time was no longer on their side.

JÖTUNHEIM

Helblindi waited more than a hundred feet away, in eager anticipation to get a true feel of the second prince of Asgard. They had received word some hours ago that delegates from Asgard would be arriving to negotiate a new peace between the realms. He had a quiet suspicion that more than that was on Loki’s mind but he was patient enough to wait to find out.

The Bi-frost shone through Jötunheim’s grey cloud bank, depositing over a dozen AEsir on the icy ground. The most prominent was the first son, his red cape flowing like a banner in the wind and his hold around his war hammer firm. He was a few paces ahead of the rest of the group.

Sif. The warriors three. Two extra warriors, they were all positioned to shield the family in the middle. The second son who had forgone traditional AEsir armor held one child, a petite human held another, and a third child was kept protectively between them. Now his curiosity was truly peaked. From one child to three. Interesting.

Jane looked around with wide-eyed curiosity, she and Talia wrapped heavily in furs. Mischief looked just as curious, scrunching down a little in his fur that was draped over his new armor before whispering a warming spell. Loki reached out and ruffled his hair. “Assist your mother and sister.”

Mischief grinned, loving the titles, and instantly turned to help strengthen their warming spells. Loki squeezed Jane’s hand, pulling them all closer. Neither he nor Indel bothered with furs beyond the standard winter hunting jackets they’d worn on Alfheim over light armor.

Loki watched Thor, knowing his brother was not a happy man. Thor had tried to convince him not to come which utterly failed. He’d tried to argue that it was too dangerous for Jane and the kids to come, but the thunderer had caved under the combined power of four pouting faces. Loki hadn’t even had to contribute but it had been tempting. The only one convinced to stay behind was Fenris, and that was because he’d decided Odin needed protecting.

Helblindi had come with just a couple of escorts this time and raised his hand slightly in greeting. “Hail Asgard.”

Thor nodded grimly. “King Helblindi.”

Loki felt like face-palming. Thor couldn’t have made his personal dislike more obvious if he tried. In this case, Loki knew the dislike wasn’t prompted because of species but because Thor had suddenly decided to become insecure about their brotherhood. The others weren’t much better but at least Fandral attempted to look cordial. Jane and Loki shared a look before both started
walking forward, realizing negotiations were going to have to be through them.

Thor held out an arm. “Loki--…”

The trickster flushed blue, his red eyes pinning his older sibling where he stood before he asked, “You pledged to watch my back, did you not, brother?”

Nodding slowly, feeling strangely mollified after hearing Loki call him ‘brother’ for anyone to hear. “Aye.”

“Then do so.” Loki started again, Jane at his side with Mischief walking between them and Helblindi nodded to them as they approached. Thor followed a few steps back, a gesture from him keeping the others in place.

Helblindi was very curious now. The female could be none other than the trickster’s mate. Shocking that it was a human. Even more shocking the feel of magical power surrounding her. The little one with the white hair he could scent was his brother’s son on a biological level. The eldest held a confusing scent that was a combination of biology and magic but he was clearly AEsir. The little elfling was of no relation to any of them, but Helblindi was quite certain she was his daughter. Combining all that with how protective the first born son of Asgard was made for an interesting mix.

Loki smirked and took over introductions, tilting his head slightly towards Jane. “King Helblindi, may I present my mate Jane Foster.”

Jane smiled brightly and bowed her head. “King Helblindi.”

Helblindi bowed in return and then lifted a hand slightly. “Perhaps we could all do without the formality.”

Loki’s smirk grew, from left to right. “My son Indel.” Indel waved with a shy grin. “My son Mischief.” Mischief bowed slightly, some habits too deeply ingrained to be cast aside so easily. “My daughter Talia.” Talia wiggled a finger at Helblindi who smiled a little. “This is your uncle Helblindi.”

Thor stiffened, much preferring the title of uncle to be his alone. Loki felt his brother’s tension but refused to confuse the issue. He was confused enough on the matter. For their sake it was simpler this way. Hissing under his breath so that only Thor would hear him. “Not now, brother.”

If Helblindi was aware of the flare of tension he ignored it. “If you will follow me, we have made arrangements within the caverns for your comfort. Today we feast and tomorrow we can begin discussions if that is agreeable.”

Loki had known this would take at least a couple of days and nodded easily. They all fell into step, eyes looking every which way in curiosity. Another gesture from Thor and the Asgardians were quick to catch up.

Indel was looking curiously at everything. He opened his mouth to exhale, giggling when he created smoke with his breath. “Is it always this cold here?”

Helblindi felt his lip pull upward in amusement as he looked at Indel. “Most of the time it is even colder.”

The AEsir shuddered but Indel grinned. “Neat! Does it snow?”

Helblindi’s brow furrowed slightly so Loki clarified. “Frozen precipitation from the sky.”
Nodding to Loki in understanding before answering. “I am afraid it is too cold here for that.”

“Then where does water come from?”

The questions continued from there and it was obvious Helblindi approved of Indel’s curiosity, the Jötunn king remaining indulgent. They followed the Jotnar into a set of caverns carved in the icy rock leading them underground. There weren’t any other occupants along the way, until they entered an eating hall that was filled with an assortment of foods and places to eat.

Byleistr was already at the table with a few other Jötunns, and he was not happy. Mischief grinned and flashed from point to point, giving Loki a bright smile over his shoulder for getting it right. Praise was handed out immediately, Indel and Talia slipping along the bench but leaving enough room for Loki and Jane.

Jane swallowed and felt her eyebrows crease together as she looked over the offerings. As obviously impoverished as they were, they still put together such a feast for them. The table was long and big, filled with AEsir on one side and Jötunn on the other. It wasn’t the overflowing platters of the Great Hall but it was a substantial meal by human standards. She tilted her head a little towards Loki in a clear message the two of them understood.

<Yes, my love?>

Her insides just melted every time he did that. She cleared her thoughts carefully, wanting to make sure he understood since she was still trying to get the hang of this trick. With the magical bond that they shared she could hear him easily, the psychic protection not keeping her from his mind. <This is too much, they’re practically starving.>

He tilted his head slightly in consideration before shaking his head. <Not starving, but they will be soon. It’s insulting not to eat what is offered but I will make certain their generosity is repaid.>

They both winced when a goblet hit the floor. “Another!”

His mental voice now had a growl to it. <Very generously.> Volstagg’s actions were the highest of compliments to an AEsir, but a diplomat the rotund man was not.

Mischief went to copy Volstagg and Loki lightly grabbed his wrist. “This is one of those times not to follow their example.” The boy frowned lightly. “I’ll explain later.” Still looking confused, Mischief nodded and set his goblet down carefully.

Byleistr looked like he’d swallowed something that was now stuck in his throat. Jane leaned towards Loki. “The one next to your brother doesn’t look happy.”

Loki nodded slightly. “Byleistr, Laufey’s youngest son.” Jane frowned, not sure about him until Loki clarified everything with one sentence. “He has my attitude problem of a few years ago.” Fear and ignorance combining together to breed a hatred for AEsir.

Her confusion cleared instantly. “Ah.”

The meal continued, as did the breakage, but the children all followed their parent’s example. That was bad enough until a comment from Volstagg threw things heavily against the Asgardian visitors. “That was a delightful meal. I cannot wait for the feast.” Again since the AEsir were used to eating four or even five meals in one day it wasn’t even an intentional insult. Blue lips thinned while Loki gave into the impulse of hiding his face in his hand.
Indel stood up on the bench and scowled. “Dada told me to be nice.” Pointing a finger with emphasis at Volstagg. “Not. Nice.”

Volstagg started sputtering, not used to being on the reprimanding side of a child. “I-It was a compliment!”

Loki snarled with a snap at Thor, deciding he’d had quite enough. “Teach them some manners or send them back to Asgard, Thor.”

Thor looked at his brother in exasperation, not at all happy with such a discussion in mixed company. “Loki--…”

His green eyes narrowed and flashed in irritation. “Or I will.”

Sif made a displeased noise but looked uncomfortable to show less than a united front to their Jötunn hosts. Jane turned her head to glare at Volstagg sourly, her posture stiff and let her words fly. “Both your actions and your words were rude.”

Fandral stood and bowed, “With respect, prince, where did we error?”

The Jötunn enjoyed gossip as much as anyone else but Helblindi knew it was time to send the others on their way. With a gesture Helblindi cleared the room of everyone else, including Byleistr. He stayed, partly as their host, but also to continue observing this elder brother he’d never known.

Loki stood, knowing if they were going to salvage negotiations this little drama was necessary because he sure as Hel wasn’t going to apologize for them. “Let us start with the basics. Their customs are perhaps not our customs. I saw no one but you and yours throwing your glasses to the ground.”

“A compliment--…” The protest from Volstagg was weak at best, now looking very unsure.

“Not to them. Did you see Thor doing so? Our hosts?” Thor didn’t say a word, partly because he’d been about to do so before he noticed Loki stopping Mischief. “Secondly, if you take into account your surroundings you would realize the bounty before you had been the feast. Now you have managed to embarrass myself and your crowned prince with your ignorance. Not to mention you have insulted our host with words that indicate their hospitality was lacking.” They all looked like scolded children.

“We can replace them easily, prince.”

Loki gave Hogun an unimpressed look; especially since he was usually the most aware of the group. “Do you accept the charity of others, Hogun?”

As the trickster predicted the warrior stiffened as if insulted. “Of course not.”

“Why do you think they would?” His own lips thinned at the rest of them. “I suggest do nothing without sanction from now on, or leave.” Negotiations could be a tricky matter and this certainly didn’t help.

Indel yawned, bored with Loki being stern and rested his chin on the table. Helblindi glanced at the boy and tabled his irritation. Bad manners aside, the other AEsir hadn’t done anything unforgivably crass.
“If you will follow me. Rooms have been prepared for you this way.”

Loki reached over and picked up Indel who just yawned again and snuggled his face into his shoulder. “My thanks, Helblindi. Volstagg, if you complain about the accommodations you are sleeping outside.” His eyes flashed and Volstagg swallowed whatever objection he’d been prepared to voice concerning the assumption that he was going to complain.

The following day had warmed the slightest bit. Enough that the chill in the air wasn’t threatening to bite into vulnerable flesh. Still, warming spells and gloves helped. The children found the ice difficult as the ground solid, but a few spells courtesy of their father soon had a nice powder for them to work with. They worked as a team, rolling the snow until they had a good base for the snowman started.

“C-can I play?” They all paused as a small Jötunn approached them and asked nervously. Small was a relative term, after all. He was young enough to be Indel’s age, but he was as tall as Mischief.

Indel grinned and nodded enthusiastically. “Sure. We’re building a snowman.”

The boy frowned in confusion. “What is it?”

Mischief shrugged. “I’ve never played this game but Indel has.”

Indel turned and pointed to Jane, she and Loki leaning against an ice drift and watching them with small smiles. “Mama taught me. Kids on Midgard do it. You just make things out of the snow.”

The Jötunn boy shrugged, still not understanding. “We make our homes out of ice. Why is that fun?”

The three children turned to ponder this before Mischief smirked. “Tag!” Playing in the snow was fun, but playing with other children was even better.

Indel grinned, his excitement restored. “Yeah. Fun. Mischief will be it and we all run from him. If he touches somebody, then they’re ‘IT’.”

The boy still looked confused but they were children. Some things just transcended the barriers between species. Soon they were all running around like crazy people, screaming with laughter while Loki and Jane continued watching.

Jane grinned up at him. “It’s beautiful here.”

“Perhaps.” Loki was a little too dismissive.

She nuzzled his neck to reassure him. “You’re allowed to like it here.”

His eyes flitted around for a moment before he seemed to internalize his reactions, withdrawing even though he was still standing right there. “This isn’t my home.”

She huffed at him. “Loki. Stop being ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous?” He frowned at her but waited for the explanation because, generally speaking, she only gave him that particular label when it was true.

“Just because you like it here doesn’t mean you have to live here.” And since he hadn’t
had this reaction yesterday she raised her voice a little. “And if your brother believes you’re being
disloyal to Asgard by finding Jötunheim beautiful then he’s a bonehead.”

Her eyes flashed amber as a sheepish Thor stepped around the ice. She had been working
too hard to help Loki accept himself to allow Thor to do anything to cause him to stumble back in the
other direction. The thunderer didn’t mean anything by it, he just wasn’t thinking of the
consequences with a clear head. “Lady Jane--…”

Holding out her hand to stop him so she could complete her thought. “We’re here to save
these people, which will save Asgard. I call it as I see it. You’re jealous of Helblindi.”

Thor frowned sharply. “I am not.”

Her frown matched his as she squared her shoulders and stiffened her spine. “You don’t
want to share your status of brother or uncle with anyone else. Hence the word jealous. Here’s a
better word: possessive. Or maybe this one…petty. But you’re also about to be a king so you need to
get over it.”

Loki squashed a smug grin. He and Thor, unbeknownst to anyone, had had a brief
discussion before letting the children come out here to play. Perhaps discussion was being too
generous but they were brothers, after all. Scuffles just went with the territory. He should let Jane
fight all his battles with his brother because she was penetrating his thick head a lot more efficiently
than he ever could.

Thor resisted the urge to squirm under her narrow-eyed gaze, focusing on Loki. “Helblindi
wishes to begin negotiations.”

She stared at him for another moment or two before leaning to kiss Loki. “Have fun.” That
had been her one warning to Thor. Next time she’d sic Darcy on him.

Loki’s lip pulled in amusement. They both knew he was looking forward to this part.
“Always.” Glancing up at the happily screaming children. “Little ones.”

Two heads turned while Mischief scowled. “I’m not little!”

Loki slowly lifted an eyebrow while Thor chuckled. “Definitely--…”

Holding up a finger in the thunderer’s face. “Please refrain, brother, or you will be
growing a tail.” Thor just continued chuckling while Loki beckoned Mischief closer by crooking his
finger. After a pause of silently debating the merits of hiding Mischief obeyed. Talia and Indel
continued watching Loki. It was one of the ‘safety’ rules. They both knew to obey those rules.
Inclining his head towards Jane. “Obey your mother; your uncle and I will be detained for some
time. Mischief walk with me.”

Mischief’s eyes widened in concern, biting into the inside of his lip before slowly obeying.
He didn’t have to start being polite just because he was older, right? He wasn’t intentionally rude but
his emotions were a little bit all over the place. Plus Loki never punished for attitude. Well, not real
punishments.

Loki walked just far enough away, arm moving to wrap around his boy’s shoulders.
“Mischief.” Mischief glanced at him and Loki winked, those shoulders instantly relaxing. “Now, I
was not including you in that identifier but I refuse to rattle off names when I need more than one set
of ears paying attention. It wastes time and energy that could be better spent in another direction.”

The boy shifted uncomfortably before shrugging as he asked, “Couldn’t you say children
or something?"

Loki lifted an eyebrow, knowing exactly what the response would be to that. “Then you would complain I’m not treating you like a young warrior.”

“Well… you’re not.” The words were muttered more than anything, green eyes peeking to make sure he wasn’t mad.

Loki just gave him a look but his tone was even. “Because you are not now desist.” Mischief sighed loudly but obeyed and Loki refrained from rolling his eyes. He remembered this behavior well and if his father found out about it he’d just sit back on his throne and laugh at him. Loki had a feeling of the three of them Mischief was going to be the child he had the most challenge in dealing with now that he was starting to discover himself as a person. “Now, while I believe Jane is fully capable in watching over your brother and sister this is not Asgard. I would like you to be careful.”

Reluctantly Mischief nodded. He may not like getting lumped into the ‘kid’ category but he knew until Loki gave his permission to enter his first proving ground it was a label he couldn’t escape. And that wasn’t going to happen for decades, if not longer. Instead he focused on the excitement of seeing actual negotiations. Not just the art, but seeing how Loki did it. “Can I come?” Not a request to hide but an interest in learning.

The trickster held up a single finger. “Just this one time I need you all to stay together.” Disappointment flashed across Mischief’s face before he hid it. Smirking at him. “But the next time I negotiate for Asgard’s benefit, yes.”

“Really?” That bright grin was back again, excitement making Mischief’s eyes sparkle.

Loki nodded slowly. “I vow it.” Mischief was quick to squeeze him in a hug before running back to play.

Laufey’s throne may have been torn down but the King of Jötunheim still had a place to sit. An underground chamber not far from where the banquet had been held, had been constructed. By the carvings Loki could see, he was fairly certain it had been made hundreds if not thousands of years ago. It was tall enough for the tallest of Jötunn to walk easily and wide enough to accommodate a hundred people.

Usually when Loki would be entering negotiations, it was a matter that was dragged along over a matter of weeks or even longer as concerns were heard and addressed. Just as with haggling, the bid starts ridiculously low and over time concessions are added until both parties feel they have made a satisfactory deal. He decided this particular occasion would be more of his father’s approach. He laid out the concessions and agreements all at once, and stood to one side to watch them mull.

Loki had forbidden Thor to bring the others and reluctantly the thunderer agreed.

“That is your concept of negotiation?”

Not really, another reason he didn’t want Mischief observing because that was not what he wanted his son learning. Loki shrugged at the Jötunn whose name he didn’t know. “I don’t have time for subtlety.”

Helblindi nodded slowly to himself, thinking out loud. “Your enemy is about to overrun Asgard.”
Correcting the king respectfully. “Thanos is an enemy to all the living.”

“And the dead from what I hear.”

Loki doubted that Hela had truly introduced herself since that particular detail rarely passed her lips. “Yes. If he wins Ragnarok will befall us.”

“You cannot know that.” The same Jötunn spoke again that reminded him of one of his father’s advisory council.

No, he couldn’t know that with surety but he knew someone who could. “But Lady Death does.”

The Jötunn sneered the word, not at all impressed. “And you would believe such a creature, who twists lies and truth until you cannot tell one from the other.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed just a little, the only physical indication that he took exception to the words. Thor was not nearly so subtle. “You will show respect when speaking of my niece.”

“Niece? An AEsir is related to such a creature…why am I not surprised.”

Loki spoke before the thunderer could let his words fly, and a soft purr entering his voice. “She is my daughter and she learned the art of deception from her father.” The Jötunn now shifted uncomfortably but Helblindi only looked intrigued. Loki turned his attention back to the Jötunn king. “You asked me here to arrange peace. To borrow a human turn of phrase: the offer is on the table.”

Helblindi nodded slowly to himself from his position. He considered what was being offered and it was more than what he would have asked for. Generous but not so much so that it would be viewed as charity. Compounded interest, perhaps, but they would be putting forth their own risks to achieve every accommodation.

“Sire? Are we truly to accept the offerings of such…brutes?”

Thor blinked just a little in surprise but it was Helblindi who responded. “War had been declared by Laufey-king, the destruction and deaths were casualties of that declaration. Gold is not necessary as recompose any more than your exile among us would have been but we will not refuse Asgard’s generosity to settle the debt.” One of the Jötunn shifted and Helblindi held up a single finger. There was instant obedience. Helblindi thought again for another moment before continuing, inclining his head slightly towards Loki to indicate he appreciated the trickster’s efforts. “You have journeyed here to act as Asgard’s emissary in good faith. You offer us further materials and goods in exchange for our hospitality. That is also acceptable. I declare that Jötunheim and Asgard are at peace once more.” Thor relaxed a little but Loki watched and waited. They weren’t enemies but that didn’t necessarily mean Jötunheim would help Asgard fight. “To the matter concerning this foe of our new AEsir allies. This is an enemy that not only threatens them but all of us. And as Asgard is not only the ally of Jötunheim but the home of Prince Loki, it is only right that we defend them in their time of need. Your offering of the Casket of Ancient Winters in exchange for that aid is acceptable…with one addendum.”

Thor was frowning, thinking that his brother had been too generous. It was something Asgard could afford but still, he was worried so much would weaken their position. “What more does Jötunheim desire?” Loki tilted his head slightly in curiosity.

“When trade agreements commence between Jötunheim and any other realm, save Asgard, we wish for you to be our voice, Prince Loki.”
Loki felt a very pleased smirk tug at his lips. If they could be said to be jobs: negotiating and causing mischief would be two of his favorites. He kept his tone even but Thor knew he was thrumming with eagerness. “That is agreeable.”

“Then to peace.” Then Helblindi stood, ice sword encompassing his hand and raised it to the ceiling as he roared. “…and to WAR!” Answering growls filled the chamber and the two brothers shared an encouraged look.

UNKNOWN

The Other awoke with a strangled gasp, confused and clawing at the cloth that had tangled around his neck. He freed himself, only to run fingernails against a hard surface above his face. The air had turned stagnant and he choked as he clawed at the wood. He didn’t know where he was. He didn’t know how he’d gotten here. But instincts to escape this confinement overrode logic.

The air thinned and his scrambling grew desperate, nails chipping and bleeding before the wood gave way and clumps of dirt fell through the cracks, covering him. He was buried alive. Screaming in panicked fear, he kicked and dug before finally moving enough sediment to sit up. The climb was torturous, the dirt too soft to stand on easily and he was forced to swim.

An eternity later.

Two.

He gasped and swallowed dirt as his hand broke through. Wiggling desperately, a second hand followed, pulling and straining as the Other slowly emerged from his grave. He blinked with eyes that could see, but no longer able to see beyond that, his gift of foresight gone. He looked to the right to see a hill and a faint glow.

Strangely this seemed familiar.

Entranced, he stumbled weakly up the hill, slipping and crawling desperately. He sat at the top, a feeling of relief and triumph overwhelming him. The Jötunn runt had failed. He smiled and bared bloody teeth as the sun slowly emerged with dawn. It was now light enough he could see a small sign.

The emotions were replaced with horror, his plummet steep because of his momentary elation as he read and understood. This was familiar because he’d been in this exact spot before. Over and over again he’d crawled out of his grave. An endless cycle that would repeat until the end of all things. His punishment. His eternity.

He screamed as the cloth wrapped around his neck with the new day, his wounds healing and his mind forgetting as he was dragged back into the coffin to begin the cycle all over again.

Hela watched silently with no expression on her face to betray her thoughts. The demons twitched anxiously, hoping she was pleased and fearing they would be punished if she wasn’t. Hela’s eyes moved to read the sign:

Day 4 of your eternity

Lady Death
The 4 changed to 5 and Hela smiled.

Author's Notes:

Now...you've seen the last of the Other.

Next:

The warrior's get a much needed lesson; War is eminent
Loki stood by himself in the training yard, leaning back against the fencing of the enclosure that could easily fit a few hundred warriors. It was five days after Odin’s announcement in court. The warriors came into the training yard as ordered warily, many of them freshly trained without true battle experience but the rest accomplished and seasoned. Many of the men here were noble because of their accomplishments and the titles they earned, not because of their family.

Mentally he marked each one that had turned their backs. They wouldn’t act defiant once Thor arrived. That was why he got here first. He let his voice carry, drawing their attention. “You are all here at the All-Father’s behest, but he is not here right now. Nor is Prince Thor. I am. A simple order first. Form ranks to the left.”

The seasoned warriors would know because he was facing them it meant their right. Some moved immediately, questions in their eyes but following orders because a prince of Asgard delivered them. That was where order began and ended. The twelve hesitated in following his orders, which caused severe hesitation in the green warriors just because they weren’t sure where to go. That was what he’d been afraid of. He didn’t give a damn what those men thought of him, but hesitation on the battlefield will get a man killed.

“Brother?”

Loki grinned over his shoulder at Thor. “You’re just in time, brother-mine.”

Thor was quietly delighted every time his brother used that particular name for him. “What have I arrived on time for?”

He pointed in the distance as the Bi-Frost activated. “Our guests are going to use them as chew toys.”

Thor tipped his head back to laugh loudly as one by one, figures disembarked from the gate and slowly approached. The closer they drew, the more restless the warriors became once they realized it was a group of at least a dozen frost giants. Thor snarled at the warriors. “Stand fast.”

That snarled order halted even a hint of rebellion, the warriors staying within their ranks. The Jötunn entered the training yard, forming a single row while Helblindi completed the distance between himself and the two princes.

The trickster nodded to the Jötunn king in greeting. “King Helblindi.”

Helblindi returned the nod. “Prince Loki.”

Loki smiled pleasantly, his tone conversational. “I trust the Bi-Frost travel was not difficult.”

“Not at all, I find the reception more disconcerting than the journey.” Helblindi glanced at the jumble of nervous and/or hostile warriors to indicate what he meant.

Loki nodded his head towards the lined Jötunn, one of them impressively broad shouldered in addition to being the tallest. “And these are your captains that command the remainder of your legion?”

Chapter 86

ASGARD
Helblindi nodded, but knew this little exercise wasn’t about training the Jötunn to fight. “They are. Are these the finest warriors of Asgard?” There was a hint of sarcasm in the Jötunn’s tone but it was easy enough for both brothers to ignore it.

“No all of them. Some are the most prominent who are in need of a…re-education.” Loki pointed and smirked when the twelve warriors he had mentally marked turned a noticeable bright pink that had everything to do with magic and nothing to do with embarrassment. “These particular warriors need to understand the importance of following orders, whether it is from pink or blue lips.”

“Hey, Locks-whoa…those dudes are tall.” Tony look up at the Jötunn in awe before looking at Thor. “Man, and I thought you were a giant, Pointe Break.” Loki raised an eyebrow, not understanding why that was always said when Thor was only an inch taller than he was.

Thor gave Tony an amused look. “They are called Frost Giants with reason, man of iron.”

The inventor nodded with exaggeration. “Well yeah but DAMN.”

Loki frowned at the human. Not that he didn’t enjoy the man’s quips but he hadn’t invited him. “Anthony, what do you want?”

Steve shrugged slightly as the rest of the Avengers lined up next to Tony on the opposite side of the fence. “We wanted to observe fighting styles.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, well I’m here to watch the blue dudes kick their butts.” A few of the Jötunn smirked and stood straighter. A few of the AEsir growled in displeasure.

Clint glanced at him as he asked, “Watch?”

The inventor’s lips quirked as he hedged a bit. “Okay, there might be a few comments. Maybe a small wager. Kinda like football so yeah…watch.” Natasha rolled her eyes silently.

Bruce was frowning in confusion. “Why are they…pink?”

Tony mock scowled at Bruce. “Hey, nothing wrong with a little gay pride.” He glanced at one particularly rough looking AEsir and pointed at him. “Although, observation, pink is not your color.”

That particular warrior immediately looked to Thor. “Prince Thor—–”

Instead of inquiring with the warrior, Thor looked to his brother for the explanation. “Brother?”

Loki studied his nails. “They could not look past the species to respect a prince.”

The mage didn’t even have to explain further for the thunderer to understand. This man was one of the ones in their father’s throne room who rejected Loki as a prince. Thor’s humor vanished in an instant. He strode away from Loki, the warriors parting for him. He wasn’t there to witness these warriors turn their backs on his brother but he’d heard about it. That was never happening again.

He walked with determination up to the warrior who looked particularly appalled at the way he was being treated. Thor kept his face hard and emotionless. “Did you reject my brother as a prince of Asgard?”

The warrior glanced around in surprise but Thor didn’t veer his gaze. After an indecisive
moment he nodded once, sharply. “Yes, sire.”

“You will receive no sympathy from me or mine. Do you think yourselves wiser than the All-Father?” The warrior was taken aback. “Nay, you will pay the price for your impunity this day for disrespecting your prince and perhaps you will be wiser in the future.”

“With a trick designed to shame us?” The question was asked inches from sounding like a whine.

The tallest Jötunn nodded to his fellow countrymen and formed an ice sword. The others followed suit. Thor didn’t even glance their way. He also had no idea what Loki was up to but he wasn’t about to question it in front of these men. “In any manner we deem necessary. You and the others will learn to follow commands or my first act as King of Asgard will be to exile you.” Sharing his glare with the rest. “Do you wish your honor to be stripped, to return to your home to await the outcome of this war?”

Blinking rapidly before getting ahold of himself. “No, sire.”

Thor nodded once, his blue eyes moving to make certain there was no one foolish enough to ask for exile. Because if he granted it for this reason, the fool wouldn’t be invited to return to Asgard. Ever. “Then you will submit to learning humility today.”

The warrior bowed immediately. “Yes, sire.”

Tony grinned conspiringly at Loki. “Served.” Loki’s lips twitched but he didn’t comment. The little drama didn’t go unnoticed, Helblindi smiling slightly in approval. Discipline in the ranks was crucial, especially with as many different races that would be converging together against this evil. As Thor moved his blue eyes to wait for the other eleven to also swallow their objections, Helblindi turned his attention back to Loki. “Are there any specific rules that are required to be honored?”

The trickster smirked with a shrug. “As long as you do not kill them wounded pride will hardly hurt them. Humility is good for everyone, a lesson my father is fond of teaching his sons.” Loki rolled his eyes with that last part, sounding a little annoyed. Thor’s lip twitched in amusement, agreeing with his brother as he came back to his side. “The marked warriors will return to their natural colors when they stop hesitating in following orders.”

The tallest Jötunn seemed to be the most seasoned. His voice sounded like grating glass and he threw them into drills. As the Jötunn adapted to the heat which didn’t take a terribly long time, they were soon moving faster and more efficiently than the AEsir in their midst. It galled the warriors into picking up their own paces.

Thor nudged Loki who glanced at him curiously. “Yes?”

“Father wishes a word with you when convenient.” Thor kept his voice low to not attract attention but he caught the grin that was a little too pleased that spread across his brother’s face. Not in an evil or even mischievous way, but as if the thought of father wanting to speak with him gave him pleasure. “Loki?”

“It’s just—nothing.” Loki seemed to be about to say something before swiftly changing his mind. When Thor refused to veer his gaze Loki lightly glared at him. “Not here.”

Inclining his blond head in the warriors’ direction. “They are hardly paying attention to us, brother.”
Loki sighed softly, arms crossing over his chest. “I find it satisfying he seeks my opinion. Shut up.”

Thor wasn’t certain what to say at first. That it took so little to actually please Loki left him with a thousand years of regrets. “Loki—…”

Loki cut him off with a word and a sharp jerk of his head. “No.” Sometimes eloquence was less preferred than a simple word that spoke volumes. Loki was done with this particular regret between them. He knew things were changing, both between them and Asgard in general. It was enough.

Thor nodded a little to himself and smiled. He wouldn’t bring it up again unless Loki did, but he wouldn’t forget. Instead he nudged Loki with his shoulder, his eyes on the warriors being put in their place. Green eyes flicked in his direction before nudging him back.

HELHEIM

Hela studied herself in the mirror. No disguises now. There was little point to it. Now she was the young AEsr about to order war on the realms. Their time was up, Thanos’ forces preparing to move. By sunrise tomorrow they would be at Asgard’s door. Now was the time to move her army. Her green eyes flashed before there was a sharp knock at her door. “Enter.”

An AEsr entered, typical in appearance of blond hair and blue eyes. He was a citizen of Helheim who in life ran from battle like a coward and died. In death he became what he hadn’t been in life: a fearless warrior and the general of her soldiers. He wore the armor he died in, a wound from back to front displaying clearly but not gruesomely how he’d died. He bowed to her with respect, reverence in his tone. “My queen. You sent for me.”

She nodded slowly, sheathing her twin swords and walking past the general who told no one his name. “Assemble my legions. War is upon us.”

If he was surprised by her appearance or her order it didn’t show on his face. Instead his question was practical as he followed her through the palace. “From where?”

Glancing up as if she could see Asgard. “We will be going to it. War converges on Asgard…and we will be joining the ranks.”

The general stiffened, purpose in his eyes. “Ragnarok, my queen?”

She stopped at the entrance to Helheim. “What do you know of Ragnarok?”

He was by no means a scholar, he only knew the most basic elements of the concept. “It will be brought to the nine realms by the Sly One.”

Smirking in delight at that particular nickname for Loki. “I always loved that nickname for him.” Hela continued what the prophet had foretold, equal parts prediction and poetry. “So the realms will burn and topple. Ragnarok. The end and the beginning. To repeat an endless cycle of life and death. Life ends, but what are we without it? It is two halves to complete a whole. The sun and the moon. Day and night. Life and death need each other, for what kind of eternity could we have if we never lived…or how empty would our lives be if we never died?” Hela’s lip curled further in amusement, asking one question. “But there is a misunderstanding that I believe should be clarified: what is a prophecy?”

“A foretelling of events destined by the fates.” It was one of the few things he remembered
his tutors teaching him.

Hela’s lips twisted in a mockery of a smile. “Ah yes, those evil blond bitches…love them so much. So tell me this. Can someone who is no longer tied to fate satisfy a prophecy?”

The general frowned slightly, considering the question. Prophecy and fate were supposed to be intertwined. “No, my queen, but Loki--…”

“Shares a mate bond with a human.” Any other race and it wouldn’t have made a difference. But humans were the exception to that rule. His fate was now joined with another’s, which breaks all hold on destiny and prophecy that the fates had planned for him.

He paled as he realized the significance. “…the prophecy is void.”

Hela nodded slowly. “A paradox since the prophecy is true, yet it cannot be true.” Time. Space. Truth. Magic. It was all the same. Unravel one and it ripples, unravelling the fabric of everything. “There is no longer a cycle. If the end of all things comes, we end. Thanos brings not Ragnarok, he simply brings The End.” They walked past Garm to a nook within a cavern. It wasn’t just the entrance to Helheim that he guarded and she pointed the way. “Follow the passage through there. Prince Loki will meet you on the other side and order your positions. Do not break rank. Follow his orders to the letter…or face both of our wraths.”

“We fight to save Asgard?” There was pride in his eyes, hoping to do in death what he hadn’t the strength to do in life.

“Ragnarok is one matter but this is something else. I will not permit that titanic fool to end everything.” Her dark green eyes met his gaze. “The nine realms must remain intact to keep Yggdrasil strong.” Smirking with satisfaction that they could make the difference. “Just this once, we fight for them.”

ASGARD

Sunset was fast approaching, the Bi-Frost standing by to send back the civilians of Midgard. Heimdall stood silently at the controls, watching with his unnaturally golden eyes. Some were there to see them off, although no one could figure out why Hogun the Grim was there. He stood next to Loki, who had accompanied Jane.

“You should come with us, Jane.” Erik’s tone had a touch of a plea to it, his worry palatable.

Her lips twitched in amusement. “You’re not going to have any more success in convincing me than Loki has.”

Erik was a little surprised the trickster had even tried. But he was begrudgingly realizing the man that he’d known was not the man he was now. He frowned at Jane. “You would be safer on earth.”

Jane shook her head. “If this doesn’t work no one is safe. I’m staying.”

There were so many things he wanted to say that he couldn’t. Either it wasn’t his place to say them or they might come off condescending when it wasn’t his intention. He was worried about her. He was proud of her. So much more, but instead he said what he hoped was true. “I’ll see you soon.”
Jane grinned brightly, a gentle hand on his arm. “Of course you will.”

Darcy shook her head, leaning against the entrance. Asgard was pretty nifty, even if their idea of clothing was absolutely ridiculous but she couldn’t wait to throw on a pair of jeans and drink a gallon of coffee. “The sooner we leave, the sooner I can catch up on my emails.” She paused with a small frown to herself before standing up on her tiptoes to kiss Loki’s cheek. “Later, cutie.” Loki scowled and stepped back from her. It was tempting to wipe his cheek and stick out his tongue but he resisted the childish impulse. Jane bit her bottom lip hard to keep from laughing, knowing how Loki wanted to react. Darcy kissed Hogun on the cheek as she passed by. “Gun, raincheck on the boat ride.”

Loki slowly lifted an eyebrow at Hogun who didn’t so much as twitch even though his skin darkened. He’d been wondering why the silent warrior had decided to walk with him to see the mortals back to Midgard.

Pepper had eyes only for Tony, her lips pressed together and blinking a little too quickly. Her hands rested on his chest. “Come get me soon, Mr. Stark.”

His lips twitched upward in amusement as he asked, “Is that a request from my fiancé, Miss Potts?”

“Yes.” She pulled in a slow breath, glancing up into his brown eyes. “But I’m not the only one making the request.”

He flashed her a pearly smile. “Swedish twin, perhaps? Yes, please!”

Loki narrowed his eyes, paying attention to the little signs that she was giving off that most humans would have a difficult time identifying. The slight trembling of her lip, as if she wanted to say something. A flicker of fear lay hidden in her eyes. Her fingers twitched the slightest amount as if to reach towards him while pushing him away at the same time. Add to that the faintest of scents that only a mage could detect and it left but one conclusion.

Pepper lifted her head a little, tone no nonsense. “You’d better stay in one piece, Tony.”

Tony gave her a cocky smile even though his eyes were sincere. “I’ll do my best, Pep.” He leaned in and gave her a kiss that made her toes curl, smiling smugly as he pulled back to see she was flushed.

She nodded once curtly before turning her head enough to glare at Loki. “He better come back to me in one piece.”

Loki tilted his head slightly. “Are you still under the illusion that I fear your wrath?”

The trickster watched Jane give Darcy a hug, Pepper’s retort distracting him. “Of course not. Only intelligent men fear me.”

Lifting an eyebrow. “Well said. It must be why Anthony is willing to stand near your presence.”

Her eyes narrowed as she judged the two distances. Tony threw up his hands and retreated to the entrance. “Hey, you two flirt when I’m not around at least.”

Both Loki and Pepper started sputtering. “Flirt??” Both of them had said this in unison before glaring at one another.
Jane grinned as she hugged Pepper who seemed to be torn between glaring at Loki and glaring at Tony. “Ignore him.”

Pepper slanted a look at her friend. “Which one?”

The physicist looked thoughtful for a moment before grinning. “Whichever one annoys you the most.” That startled a chuckle out of Pepper, some of the tension leaving her.

Jane moved quickly to Loki’s side while Pepper took her position. Darcy waved at Jane. “See ya soon, boss lady.” A last grin to Darcy as she nodded, a second reassuring glance to Erik, and a wiggle of her fingers to Pepper as a goodbye. Loki was giving Jane a thoughtful look even as the Bi-Frost activated with Heimdall in control and sent them home.

Jane didn’t turn around, making the last adjustments to the armor she was wearing with a dagger sheathed to her thigh. It armor was made specifically for her and it fit her well. A combination of practical protection and feminine beauty.

Loki had been disturbingly quiet the walk back from the Bi-Frost. She knew by now he was plotting something. He watched her fiddle with the gauntlets on her wrists. Then she paused, her brown eyes narrowing at him in the mirror. “No.”

His lips twitched, pushing himself away from the wall. “No?”

Her arms dropped to her sides, turning around and amber flashing in her eyes. “No.” The same word was offered, and yet a different emphasis to it.

He slowly started walking forward, protest on his tongue. “Jane--…”

She stormed the difference between them, already knowing what he was going to say. She could see the cogs in his mind turning. As the day progressed his insistence that she take the children and leave had steadily increased.

It was understood between them what she was saying, but she wanted to express herself clearly. “I’m not going back with them. This is my home--our home. I’m staying. We’re staying.” She gestured outward with her arm, including the children in that last statement. At the moment they were in her quarters, putting on their own armor. They wouldn’t be fighting obviously, but they would be here where she could keep a protective eye on them.

“I could persuade you.” With his face blank it was difficult to say if he was serious or testing an idea with her.

Amber sparked in her eyes. “Not unless you’re stupid.” If anything her unspoken threat made him smile. She was a vision. She was still Jane, but her mortal trappings were slowly being cast aside. His father would be proud to make her a princess of Asgard because her words and actions in this moment were Asgardian. But then she was always her fiercest when she was angry.

Loki nodded slowly to himself as if in acceptance. “And I can’t convince you otherwise.”

Jane sighed softly, hands smoothing over the lapels of his armor. He should know her better than this by now. “I’m your shield maiden.”

There was no convincing her. He’d help make her his equal, but he hadn’t had to do all that much to accomplish it. Her determination, her intelligence, her temper; they were all assets in that equality. He’d just helped her to stop being afraid. He brushed his thumb lightly against her chin.
“Yes. You are.” His beautiful, fiery little mate. He purred softly and the tension between them melted as another tension heated quietly.

She leaned into his touch, sighing softly as she suddenly felt so content. Like she was wrapped up in warm, fluffy blankets. Alarms were going off in her mind but they were quiet and distant, easily ignored. “I belong at your side…”

His second hand came up to lightly stroke her neck, his voice maintaining that seductive purr. “Yes. For all time.”

Her eyes slowly started to close as she leaned a little more heavily into him. Breathing in his scent. Feeling his warm lips against her forehead. She breathed the word. “Forever…”

“You should be safe in Helheim.”

He smiled and reached out to cup her cheek with one hand. She paused to smile up at him. “Not a chance…” At the last second her brain seemed to be aware of what was going on, a frown drowsily forming. “Loki–…”

He caught her when she swayed before collapsing against him, asleep. He felt a little guilt, but it was easily ignored. He’d never let the emotion stop him before and he wasn’t about to do so now. Sweeping her into his arms as he spoke, “With me, my love, there is always a chance.”

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HELHEIM

Amora stormed as much as her ghostly form would allow through the throne room, stopping just short of the steps before Hela’s throne. “Those bastards won’t let me through.”

Hela gave her a lazy look. “You can’t follow orders. You stay.”

The Enchantress’ jaw dropped open, her tone wheedling after a stunned moment. “Be reasonable, Hel--Queen Hela.” She was quick to correct herself when Hela frowned at her. “This will be my last chance to see Asgard.”

Not even if she were deaf, dumb, and blind would she be foolish enough to let Amora go. The Enchantress would immediately go to Thor, whether she was welcome or not. Hela was not taking the chance of the balance being shifted when she was so close to her goals. “Nope, not buying it.” Like a pouting child Amora threw herself into a chair.

“My Queen--...”

Hela held up a hand to forestall Farbauti’s objections who had followed at a more dignified gait but seemed just as perturbed. “Helblindi will be joining Asgard in this battle, as is Loki. No.” The two ladies shared a similar disgruntled look and Hela slowly stood, slinking down the steps. “There is a reason the living do not comingle with the dead.”

Amora gestured to her. “You’re living.”

Her dark green eyes flashed, her teeth sharpening. “You think I am here by choice.” It wasn’t a question.

Amora treated it like one anyway, clearly not understanding. “Why wouldn’t you be? You’re a Queen. The Queen. You are a law unto yourself.”
“You think I truly coveted such things at 350?” Which amounted to a twelve year old AEsir child. A child cast out of her home and forced to run where she couldn’t be caught. Amora blinked in surprise, just now realizing how young Hela really had been. “I wanted to live and no other option afforded that. I refused to hide and pretend I had died but Asgard’s reach was too great. Here was the only option. Forever exiled from Asgard but at least I had the illusion of living.” Hela picked up a goblet and hurled it at the far wall, the wine staining the surface and the glass shattering. It was a display of temper that Hela didn’t often indulge in and wariness crossed both their faces as ice spread across the floor. Deadly magic curled around her as her expression darkened. “I had the cold comfort of the dead for company…and I had rage.” Rage that demanded that Asgard would pay dearly for destroying her life. A wish, backed by a young mage’s rage, that created the events of now that were over 700 years in the making. “You have no conception of the living thing a mage’s rage can become. A rage that burned so bright in a young heart that not even I can stop the chain of events…I can only attempt to temper the fallout--…”

Hela cut herself off sharply as she watched Loki walk down a side corridor with Jane in his arms. She blinked again in surprise as three sleeping children floated behind him. Amora and Farbauti bowed as Hela swept past them to see what Loki was up to.

Hela watched from the doorway of her rooms as Loki moved from one to the other with a thoroughly irritated look on her face. Slowly she shook her head. “She is going to rip your spine out when she wakes up.” If he was lucky that was all Jane was going to do. She hadn’t anticipated this. She should have but she hadn’t. This was going to ruin everything if she couldn’t send them back to Asgard. Jane at Loki’s side was the only way this would work.

Only once he was satisfied that everyone was tucked in did he turn to look at Hela fully. “Your word that you won’t wake her nor send her back to Asgard.”

“Forget it.” Hela crossed her arms in an obvious snit. What kind of fool did he take her for?

He sighed softly at her. “Either here or Midgard, Hela. Choose.” And Heimdall would refuse to use the Bi-Frost to retrieve them until after the war.

Hela narrowed her eyes at him, growling softly. “You are such an unbelievable bastard.”

Loki snarled in irritation. “Hela, I do not have time--…”

“I vow it.” She snapped off the retort to cut him off. When he continued to just stare at her she rolled her eyes and gave him a more form promise. “I will not wake her nor send her back to Asgard.”

“Or them.”

Rolling her eyes again with more emphasis. “Or them.”

Loki reached out to lightly caress Jane’s cheek with his fingertips. He’d mapped and memorized every inch of her. But then that had been the point of Vanheim, only not just for himself. He’d wanted to give her a memory to last for a lifetime, even if he couldn’t spend it at her side.

He did a little bit more fussing, adjusting covers and just soaking in their scent and the sight of them. He knew he wasn’t going to survive this battle so he was taking every precaution that what mattered most to him did. He could almost feel Hela vibrating with tension.
He focused his attention before it occurred to him why she was so restless. Loki smirked and pulled Hela into a hug, which she returned instantly. Hela pressed her lips together, refusing to acknowledge the sting in her eyes or the trembling of her chin. Once she had managed to get ahold of herself she pushed him back. “Go. Go stop Thanos and retrieve your irritated mate.”

His eyes narrowed suspiciously before he asked, “Hela?”

She crossed her arms and glared at him. He didn’t bother to question her further. She wouldn’t tell him what she was plotting, no matter what he threatened. A last touch to each of them. Fingers tracing delicate ears. He lightly squeezed the back of Mischief’s neck in silent farewell before slowly walking away.

Just before he reached the door her voice paused him. “It seems like an awful lot of trouble, doesn’t it? Why did Thanos waste his time saving Malekith?”

He gave her a thoughtful look before turning. “Perhaps at the Other’s behest. Do you know why?”

She shrugged loosely and there was no lie in her eyes. “I’m just saying out loud what you’re thinking. This is the type of creature who would go to great lengths to give himself pleasure so it could all be just to torment you…but what if he had another purpose?” Malekith was a mage, the same as Loki. Perhaps it was significant but perhaps it wasn’t. Loki nodded slowly to himself. Only once he had gone did she pull out her own grimoire and flip to the section that she wanted. Snapping her fingers, one of her servants bowed to her as she appeared. The dead were mostly useless when it came to magic. Ones who had recently died, like Amora, had a small amount at their disposable but it soon fled them to leave them as ordinary as the rest. But they absorbed it quite well when a spell was required and for this particular spell she needed someone more gifted than an enchantress. “Go retrieve Morgana le Fey from Niflheim. Tell her I will arrange for a lesser punishment for her eternity for a swap of favors.”

ASGARD

Loki had joined the ladies in the healing rooms. He had one more stop to make before he caught a couple of hours of sleep. Right now he could really do without her silent reprimand. G’dath’s glare could have stripped meat from bone. Loki didn’t even flinch, unsurprised she knew he’d taken Jane to safety. “Unless you want to join her, move on.”

The healer narrowed her eyes. “You wouldn’t dare.” He slowly raised an eyebrow at her so she clarified. “What makes you believe I would let you?”

As little as it was actually mentioned, the simple fact was that she was his mentor and as such his magic would yield to her. He was the one who glanced away first. “I had my reasons.”

G’dath muttered under her breath. “Doesn’t everybody?”

He huffed at her irritably. “Now is not the time for this.”

She raised an eyebrow at him since the occupants of this room were all female. “I hardly think there will be many objections.”

“G’dath.” The healer glanced at Azni who looked more amused than anything.

G’dath talked a little louder, glancing at the other healers. “Eir and the most seasoned of
the healers will remain here, the healing rooms our central location. We will be posting healing teams at these locations.” She pointed to various positions within the city surrounding the palace and the most traveled roads. “There isn’t enough of us to cover the initial battlefield.”

Sigyn nodded. “I will have a selection of our healers here within the hour.”

Loki nodded, his arms crossed. “Expect attack at first light.” That brought a somber silence to them all. It made it more real. War. War on Asgardian soil after so many centuries of peace, and it would start at sunrise.

Eir spoke, the oldest of the healers and the most skilled, who had healed on the front lines of many of King Odin’s wars. “Healers on the initial battlefield will be tricky.”

Loki was slowly shaking his head. Having healers mixed in with the ranks during this first onslaught would be wasteful and pointless. “Don’t expect Thanos’ forces to restrain themselves. Everyone on this planet is a target.”

Sigyn lifted her head a little higher, well used to matching protective elven steel with healing need. “If any healers are brave enough to volunteer, they will be escorted.”

“Did all of the humans return to Midgard?”

Loki slowly turned and raised an eyebrow at Sigyn who didn’t flinch, her face carefully blank. “Not all of them.”

Her lip twitched after a moment, realizing it was pointless to deflect. He knew of her interest in the mortal called Wolverine. Shrugging lightly, her tone careful. “I find his courage… intriguing.”

“He’s chosen to fight among the mortal Avengers.” His finger moved to a section of the field, indicating where Logan would be fighting.

A small elf smile graced her features. “Then I would like to lend my support with participation.”

Loki nodded slowly in agreement, both of them ignoring the bustle of healers moving and preparing field kits and supplies. He shared with her what not many knew, because there was no point in most knowing. “The initial forces will target the field. At Thor’s command, we fall back to the palace.”

“At day’s break, then.”

He bowed to her in farewell. “Lady Sigyn.”

She nodded to him slightly in return. “Prince Loki.”

“Loki.”

Loki silently cursed at being unable to retreat. He stiffened and asked over his shoulder, “G’dath?”

Azni and G’dath shared an amused look. Instead of answering with words G’dath held up both arms at waist height with palms up in invitation. His brow furrowed an instant before he turned and mirrored her position but with palms down so that she could easily grasp at his elbows if she chose to. A traditional elven exchange before a war or long journey.
Idly he wondered if she’d been so confident in his battle against the Other that she’d chosen not to offer this to him. But Azni made the same gesture and he moved to her just the same. For the briefest of moments he wondered if they knew.

Azni smiled gently in the way that Frigga would at times and took a step closer to him. He didn’t flinch back as her hand moved to the back of his neck. He simply obeyed her guiding tug and allowed her to kiss his forehead. A small, sad smile crossed his face as he realized she was saying goodbye.

MIDGARD

Fury sat behind his desk, staring out at nothing with his fingertips touching. He hadn’t heard a damn thing so he supposed that was a good indication that they had more time but he hated being out of the loop. He didn’t like the entire world in the hands of someone else, particularly if he didn’t overtly trust that somebody.

When the Bi-Frost or whatever the hell Thor called it sent him a group of people, SHIELD had done a respectful but thorough debriefing. They still knew next to nothing, other than ‘soon’ which wasn’t helping his blood pressure any.

He didn’t even jump when Loki appeared in the chair opposite him. Instead he turned to glare at him. “Either the war is over or it’s about to start. Anything else and I don’t want to hear it.”

Loki smirked but decided to get right to the point. “The morning by first light Asgard should be under attack.”

Fury’s scowl eased that Loki wasn’t toying with him for once as he nodded in understanding. “And when could this become my problem?”

Shrugging lightly, stretching out a little in the chair as if to appear casual. “At earliest by late afternoon. If I know my daughter she will be here by the time Thanos arrives on Asgard. If the tables turn, she’ll inform you of an impending attack.”

“Great.” It was all he needed. But he got to the heart of the matter of why he disliked the demi-god as much as he did. “I want your damn word that what happened in New York with my people isn’t happening again.”

Loki just continued to smirk and chuckle softly, nodding his head. Not in agreement but that he would expect nothing less from Nick. He’d fooled him, and the director didn’t like that. In Nick’s perfect little word his first assessment was the correct one. The man was a spy and one of the best. He didn’t like not being able to anticipate Loki.

Opening his right hand, a small green serpent of magic curled in his palm. He pet it with a fingertip. “They’ve signed up for the fight of the ages. They won’t be on the front lines but they will be battling Thanos directly.”

After a considering moment Fury nodded and opened a drawer, pulling out two glasses and filling them just enough alcohol to take the edge off. The hell with animosity. It wasn’t practical
right now. “What kind of casualties are you anticipating?”

Loki took the glass, the serpent disappearing and he a little surprised at the gesture. But a gesture that opened him to being more forthcoming with the director. “At least 25% of the front lines.”

Fury sipped slowly from his glass, not normally indulging until after a well-earned celebration. But he had a feeling unless this became his problem he wouldn’t know the outcome immediately. “And the Avengers?”

Loki moved the glass slowly back and forth, gently swishing the liquid. “Thanos is the one most difficult to anticipate. If he enters the throne room, which I suspect he will, not everyone who follows will survive.”

“Who?”

Now Loki chuckled, giving Nick an amused glance. “In spite of popular opinion I cannot see the future. I don’t know who.”

But Loki knew something, Nick was sure of that. He slowly narrowed his eye, studying him, before it occurred to him that he knew that look of resignation. Loki was taking a moment to just stand still. “You’re going into this knowing you’ll die.”

Loki didn’t even flinch, not surprised Fury had figured it out. “It happens to all of us eventually. I like the idea of my death having some meaning.”

“Do you?”

“By Hel no.” Loki gave him a patronizing look before sighing softly. He had a lot to live for, but at least his death would leave behind someone to protect who he held most dear. “Barton isn’t coming back.”

“What makes you say that?”

He could mention how helpful Clint was during the invasion, but it seemed a little too petty. “The elves have taken a liking to him. He’ll be going back to Alfheim, assuming he survives, with 5,000 years ahead of him.” Loki stared at the liquid in the glass, slightly mesmerized as he watched it move. “I’m still not certain if the little spider will be accompanying him or not.”

Steve was the most vulnerable, even though he was also the most advanced, save perhaps Wolverine but Fury wasn’t interested in hearing about him. Tony was the most reckless, his intelligence making him the most likely to survive and his impulsive need to fight the most likely reason he will die. Bruce was the wild card, simply because it wasn’t known if he could even die as the Hulk.

“To victory, then.” Fury raised his glass slightly.

Loki just made a face. “Nicholas, if we must toast at least make it a true statement and not something so vague and disappointing.”

Shrugging and gesturing with his free hand. “By all means.”

Loki considered what the AEsir would find an appropriate toast before raising his glass. “May our strength never fade; may our might never fail…and may we fight on until we meet once more in the great feasting hall of Valhalla.”
Fury’s lip twitched, thinking of his years before this. Like Natasha, he had a lot of red on his ledger. “Do you really think either one of us is destined for that?”

Loki contemplated the glass, drinking slowly and enjoying the flavor since the burn was nonexistent to him. He wasn’t one for offering the private side of himself to anyone not family. But just this once he gave into the temptation. “My mother never once faltered in believing the impossible.” She’d never given up on him, even when he’d given her very good reason to do exactly that. She’d loved him for who he’d been, no matter what he’d chosen to be. He still craved his father’s love and pride, but if he had to choose between the two of them for who he wanted to be like then it was an easy choice. “She is the person I aspire to emulate.”

Author's Notes:

...Loki is in so much trouble.

Next:

Thanos
ASGARD

“What is your plan, prince?”

Loki didn’t glance in Fandral’s direction, watching as the commoners herded their children to underground shelters. Every man capable of fighting would be out in the field. Those that had aged beyond the ability or that were incapable of fighting would be in those shelters with the women and children.

The plan had been gone over in detail with them and the warriors, but Loki knew that wasn’t what the adventurer was asking. Fandral wanted to know what **Loki’s** plan was. “You assume I have a plan beyond the one we have discussed.”

“Yes.” The word was said as a chorus by the Warriors 3 and Sif. But unlike the past it wasn’t accompanied by looks of distrust. If anything their worry had less to do about themselves and more about **his** overall health at the conclusion of that plan. Thor hadn’t joined the chorus but his eyes said he agreed with them.

After a moment Loki smirked. Ordinarily this would be very true but for once Asgard’s ear was bent to his will without subterfuge so he’d offered little. The dangers of the spell he would be using and the foreknowledge of his death he’d kept to himself. There had been little else.

“Where is Lady Jane, brother?” And that.

Loki shrugged ever so slightly, exhaling slowly. “Helheim. Where they will remain until this matter is settled.” Sif raised an eyebrow at that one before slowly shaking her head. “If you have something to say then say it.”

Sif stiffened just a little before sending him a look. “I pity you.”

Loki jerked around to snarl at her. “What?”

“Your mate is quite spirited and will not allow this insult to go unaccounted for. I pity you.” With a final glare he decided to ignore her.

They all walked together through the city, Volstagg shuddering as they passed the wall of the dead that were already standing in place. They were comprised of different races, many that had been departed for so long the knowledge of their species had been lost to time. Ordinarily the dead were translucent specters but that was not the case right now. “Is their presence truly wise?”

Loki pointed to the glowing line on the ground as they walked over it towards their destination. “If they cross the line they will wish their eternity was in Niflheim. A fact they are all aware.”

Fandral shuddered but kept pace to their destination, the field that the dark passage spilled onto. Hundreds of thousands of warriors from the different realms had already gathered, sectioned off based on skillset.

“Brother?”

Loki rolled his eyes. Leave it to Thor to choose today to be observant enough to realize he
They formed a line to stare straight ahead and wait. Thor frowned thoughtfully before he asked, “How long will this initial battle last, Loki?”

The mage just shrugged again. He could hardly anticipate a time table base on what little information he had. “An hour. A year. Who knows? He’s impatient so I would think not long.” Even as they continued muttering, Loki’s thoughts moved over the plan.

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**The Plan**

They all hunched over the maps of Asgard showing not just the structures but the topography of the land. It was a gathering of the leaders of the realms that would be joining forces along with a handful of the most influential warriors from each world. Asgard. Vanaheim. Alfeheim. Jötunheim. Midgard. They were all focused on the vulnerable point Loki had just pointed out. An unmarked dark passage that would spew out Thanos’ forces from one point in space to the training fields closest to the forest. The current argument circulating was a debate of the merits and feasibility of somehow closing the dark passage and delaying attack indefinitely.

Loki had his arms crossed over his chest, his eyebrows raised and giving the warrior who had just spoken a condescending expression. “There is no way to close a dark passage.”

“That you know of, you mean to say.”

The trickster didn’t turn, pointing outward. “Obliterate that sun.”

Reflexively the other warriors looked to where he pointed while the warrior addressed just slowly frowned. “What?”

Loki didn’t even twitch, explaining. “If your task was to obliterate that sun; how would you do so?”

The warrior gave the distant star a few moments of contemplation before slowly nodding. “An explosive force I should think.” The other warriors started nodding in agreement.

It was obvious Loki was unimpressed. “And what do you do when the implosion turns inward and consumes the remaining planets, including this one, in an ever expanding black hole?”

“But you said--...”

Loki cut him off with a decisive gesture and a clipped tone. “I am making a point. To an action of that magnitude reacts. Any attempt to rupture a dark passage will turn that benign passage into a malignant one with a gravitational force. Our realm may not be consumed but all of us would. Do step back and allow someone else to communicate something useful.”

Thor ignored the back and forth, frowning at the maps. “If we cannot close the passage, could we coral them?”

Loki grinned slowly and nodded. “That is part of my plan.”

“Having all of us here leaves the citizens vulnerable.” Thor was pointing to the fields and Loki felt like applauding.

Instead he made a slightly dismissive gesture. “That’s already been handled.”
“How?” Sigyn was the one who asked the question.

“Our fair Goddess of the Underworld has agreed to lend Asgard her assistance.” The two brothers stared at one another, Thor’s eyes widening when he realized that his brother had invited the dead to guard the citizens. “She may not enter but her army can. They will act as the perimeter wall.”

The warriors all paled, one of them asking in horror without thinking. “You would trust the dead to protect the living…prince?” He was hasty to add a title to the end of that sentence.

“Ordinarily, no. But desperate times call for desperate actions. Besides…” Loki grinned maliciously. “I trust they are unwilling to anger my daughter and myself.”

ASGARD

It was fortuitous the dark passage spilled out onto this particular field. The numbers that had gathered were impressive. Impressive enough that you would believe all of Asgard was here. The front ranks were thick with AEsir warriors on foot and Vanir warriors either standing or on horseback. The middle ranks held the Alfheim archers, mixed with elves wielding hilted swords. The last rows were filled with Jötunn and trolls controlled by Vanir spell casters on unicorns.

Thor. Sif. The warriors three. Loki. They all stood side by side as the dividing line between the front and middle ranks.

Fandral bounced lightly with energy. “Just like old times.”

“Indeed.” Loki certainly hoped not because he was not in a mood to stand at the back and know his place. He shook himself out of the past and glanced at Fandral. “Even if we all live, no, you cannot court my daughter.”

Sif muttered under her breath. “They’ve done more than court.”

Thor scowled at her. “Sif.”

“I saw nothing. It was Vanaheim, after all.” She rolled her eyes and muttered just a little louder. “No one would believe me anyway.”

Fandral looked particularly crushed. “Be reasonable, my prince.”

Volstagg just grinned fondly, remembering the growling and grumbling when he’d been courting his own wife. Her father had been predictably hostile until it was clear his intent had been to marry her. The fact that Fandral was alive and intact just proved it was an expected response of male family members protecting an unmarried female of their house.

Queen Sigyn stared straight ahead, anticipation in her eyes. It had been centuries since she’d last joined the ranks like this and she was ready to make blood flow. Wolverine glanced at her, raising an eyebrow. “Didn’t think a queen would be here.”

She wore standard elvish armor, sword at her belt. “Before the light elves were scholars we were warriors. I learned the art and pleasure of war well from my mother.”

Logan nodded slightly but he couldn’t deny he was curious. He’d seen some of the elves in action and he was impressed. “But you don’t live with elves, right?”
A small elf smile tugged at her lips. “Ambition is my vice. There is no true need for a queen on Alfheim, save for Et’ana. But I knew with patience I would hold rule over a territory on Vanahiem.” She gave him a less than subtle head to toe glance and obviously liked what she saw. “After our victory I will be returning to Vanahiem. I would like you to accompany me.”

Wolverine blinked in surprise before his lip curled. “Forward, aren’t you?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I am an elf. Many of us prefer candor.”

“Didn’t think you elves liked humans.”

Her blue eyes swept over the Avengers, her tone even. “We have a low tolerance for prey…but then you don’t read as prey to me.”

His head tilted just a little towards her before he asked, “Then what do you see?”

She reached out a gloved hand, rubbing the lapel of his jacket between two fingers before meeting his gaze evenly. “Consort.” The Vanir didn’t recognize dual leadership because the ruling power of a territory was an elected position. However, what on earth or Asgard would be called ‘spouse’, the Vanir called ‘consort’.

Wolverine bared his teeth, getting her meaning. Not all of it, but enough to say that he was definitely interested.

The Avengers were on the opposite side of the row, closest to the city so they’d have the ability to fall back when needed. Tony had his HUD down, running tests with JARVIS. It had been a bitch to upload him but it had worked. He glanced at one of his screens and shuddered. “The wall of the dead is creepy as hell, just saying.” He also had the comms open, hearing the conversations around him. Especially when he had money riding on the interactions between Wolverine and the Vanir Queen. “Hawk, that’s a hundred bucks you owe me.”

Clint scowled, his bow resting over his shoulder with his quivers. “He didn’t agree to anything, Stark.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “He’s as good as married to Arwen.”

Bruce snorted in quiet humor, asking, “A Lord of the Rings character?”

Sniffing and not sure if he should feel offended or not. “What? I’m well versed in pop culture, Brucey, get with the times.”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Then the correct reference would be Galadriel.”

Heads whipped around to stare at the red-haired assassin who didn’t even twitch in their direction. Tony raised his HUD, his voice low. “I knew it.” Natasha slowly turned and raised an eyebrow at the inventor. “Aragorn and Arwen or Aragorn and Eowyn?”

Something wicked sparked in her eyes before she answered. “Aragorn and Legolas.”

Tony eyed her appreciatively. “I may be replacing my best friend.”

Loki’s double appeared in front of them just in time to hear that, first scowling at Tony who grinned weakly and lowered his HUD, then addressing the others. “Get ready.”

He disappeared as the first of the ships emerged slowly. There was only so much room that
a dark passage can accommodate, after all. Narrow in design, black as pitch, they appeared one at a
time and hovered before moving to line up side by side. As the ships docked, they formed two rows
half as wide as Asgard’s forces. It might have bolstered confidence in some but most were patient
enough to wait and see just what was going to come tearing out of those vessels.

HELHEIM

Jane was the first to open her eyes. She blinked slowly twice before her face contorted into
a vicious glare. “LOKI!” Morgana jumped back, giving the Helheim Queen a surprised glance but
Hela just smirked, wishing she’d bet money. Her father was a dead man. Jane sat up even as the
children slowly started to wake up. Pushing herself to her feet, storming up to Hela. “Send me back.
Right now.” Hela made a dismissive gesture to Morgana who bowed her head stiffly and left.
“Hela.”

She gave Jane a patient look and asked, “Do you really think he was that careless?”

Jane was breathing heavily, her eyes narrowing. “Meaning?”

Hela’s expression turned slightly condescending. Not enough to have that temper directed
at her but enough to catch Jane’s notice. “Meaning he made me vow not to do precisely what you’re
asking.”

“These are extenuating circumstances, Hela, you have to.” Hela lifted an eyebrow to see
color start to rise on Jane’s face. She almost pitied Loki. Almost.

Hela held out her hands helplessly. “I don’t break promises with Loki. Once I give my
word, I maintain it.” Jane’s gaze didn’t veer. “I am a mage, sorceress. My word is my bond. Magic
has been known to reap a vicious cost for breaking that word.”

Jane snarled wordlessly and started to pace. Hela silently watched her with an amused tilt
of the lip. Was this truly the same woman of a few, short years ago?

The physicist looked around quickly before crossing the distance and wrenching open the
door. Hela raised an eyebrow but silently picked up Indel while gesturing for the other two to follow.
Jane didn’t pause or look around, focused on her intended destination. She glared up at Garm who
backed up several steps in surprise. As soon as she was beyond the gate she waved her hands at the
skies. “Heimdall!”

Hela wasn’t but a few steps behind, her lips twitching in amusement. “He won’t open the
Bi-frost.” Jane whipped around to stare at her. “The war has started.”

Indel leaned in to whisper in Hela’s ear. “Why is mama mad?”

The trickster queen decided to be blunt. “Because father is an ass who forgot the meaning
of the word compromise…or never learned it in the first place.”

Talia looked up with wide eyes. “Hela, you said a bad word.”

The mage just smirked evilly. “That’s nothing compared to the words going through her
mind right now.”

Jane’s hands twitched towards her hair that she no doubt wanted to pull but she didn’t
complete to gesture. “I am going to kill him.”
Hela sighed. “I imagine he is well aware of that.”

“Oh, he has no idea what I am going to do to him…” Amber flashing in her eyes as she paused in her pacing. “And you just let him go?”

Throwing Jane a quelling look over her shoulder. “In spite of popular opinion Loki and I are fairly evenly matched when it comes to raw power. We would do considerable damage to one another and our surroundings… and wouldn’t that just be convenient for Thanos?”

Tossing her arms into the air. “How the hell am I supposed to help him from here?” Jane’s tone turned insistent. “He needs me, even if the stubborn jackass won’t admit it.” Indel’s eyes widened in surprise.

Hela couldn’t agree more but she kept it to herself. Mischief was holding Talia in his arms, the girl’s face pressed into his neck.

After a thoughtful assessment of the time Hela turned her head to the small boy watching Jane pace. “Indel, have you been studying your runes?”

The little boy looked down and pouted. “Runes are stupid.”

A knowing smirk curled Hela’s lip. “Our father hated runes as a child, too, but he still learned them. Did you know that you can make spells out of runes?” She looked at Mischief in just the right way that his eyes widened in understanding.

“Really?” Indel chirped the question, curious.

Talia lifted her head, listening. Hela’s voice was a little too casual. “Yes, in fact, I have some runes over here you might like to see. Careful.” She paused for just a second too long. “Remember, when reading runes you always stay to the outside. Standing inside the shape of the runes activates them.”

“Oh.”

She put him down and showed him a set of runes carved into the stone in a circular pattern. “Can you tell what it says?”

Frowning, Indel tilted his head from side to side before he shrugged. “It doesn’t mean anything. It’s just a bunch of letters.”

That knowing grin was back on her face. Creating a few cards, one each with an English letter on them and putting them in a circular pattern. “What do they say?” He looked this way and that before shrugging in confusion but Jane blinked in understanding. Hela moved the letters so they lined up. “And now?”

“Well. Oh.” Indel looked over the runes again before grinning. “It spells Asgard.”

Hela knelt down and tilted her head slightly at the clever boy. “And what do you think will happen if you stand in the center?”

Hopping on the balls of his feet as Mischief started grinning. “We go back home.”

Hela stood and lifted her hands up in a supplicant pose. “I kept my word. I didn’t wake you and I didn’t send you to Asgard.” Winking at Jane as Mischief laughed. “Loki should have been more careful in the wording of my promises. Be sure to tell him that for me.”
Jane stared at her for several seconds before shaking her head a little in confusion. “You planned to send us back.”

Hela smiled slightly. “Remember who you’re dealing with, Jane. We’re tricksters with our own ethics and our own rules…timing is everything.” Jane’s brow furrowed. “Thanos is on Asgard right now. Any moment he will breach the palace.”

Jane gasped. “Loki--…”

Hela nodded slowly. “Go.” Jane glanced at the children but Hela shook her head. “Nowhere is safe anymore. If Asgard falls so will the rest of us. Take them and go.”

MIDGARD

Charles Xavier and Nicholas Fury were next to one another, one man sitting while the other stood. There was nothing from the command center that they could see or do, not until an attack became apparent, but it was time. SHIELD personnel were on high alert, waiting for the slightest indication to mobilize. The X-Men were out, as were all the other fighters for humanity. Strange was keeping his mystical eyes peeled for when and if he would need to act.

Hela appeared in a flash of green, arms crossed over her chest and wearing a very old set of armor, her cloak obscuring it from view. When neither man reacted to her presence, the agents put away their guns and focused back on their screens.

Jane was on her way but this was about as close as she could get to Asgard. Still, she was a queen to two of the nine realms, she wasn’t powerless. She could feel Asgard’s anger. She could sense the brave warriors that died and were sent swiftly to Valhalla. She could feel the gates of Niflheim opening to admit the creatures that Thanos had persuaded to fight for his cause.

Hela turned her eyes towards the skies. “Thanos has arrived.”

THE PLAN

Loki moved the discussion along. This plan worked in stages. The first assault was something anyone could anticipate. Thanos was counting on no one here being able to anticipate another. “With so much focus on the battlefield, we’ll be ill prepared for the second wave which will attack by air.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I know Thanos.” Loki’s tone was flat, almost daring anyone to ask how. Thor had stiffened in anticipation of that question being asked but no one did and the discussion moved along. Word had spread quietly among the warriors of his scars. No one would ever ask that question. “Turrets and air ships will be vital.”

“But if the men are in the field--…”

Loki turned his head towards Azni who had been silently watching. “Et’ana Azni, how many female warriors make up Alfheim ranks?” The AEsiir warriors looked absolutely horrified at the prospect of females being responsible for their weapons and the air defense surrounding the palace. Loki snapped at them impatiently. “If you have difficulty accepting feminine might I would be happy to arrange an audience with the king on the matter…I am certain he would be eager to respond.”
They all lost eye contact with him. Most females of Asgard didn’t aspire to be warriors but Frigga had been well known to be the exception to that rule. Her training and status among the warriors had been fully backed by Odin.

Tony didn’t even bother to snicker quietly. A small smile curled Azni’s lip as she responded. “A third of them.”

“And how flexible is their knowledge?”

Azni’s shrug was dismissive, unconcerned. “They will learn.”

Loki nodded and pointed to various places. “Then this is where I need them…the dragons will do their part. Do tell your ladies not to shoot them, it will only create problems.”

Thor blinked at his brother. “Dragons?”

ASGARD

Two crystal dragons, to be precise, flew over the great city. Loki had traveled to Alfheim to retrieve them to settle the debt they owed him, he tucking their children away so they wouldn’t have to worry about them. Their large wings kept them in the air, moving lazily in a powerful circle and ready to swat down the enemy like annoying flies.

From the air the field was a writhing mass of conflict. It was almost impossible to determine the species of the combatants. It was a tale of victory and defeat. Bodies of all the races from both sides lay on the ground after being felled by their opponent. Loki had been right, the numbers were in the hundreds of thousands.

A bipedal species had raced out of the ships that had multiple mechanical limbs and each one of them deadly. There were no generals. No commanders. The Phalanx. A hive mind species enhanced with Thanos’ technological genius. It was a mass of numbers that were hoping to overwhelm the opposition.

Trolls roared, stomping and hitting anything within reach.

A Vanir spellcaster charged forward on bareback, the white unicorn under him running and spearing obstacles in his way with his spiraled horn.

AEsir snarled, cleaving heads from bodies. Without their heads the Phalanx fell to the ground, their limbs writhing pointlessly beneath them.

The elven archers stayed silent and contained, their arrows hitting their targets with surprising accuracy.

Hulk was launching himself up into the stratosphere, crashing down with his fists and a very pleased grin on his green face.

The warriors three had been working together as opposed to splitting up individually. Loki sent a small burst of power forward, stopping his target’s heart and grinning maliciously when its screech was cut short as it fell over, dead. He frowned at the AEsir that seemed to be hovering in one location before scowling at Thor who hadn’t ventured far either. “Was it you or father that put them on babysitting detail?”

Thor hid a guilty expression, swinging Mjolnir at the creature in front of him and sending
him sailing away with a scream. “I know not what you mean, brother.”

“Lie.” Pointing a finger in his direction. “Thor, you and I are having a detailed conversation after this war.”

The thunderer swung his hammer to the left as he asked, “Concerning what, Loki?”

Distractedly Loki tossed a throwing knife to the right, hitting his target in the eye. “Concerning your irritating and incessant need to coddle me like I was three hundred again.”

Thor threw his hammer to the left, the weapon plowing through an entire grouping of Phalanx as he walked up to Loki. “I will not take you for granted again.”

Raising an eyebrow at his brother. “Then you would not be opposed to my sending them to dog your every step during your next adventure?”

Thor raised his hand without looking and caught his hammer. “You followed me on adventures for seven hundred years, Loki, even though you lost your taste for them a long time ago.” Putting his hand on Loki’s shoulder. “You did so because you are my shield brother as well as my brother.” Shaking his shoulder slightly. “I will do no less.”

Loki tilted his head slightly. “Fine. Guard my back. That doesn’t mean—…” With a heavy scowl he turned, Thor mirroring him and both of them stopped the Phalanx running towards them, he with a magical wall and Thor by extending his hammer. The Phalanx was flattened by his own momentum. Loki huffed. “I hate being interrupted.” Something out of the corner of his eye caught his attention and Loki turned enough to see a small craft shoot out of the dark passage. It flew over the battlefield, screaming past Tony who pulled up short in surprise, and headed for the palace. Loki murmured softly. “The second wave.” The dragons roared as the small, single pilot airship made a beeline for the palace. Instead of breathing fire, they destroyed the ship with icy blasts of frost crystals. The craft screamed out of control, barely missing the palace to crash with a small explosion into the outer wall. Loki looked back to the passage as hundreds of tiny crafts flew through, all of them veering for the palace. Either Thanos was in one of those planes, or he’d arrived invisibly with the Phalanx. Snarling at Thor as he teleported. “GO.”

Steve wasn’t comfortable with a sword but he could use a gun. Between it and his shield, he was making excellent headway. He glanced up, Tony doing a somersault in the air because he could. He shook his head silently before stopping short.

Loki’s shadow flashed in front of Steve. “Fall back!”

Steve nodded, using his shield as a battering ram and started running. “Avengers, fall back.”

Natasha was already right behind him, gun in her left hand and keeping up very well. Clint caught up, running while turning to watch their back as they ran for the palace.

Hulk paused when Loki’s shadow appeared in front of him, arms crossed with a bored expression. “If you really want to smash something there’s someone perfectly evil in my father’s throne room.” Hulk bared his teeth in a savage grin and decided to do exactly that.

Wolverine roared, his claws sinking into flesh and the Phalanx falling to the ground. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Thor shoot into the air and some of the others running past the dead army that were keeping the Phalanx out of the city. He nodded. Time for the showdown.

Tony stayed airborne, keeping an eye on the streets to make sure the path was clear. He
blinked in shock to realize Loki was floating next to him. “The hell…?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Thor likes to think he’s the only one who can fly. I allow him his delusions on occasion.” He turned invisible and teleported just as Thor went whizzing by with Mjolnir firmly in his grip.

Tony grunted. “So happy I was an only child.”

He scowled when Clint immediately snarked over the comm. “You and the rest of the universe is thankful, Stark.”

Maintaining his scowl, seeing the Avengers getting close to the palace gate where Thor had already landed next to Loki. “Shut up, Tweety, or JARVIS is forgetting how to make your arrows.”

“Sir, I am incapable--…”

Snapping at his AI. “JARVIS.”

Steve’s calm voice regained control over the others. “Let’s not announce ourselves before we’re ready. Stark, do a perimeter sweep, north to south.”

Tony changed course sharply, watching the others group together before running swiftly and silently for the throne room. “Yep. On it.”

Jane froze as she stepped away from the runes by Loki’s worktable to see a horse-sized baby crystal dragon. The little dragon trilled and wagged its tail like an enthusiastic dog. Something broke in the washroom, no doubt where the other dragon had wandered. Fenris was growling lowly at the creature, hiding under Loki’s writing table.

Indel jumped on the balls of his feet, pointing. “I want--…”

Picking him up. “No. Now I need you to--…”

Mischief snarled in protest. “NO!”

Jane blinked in surprise at his vehemence, just as the doors to Loki’s suite opened with Azni on the other side. The smell and sound of battle was heavy in the air, the screams of angry dragons, but the elf seemed so calm as she pointed. “Bring them this way.”

Her eyes widened. “Bring--…”

“Trust us.”

Us? Jane’s brow furrowed in confusion but Azni seemed almost desperate. As if there weren’t even seconds to spare.

“Bring them. He’s in the throne room.” The woman Loki trusted as much as his mother. There was something going on, but Jane did trust her. Azni held out a waiting finger and with an unhappy bleat the little dragon didn’t follow as the door closed.

They moved very quickly through the corridor, entering the wing that spilled out into a series of balconies. Down below in the gardens she could see Anya with dagger in one and sword in the other fighting back a ghastly looking, multi-appendaged, mechanical creature and holding her own.
Jane matched Azni’s pace, Mischief right behind her with a hand holding each child. “Thor? The Avengers?”

“They’re all there, dear—…”

Azni went flying back with a gasp as a heat wave of magic brushed over them, Jane screaming and throwing herself back as Mischief dove and flattened his siblings protectively. Jane stopped screaming abruptly, her body half covering Mischief’s and her head raising as a very familiar figure stepped out of the shadow of a column. Her heart jumped into her throat, whispering hoarsely. “Malekith.”

Azni was suddenly in front of them, drawing a long sword from its sheathe. The light elf narrowed her brown eyes, her normally gentle expression set in a hard line. “You should have stayed asleep.”

“So I have often told myself.” Dark magic swirled in his palm but she reacted before he could, lunging. His spell was disturbed but he batted her sword to one side effortlessly.

It had been thousands of years, but she still remembered how to use a sword. “You will be shown no mercy for the crimes you’ve committed.”

Malekith studied her for a moment. “Hmm…now this does seem familiar.” Instead of searching for a weapon he conjured one and matched Azni thrust for thrust. Mischief picked up both Talia and Indel and dragged them out of the way as Jane stood. Malekith was amused, almost whimsical in memory. “Oh, yes, and I remember my response.” A blast of power disarmed her and he didn’t hesitate, running her through the heart to the hilt.

“NO!!”

Azni made no sound, staring at Malekith with utter peace on her face. He let go of the magic created sword, it disappearing as the elven queen slipped to the ground. Jane caught her and eased her down, watching those gentle eyes close.

Jane stilled, staring up at the dark elf who stared right back. Amber sparked in her eyes and a wave of gold circled around her sharply as she stood and conjured her own sword. He sounded nothing more than amused as he asked. “Do you truly believe you have the ability to defeat me, sorceress?” Indel stepped away from the pillar, green eyes watching Malekith. The ears made it obvious he wasn’t a true dark elf, which made the identity of this little one obvious. “Do not worry, little ungit. Your death will be swift compared to hers.”

Malekith flung his hand out towards Indel and there was no telling what sort of awful spell he had planned. Thankfully Mischief had other plans. Nothing was produced forward, Malekith’s own power sending him flying back.

Malekith snarled from the floor, pushing himself back up, while Mischief just smirked. “Too bad, so sad.”

Talia pressed one palm outward, a golden shield shimmering into existence. Indel’s face had no expression, something dark and knowing in his normally joyful eyes. “You hurt my dada.” He’d been little but he remembered his dada screaming in his sleep. He remembered a name.

The dark elf sounded deeply amused. “Hurt him? No…I did so much more than merely hurt him, ungit.”

Indel frowned thoughtfully, unafraid. “What does that word mean?” Talia stepped up next
to him, whispering in his ear. “M’not a bastard. My mama and dada love me.”

Malekith snapped at Indel in irritation. “I am your sire, little fool. The weakling you call father is your mother.” He stepped closer to Indel but Jane moved quickly to intercept him and unknowingly stepped beyond Talia’s shield.

“You won’t touch—…”

He backhanded Jane and sent her falling to her hands and knees. Talia yelped in reaction, losing her hold on her spell. Malekith took a step and picked up Indel around the waist who twisted and hit at the arm holding him. “You are spirited.” Mischief leapt and Malekith deftly spun, shoving Mischief away who went flying into Jane. Indel stilled, his green eyes flashing as he bared his teeth. His suddenly sharp teeth. Malekith murmured almost to himself. “You do resemble him.”

*Bad man. A very, very bad man.* Indel remembered the rule about biting. It didn’t apply to evil or stupid people. Hissing. “I bite like him, too.” Indel bit down on his arm hard enough to draw blood and with an enraged howl Malekith dropped him. Like a little nymph Indel hopped and rolled out of the way. Gritting his teeth, Malekith gripped his dagger in one hand, flipped the blade and tossed it to strike the closest target which happened to be Talia’s heart.

Mischief deftly caught the dagger blade between his palms, flipped the blade and released it back as he spun. Malekith howled, the dagger sinking deeply into his shoulder. He stumbled into the far wall, gathering himself and freezing in shock as the blade of Azni’s long sword sunk into his abdomen. Jane had her teeth bared, using all of her weight to make sure he couldn’t simply pull the sword out.

He locked eyes with Jane whose own were glowing a fiery amber. “I might say something clichéd that this was for Frigga or Loki or Azni…but that was really for me.”

Mischief crossed his arms over his chest. “Indel.” The little boy looked up at his big brother who was smirking dangerously. “Now would be a good time to say your spell backwards.”

Indel screamed the words as he pointed and a blood red portal exploded behind Malekith. Jane’s eyes widened, tethering herself to a whip chord of amber magic looped around a column and holding onto the hilt of the long sword. Malekith groaned as inch by inch the steel withdrew as he was pulled back and up.

Lifted off his feet, Malekith reached out for anything and found Talia’s hair. The little girl, who had been at Azni’s side, screamed and whipped around to sink her teeth into the hand holding her. Malekith howled and moved to strike her, Jane catching the hand moving for her face. She didn’t think, the hunting knife that had been on her thigh in her hand, slicing cleanly through skin and bone and scooping Talia out of harm’s way.

He howled as his hand was separated from his body. He screamed as the portal seemed to eat him feet first. Mischief snagged the end of his white braid, keeping him from actual death just long enough to hiss almost idly. “I wonder what delights await you in Niflheim. I’ll be certain to give Lady Death a few ideas that will please Loki.” He opened his hand and with a blood curdling scream Malekith was gone.

Jane curled her nose, grabbing the hand and quickly throwing it into the vortex. Indel softly spoke and the portal snapped shut, Mischief holding out a hand for the boy to slap.

Talia looked up with tears in her eyes, hand resting lightly on Azni’s forehead. “She wants to go.” They all silently gathered around Azni, falling to their knees. Tears slowly dripped down her
cheeks as she spoke. “She says she’s lived a long time but it’s time for her to rest in Valhalla. But--… I don’t wanna let her go, mother.”

Jane frowned softly, her fingers running through the light elf’s hair. A woman and a mother, who had been just as responsible if not more so for Loki finding his way back to who he used to be. She pressed her lips together firmly to keep from crying. Soon was all she could promise herself. Once they were safe and the war was over they would grieve.

Pulling Talia close, kissing her temple. “It’s too late to save her, sweetie. You have to let her go.”

The little elf frowned, not looking back at her brothers as she reluctantly took her palm off of Azni’s forehead and felt her slip away. She whispered farewell in a teeny, tiny voice to the woman she would have called mother if not for Jane. “Bye.”

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**THE PLAN**

Steve was frowning thoughtfully at the maps. “And you need us in the field?”

Loki was already nodding, arms crossed. “Only in the beginning. Thanos is too smart to lead them into battle. His only goal is the gauntlet. We have to stop him from gaining access to the vault. He can’t go further than the throne room.” Glancing at the thunderer and knowing he was going to protest. “Thor, as the second wave arrives you need to fall back with them.”

“Loki?” Thor offered no other protest, just a question of why in his eyes.

“Defeated, I doubt his army will fight without him.” Thor still didn’t look convinced but his gaze hadn’t shifted. Loki felt himself perk up, realizing his brother wanted the explanation of why he needed to fall back to the palace but he wasn’t going to fight him if the reason made sense. “Father will have the vault sealed tightly but even all of us together may not be enough to stop him.” Perhaps not stop him but Odin will never release the vault, the magic surrounding it strengthened by Asgard’s heart. Thanos would have to destroy Asgard to open the vault. Unfortunately that was not something the titan would be opposed to doing but it would take time. “Even with all of us dead, she is keeping the reality gem so Thanos can never have it. He will never be able to complete the gauntlet, but he could devastate the universe with the number of gems in easy access.” They were all needed. To be the wall that hopefully Thanos couldn’t tear down to get the gauntlet.

“We fall back?”

Loki nodded once sharply to his brother. “Yes, I have a plan.”

“Your magic.” Thor tried to keep the grimace off his face but it was hidden in his voice.

Giving the thunderer an exasperated sigh. “What else were you expecting?”

“Bro--…”

Cutting Thor off with a sharp motion of his hand. “Your might and steel may not be enough.” It probably wouldn’t be. “His technology will protect him from blunt force so something other than that must be utilized to weaken it. Hence the necessity of magic.”

Thor gestured weakly to Tony. “The Man of Iron could craft something.”

Both of Tony’s eyebrows hiked up. “Dude, as awesome as I am--…”
Loki talked over him, his expression saying that Thor was clearly not being practical. “As skilled as Anthony is, he cannot create a contingency for that which he is unfamiliar with.”

The inventor pointed. “What he said. As much as I want to deny it Locks has a point, Thunder Cat.”

“So our goal is kill, not capture.” Steve’s expression was grave when he said this.

“He could not be contained on Midgard, which means he would be confined in Asgard.” Loki just sent him a toothy grin. “Think of how long it took for me to be free. Do you truly wish to give him the opportunity to try again?” Clint shuddered slightly but didn’t comment. Then Loki cocked his head slightly. “Even if that were not the case, this is a creature that not even she is willing to kill, simply because he is too powerful dead. To obliterate not just his body but his soul is the only choice and only magic can accomplish it.” Which wasn’t exactly the truth but he wasn’t about to offer the alternative because he wanted the titan dead.

“Is that possible?”

He had no idea but he had to believe. Magic was all about belief. Shrugging dismissively as if he had every confidence. “Of course. Anything is possible.”

ASGARD

Thanos smiled brightly as he walked the empty corridors of Asgard’s palace. It had been pitifully easy to gain access to the mighty castle but he wasn’t terribly surprised. These AEsir were a rather predictable breed. He chuckled, raising his arm and hitting the double doors with his fist. The ancient wood shattered, the metal hinges splintered, and the remains of both sides went flying inward.

Raising his eyes, his chuckle carried to see Odin sitting proudly on his throne, Gungnir in his hand. Odin’s voice rumbled through the great throne room of Asgard. “You are not welcome here, Thanos.”

Pausing to shake his head in amusement at the aged monarch. “I certainly was not anticipating a welcoming gesture, Odin All-Fool.”

Odin slowly stood. “You will never have the gauntlet.”

Slowly walking down the carpet towards the throne, Thanos countered, “You are hardly in a position to deny me.”

Thanos paused as the Avengers moved out of the shadows on one side and Odin’s sons on the other. His amusement grew, glancing back to see Logan and Sigyn boxing him in. He gave Loki a knowing smirk, reaching out with his mind to snare him. It would be most amusing to watch Loki kill his father. He narrowed his glowing eyes a little, feeling his telepathic abilities rattle within their cage but they couldn’t project outward.

There was a knowing spark in Odin's blue eye. Thanos glanced back at Odin who looked particularly satisfied. “I am, perhaps, more aware of the situation than you are.” Odin couldn’t take the credit for this particular defense. The throne room was the only place in Asgard designed to ward off such abilities and had been so since the beginning. Because what good was a king of Asgard if he were being controlled by another?

Thanos took another assessing look, his initial frustration and doubt dissipating. He was
more than telepathy. He made a scoffing noise. “This is what you have brought forward to defeat me? A group of children. A she-elf…and a Jötunn runt…how desperate you must be.”

Odin’s voice rumbled with authority and power. “You threaten the existen--…”

Thanos’ weapons were built into his metallic suit and he used it to fire a pulse of energy at Odin. The All-Father deflected it with Gungnir easily, Thor narrowing his eyes. Thanos shrugged dismissively. “I grow weary of your sanctimony.”

The king of Asgard nodded slowly, gesturing with his free hand. “Then I will give you a taste of steel.”

The titan nodded slowly as Odin stepped the rest of the way down his throne. “I might enjoy that flavor.”

They all circled around him, weapons in hand, all but Loki who knelt while holding his scepter. He was pulling together the magic needed for this spell, an act of concentration that would take several minutes. In the meantime, he had one other trick in store for the Titan that would hopefully make this unnecessary. Still, he would have a reserve even after this spell, but failing both there was little hope for success. This has to work.

Thanos detected the weakness and flung a pulse of energy in Loki’s direction, the shadow disappearing to leave the trickster invisible and hidden. Thanos made a dismissive noise. “Such a child, runt. You will never be a true son of Asgard.”

A growling sound started low in the back of Thor’s throat, his hold tightening on Mjolnir. Odin lifted his head ever so slightly. “Do not succumb to his insults. Asgard knows the truth.”

Without a word they converged. The others soon discovered Thanos was very well prepared. Bullets had no effect but Natasha was not one to give up easily, continuing to reload and fire. The explosive rocket that Tony had aimed for him, Thanos electronically overrode in a nanosecond and sent it hurling into Hulk. The green giant was sent flying back, lying unconscious by one of the pillars.

“SHIT.” Thanos clamped down on Tony’s wrist. All of their armor had been enhanced, yet it still wasn’t enough and the inventor swallowed a scream as the grip crushed his wrist and disabled the left thruster. The titan prepared to hurl him into the stone wall a second before Mjolnir batted his hand away. Tony immediately used his right thruster to spin out of range. “Fuck!” That was one mistake he wasn’t repeating.

“Sir?”

Tony grit his teeth tightly, his flight ability now next to non-existent without a stabilizer. “Not now, JARVIS.”

Mjolnir turned in an arc back to Thanos but it never reached its target. The titan grinned suddenly and pressed a button. Like a lead weight the war hammer dropped to the ground, cracking the marble. Chuckling deeply at Thor who couldn’t hide his surprise. “Uru is not nearly as impressive once the harmonics of the chemical composition have been analyzed.”

Thor growled and outside the storm rolled in. "You assume much that Mjolnir is required to smite you."

Thanos chuckled at the thunderer and moved forward. "Your assumption that any of you can defeat me amuses me, boy." His amusement fled as he took another step, green tendrils growing
out of the floor, wrapping around his limbs and slowing him down. Hissing and fighting against the magical bonds. “…damn Jötunn runt…”

Tony turned as JARVIS detected movement. “Incoming.”

Over the balconies and through the entrances Phalanx converged. Steve sent his disc flying, gun in his hand with Natasha at his flank. These creatures weren’t nearly as hardy as Thanos.

Wolverine roared and ate up the distance, twin claws extended and ready to shred.

CLANG.

Thanos used his forearm to deflect the adamantium weapons that normally cut through anything. Wolverine blinked in surprise, impressed. “There is something stronger than your pitiful metal, mortal. Me.”

Sigyn flowed the distance like water, her speed and agility keeping her out of Thanos’ grasp but her sword was useless. She and Logan worked in concert to distract the titan, Hawkeye lining up for the perfect shot with his left eye. The arrow sung through the air, as easily caught by the titan as it had been for Loki a lifetime ago. But unlike the trickster Thanos immediately threw the exploding arrow back. Clint hissed through clenched teeth. “Dammit…” It was a second before he and Steve went flying.

The archer hit one of the stone columns with a sickening crunch and landed on the ground in a heap. Steve suffered the brunt of the blast and went flying back through the entrance. Without a sound Natasha raced the distance, kneeling down next to Hawkeye and almost frantically searching for a pulse. The slightest slumping of her shoulders was the only indications that she did find one and she spun where she knelt. Her gun in her hand, she aimed for every vulnerable spot she could think of while staying to act as Clint’s protector.

Volstagg ran in through the entrance moments later, his battle axe in hand. “Sorry for the delay, lads.” He put it to good use, cutting through the Phalanx ranks with ease and clearly enjoying himself.

Tony frowned and lifted his HUD, his voice and tight jaw betraying the pain he was in. “Let me guess. Parking.”

Fandral spun, rapier in hand. “Twas a very large dragon barring our entrance. She seemed to think we intended harm on her little ones.”

Sif huffed, sword and shield being put to good use. “It was Loki’s brilliant idea to invite the dragons.”

Hogun just shook his head and hefted his mace with deadly skill.

Volstagg frowned. “To be fair they have been doing a fair amount of good. I believe they just do not like us.”

Steve came back in, powder burns on his uniform but not looking the worse for wear. He lifted his shield and hurled it. With one hand Thanos caught it and casually tossed the metal shield over his shoulder, smirking when it embedded in the stone wall.

Thor hefted Mjolnir. The hammer still worked as a weapon, it just was incapable of its more magical properties. But it was still a hammer and he used it. Thanos grunted, the hit to his chest solid enough to back him up a step. He formed twin fists and when Thor hit a second time electricity
shot up his arm and brought him to his knees. Thanos lifted a boot, bringing it down hard and the thunderer agilely twisted out of the way, the marble cracking when his boot landed.

Natasha reloaded her gun, hand to her ear. “This isn’t working.”

Tony was concentrating on the remaining Phalanx, spinning and blasting them when they pursued. “Yeah, noticed that.”

Thanos at last broke free of the tendrils, the magic dissipating. He turned his attention to walking forward, catching the bladed scepter aimed for his midsection. Grinning at Odin who was glaring. “I was wondering if you were going to join this battle.”

Odin grit his teeth to keep a hold of Gungnir. “You will never succeed in this madness, Thanos.”

“And it is so amusing that you believe you can stop me.” Thor came up to his father’s left, hammer in hand. “You truly believe you and your simpering son has the power?” Loki appeared, his magic swirling and crackling around him. Thanos turned his eyes enough to see him, delight in his gaze. “Ah…Loki.”

“This ends.” Loki’s eyes were narrowed, focused.

“Yes, I suppose it does. A pity, really.” Giving Odin an amused look. “Did you enjoy his screams, Odin?” Odin’s face lost what little color it had but he didn’t flinch and Thanos continued to goad. “The whimpering boy crying for the father he loves who cares not for him. I sensed your gaze; did you enjoy his suffering? Watching as the hope that anyone in Asgard cared enough to rescue him faded. Watching him turn traitor to beg and plead—…”

Thor roared in fury, hitting his face with the hammer. Thanos then realized the purpose behind the magical tendrils had been more than to just slow him down. The hammer in its current state wasn’t enough to dent his armor, but it was painfully obvious the integrity of his suit had been compromised thanks to Loki’s trap. Blows that before he hadn’t been able to feel he now could. The titan locked eyes with the trickster who smirked.

Loki hadn’t paid his words any attention, knowing the things Thanos would say. He was tuned to the moment; soundless words crossing his tongue as he slowly raised his arms. The ground beneath their feet shook, the warriors sharing grim smiles and working in concert to subdue these creatures. Thanos turned as the green sparks seemed to ignite the trickster, green flames of magic licking at the air surrounding him, swirling around the scepter in his hand.

Thanos grinned. “You think I am fooled, Jötunn runt?”

“No more tricks.” Thanos’ grin only grew as if pleased with the confirmation that Loki was truly in front of him, pulling out a small sphere from a compartment on his armor. Loki muttered under his breath as if a soft prayer. “Please let this work.”

With a snarl he threw everything that he had collected forward, the heat of the blast scorching enough that everyone flinched back. Thanos didn’t even blink, lobbing the small metallic globe at the magical storm. Enough magic to eviscerate a planet. Certainly enough to rend flesh from bone and destroy the titan’s soul. Magic versus technology, the two met and collided. The sound was deafening and caused eyes to close or duck behind hands.

Loki’s green eyes widened, feeling more and more of his magical strength consumed. It was well beyond what he’d been prepared to sacrifice for the spell and he stared in surprise,
metaphysically trying to yank it back. He fought and scrambled to cut the connection, unsuccessful. Just to the point that it would mean his own life, then the connection severed, his mouth open as the light faded. The metallic globe stopped humming and sealed, returning to Thanos’ waiting palm. In all of his years, Loki had never seen nor heard of anything that could suck the very magic out of a caster…until now.

The trickster felt his knees buckle as his glamour shattered and caught himself on his hands. He was still AEsir in appearance, but the state of his body was no longer hidden. Thanos didn’t even suffer a mark on his armor, so pleased. “Malekith did have his uses, Jötunn runt. After all, I would never have been able to devise a defense against your parlor tricks were it not for him.” Casually he backhanded Steve who went flying. He pressed two buttons and hurled the globe at Loki who didn’t even have the strength to block it.

But Odin took that opportunity out of his hands, standing in front of Loki.

The explosion was enough to singe stone, Odin flying back in one direction while the backlash toppled over the throne. Thor roared, hitting with an unrelenting volley. Thanos snickered and focused on the thunderer’s rage even as Loki dragged himself the distance. “How pathetically predictable…say your farewells to your master, runt.”

His glee turned into a glare as ice snaked out along the marble floor. It made traction difficult for the fighters, but the ice had a purpose. Thanos snarled as it grabbed at him, slowing him down to freeze his legs to the spot. The ice stopped sharply, spent. But it would buy time and that had been the purpose of the instinctive response.

An angry grunt caused heads to turn as Hulk lumbered to his feet and roared, his fists hitting the marble floor and leaving holes before charging forward. In concert Hulk and Thor work to smash Thanos into the ground. Thanos was fast enough to use his arms for defense against the pair but his armor was paying the price for it as dents were finally becoming visible.

Loki wasn’t even aware of the ice or anyone else, focused on his father. The cuts and burns were superficial and not life threatening. Shakily he put his palms on the armor covering his father’s chest. He could feel the internal damage, organs torn and bleeding. Loki felt something stick in his throat. Thanos had used his own magic to kill his father.

He should get up and help Thor but he was useless and he knew it. He had just enough magic to survive and no physical strength. He wanted so desperately to fight and protect what mattered most to him. Love. Love mattered more than anything. Love is what brought him back home. It was his weakness, but it’s what also made him strong. Doing nothing, he would watch his father die and his brother fail. Fight and he would die with them and Thanos would still win. He couldn’t choose between the two, which gave him but one choice.

Swallowing thickly, tightening his right hand on his scepter, with his left he stretched outward to place his palm on his father’s weakly moving chest.

A tear slipped free and he smiled as he closed his eyes. This was his purpose. This was what he was supposed to do. There wasn’t enough magic left in him for anything except this. Hopefully his father would succeed with might where he knew he would fail. Golden warmth glowed around him, sparkling against his palm as it spread to gently engulf the All-Father. Centuries flowed through that golden path, enough time to heal all wounds. There was no pain. No fear. Just peace and he gave it without regret.

Sif knelt down next to the king and prince. “Prince?”
The gold faded and Odin took a strong breath as the wounds faded and healed as if there had never been an injury. Her mouth slowly opened in wonder as Odin opened his eye to stare up at his son. “Loki…what have you done?”

Blinking, eyes opening, Loki smiled again and shrugged. “Saved you.”

His father’s face crumpled in regret. “Why??”

More tears fell but Loki didn’t even notice. “Because I love you.” Green eyes moving to Sif, ignoring the surprise on her face. He didn’t care what he said anymore. All that mattered is that what was most important was said. “Be certain to tell Thor I love him.”

He fell bonelessly back as his strength failed, caught by the warrioress and eased down. Sif looked back from one to the other. “What is it—what’s happening?”

Odin sat up and fairly scrambled forward to take Loki’s hand. “He gave me his magic.”

A mage can’t live without magic. It was a fact she knew and understood now. Cold ice rushed through Sif’s veins. “WHAT??”

It wasn’t just magic that Loki had given him, but Odin wouldn’t know the difference. It was the magic that all creatures carried inside of them to keep their souls anchored to their body. It wasn’t something Odin would be able to give back, even if he knew how. He took in a calming breath. “Go assist Thor. Kill Thanos for Asgard…and Loki.”

Gritting her teeth, with a growl Sif raced back into the fray but Odin only had eyes for his son who was looking at him with a curious little smile on his face. “Uh oh. I remember that look. I might be worried were I going to live past today.”

Odin struggled to rumble. He struggled to do anything but weep. But his boy needed him to be strong so he would be. “My time to Valhalla will come soon enough, my son, and a sound reprimand will be waiting for you.” He shook his head and gently moved an errant hair out of his face, tucking the ebony lock behind an ear.

Loki didn’t want to see his father so sad. Odin’s lips were pressed in a thin line to keep emotions at bay and there was a permanent furrow of his eyebrows. The slight tremble at the corner of his mouth truly distressed Loki. It was nice he would be mourned and remembered but he’d been responsible for enough of those lines. He sighed softly. “I suppose now is as good a time as ever to tell you it was my fault.”

That soft confession distracted Odin. Frowning lightly before asking, “What was your fault?”

His lip twitched just a little, not in memory because this particular moment had been one of his favorites, but to see a slight lightening in his father’s features. “Thor and Fandral were brushing up on their sword work in the formal throne room. They were throwing one another against the pillars and a torch dislodged…”

Odin nodded slowly. “It caught the red runner on fire…”

“And scorched more than half of the golden throne.” Loki tried to chuckle but it sounded like a sad cough. “You screamed at both of them for over an hour and confined Thor to his quarters for months.”

“I recall it took months to see to the repairs but how is their rough housing your fault?”
Grinning weakly at his father. “I was working on my invisibility spells. They’d been ignoring me so I threw the torch.” Loki grimaced suddenly, blue racing across his face briefly but he clenched his eyes and forced it back. He accepted and embraced his Jötunn side but of the two this was still his preferred appearance. Feeling Odin’s palm brush his cheek startled him into opening his eyes.

“You needn’t hide from me, Loki. My Jötunn son is a prince of Asgard and I am very proud of that fact.” The tension melted away and his father didn’t really even react to the cool blue skin against his palm, not even will able to keep Loki’s body from returning to its true state. “Oh, the songs they will write about you, Loki. The stories that I will tell your sons.”

Swallowing thickly. “You’ll look after them? All of them?” One more time, was all Loki could think. He wanted to see them just that one last time. One last smile. One last laugh.

Odin nodded gravely, his words a vow he would not break. Words that he knew Thor would echo. “I swear on my life, Loki. Your mate will never want for anything. Indel and Mischief will grow up brave and strong, both cunning and intelligent mages. Your little Talia will be the most glorious goddess in all of Asgard. They will make me almost as proud as I am of their father.”

Whispering softly, slowly. It wasn’t difficult to breathe…he was just so tired. “Look forward to it. Cannot wait to see mother…”

Odin wanted to close his eye and bow his head. He didn’t. He couldn’t. He’d missed so much already. Leaning forward as Loki slowly closed his eyes, pressing a kiss to his temple and whispering words he should have spent a lifetime giving. “You are loved, my son. I only wish I had told you more often.”

Loki forgave him. There was no point in the anger anymore. His father loved him. It was enough.

He heard the distant sound of a pair of shears snipping through thread, and of three voices weeping.

He was floating now, no longer able to feel his body as he took that last, slow breath before softly exhaling. As he did one word passed his lips. The most important word. “…fader…”

Sound faded. Light faded. Stillness.

The quicksilver prince slipped away.

MIDGARD

A hush had fallen over the command center that no one was willing to break. No one knew when it had started but it had stretched into a strange tension. No one could see or hear what was happening on a distant planet in an entirely different realm but mortal eyes glanced at one another as if feeling it.

Charles leaned back in his chair, elbows on the arm rests and the backs of the fingers of one hand touching his lips, staring off in the distance. His skill was tied to the thoughts of others, not nearly as sensitive to emotions. It wasn’t to say that he couldn’t feel them. Particularly when such a sharp emotion as anguish tore at the barriers of his mind.

Fury stood, his arms hanging at his sides. He took it all in but he said nothing. His thoughts were on his Avengers but there wasn’t a damn thing he could do to help them. Their fate lay in their
own hands and the lying hands of a man he wished he’d never met. And in a quiet, private part of his 

mind, the part that he never acknowledged because he was too old to believe in such shit…he hoped. 

He hoped the trickster was wrong about his fate.

Hela hadn’t moved from her position, her eyes affixed upward as if she could see Asgard, 

millions of miles away. Neither man could tell how the battle was progressing by the lack of 

expression on her face. She was frozen in a moment of time that had lasted hours.

When a single tear slipped down her face, Fury knew.

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**Author's Notes:**

*Don't kill me. This turned into a beast and I couldn't fit it all in one chapter. I just couldn't. I also 
gave plenty of warning that this was going to happen but there is a point. Now I won't make you 
wait a week for the next chapter but you will have to live in suspense just the tiniest bit because I'm 
still editing.*

**Next:**

*Victory or defeat?*
Chapter 88

MIDGARD

“Everyone, stand by.” There was a flurry of activity, orders being given rapidly over the comms. Fury turned to look at Hela, needing to know just how close they were to being attacked. “How soon?”

Hela didn’t move, she didn’t even blink. It was almost as if she couldn’t hear him and perhaps she couldn’t. Charles turned his attention away from her to give Fury a warning look. There was a feral feel to her thoughts now and he knew now was not a good time to make demands of her. “I wouldn’t recommend gaining her notice right now, director.”

Whether it was because of stress or anxiety, whatever the reason Nick didn’t heed Charles’ advice and put a hand on her arm to do exactly that. His eye widened and with a gasp he fell to his knees as her hand clamped down on his hand and wrist. He honestly didn’t know how she didn’t break his bones as her green eyes moved to lock onto his own dark orb.

The agents that weren’t in the midst of giving orders had weapons in hand, ordering her to release him. She ignored them. They both did. Charles knew there was little that could be done if she didn’t want to be stopped so instead he listened. “This is the moment, little mortal. A matter of minutes that extend to infinity. So many possibilities within this moment. You should pray that this ends as I’ve designed.” She bared her teeth, a predatory gleam in her eyes that made him shiver. It was as if the veil had been ripped aside to truly show him who and what she was. “You all should.”

If Thanos wasn’t stopped he would come to Midgard next after destroying Asgard and everyone in it. She would gladly hand him the Gem of Reality because she had no intention of existing in a universe if her family was dead. They had all better start praying that the right decision was made.

She released Nick and he stumbled back. He waved the agents back to their posts while he tried to rub feeling back into his hand, knowing it was his own fault for not heeding Xavier’s advice. She returned her attention towards Asgard. Her eyes glowed green and the citrine gem around her neck flashed. She spoke the words with great care and everyone in the vicinity felt as well as heard them. “What is the name?”

ASGARD

“NO!”

Jane ran the distance, heedless of the danger. Heedless of anything except the prone figure. She skidded across the cracked marble, cradling Loki’s head in her lap even as Odin silently stood with Gungnir in his hand and strode back into the fight with battle-edged determination. Tony had eyes only for his target, but he’d had JARVIS keep one eye on Loki at all times. He knew. He kept it out of his voice and his focus for now, but hell spawn Barney was going to pay.

With the last of the Phalanx dead, every single one of them focused on Thanos. He laughed with glee, breaking free of the last of the ice as it melted. “And so the Jötunn runt is no longer favored by my beloved.” He shifted and his fist met Thor’s hammer. The vibration of the impact brought them both back a step. Thanos looked almost amused, shaking out his hand. “Hmm…more resilient than I thought, this uru.” Odin chose stealth and thrust Gungnir forward
without his typical roar but the blade was deflected. Then Thanos caught movement out of the corner of his eye and turned. “Ah, the little mortal.” Jane barely even noticed a shadow fall over her. The sound of approaching steps.

“Ah, hell.” It took Tony only a second to react. “Guys, keep him away from Janie.”

Now Odin roared. “You will maintain your distance!”

“Jane! Run!”

Jane looked up slowly, almost detached to see Thanos looming before her. Thor had an arm wrapped around his throat but the thunderer’s weight wasn’t slowing the titan down. With a roar Hulk brought down his fist, scowling when Thanos was able to pivot enough to avoid him. In that same move Thanos jerked and dislodged the thunderer, sending him stumbling into Odin.

Indel dropped down and grabbed for his father’s scepter, pausing when a larger set of hands helped him lift it. Mischief and Indel shared a look before they both spun the staff in concert and the twin blades were unsheathed. As one they bared their teeth and dropped into a defensive crouch.

All the others were trying to keep Thanos back but they weren’t strong enough. Jane glanced at the palm of her hand a second before pressing it flatly on the stone. Almost immediately she, Loki, and the children were encased in a magical shell, since she knew more defensive than offensive spells.

Thanos’ extended hand was snatched back as it encountered the barrier. His amusement vanished as he sneered. “You cannot escape the will of the gauntlet, little witch.” She turned her attention back to Loki without reacting. With a sneer he turned for the vault with a renewed purpose.

What is the name?

Jane kissed his forehead and carded through his dark hair, putting it all back in its proper place. Talia frowned and leaned forward, her ear resting over where his heart should be beating. Indel and Mischief maintained their position, just in case the shield fell.

Jane batted at her ear as if to ward off a gnat, her face crumbling in misery. He’d known. Somehow Loki had known this was going to happen. Pulling in a shaky breath, tears dripping down her cheeks and off the edge of her trembling chin, muttering. “Stupid…stubborn…prince…”

Her finger traced the circular marking along his forehead, a sob wrenching at her insides and pain tearing at her chest. Jane remembered something but it was on the edge of her mind.

What is the name?

Her body started to rock rhythmically but even as she moved she felt like she was dividing within herself. Part of her wanted to scream and rage against death but another part of her mind was still turning. Slowly she frowned. She was supposed to do something. Something important. But all that she wanted to do was sit and weep and pretend that the universe wouldn’t move on without him.

What is the name, Jane?

Talia looked up. “What is the name, mother?”

Indel and Mischief knelt down, staring up at her. “What is the name?”
Frowning and looking down at Loki, muttering softly as a question from what felt like a lifetime before suddenly slipped into her mind. “…what once was whole, strong and fair…” She brushed her fingers against his skin that whether it was pale or blue had never mattered to her. “…halved cleanly…” How can a whole be halved and yet still be whole? It was impossible—it wasn’t geometry. It was a riddle. It was a name she would know. “…yet two walk away whole…” The furrow between her eyebrows deepened. “What is the name of that who is daughter, yet birthed by none?”

Why was a name important? Who cares?? But then it came to her. Because the person was important. Someone powerful. Someone vital who knew this was going to happen.

**WHAT IS THE NAME?**

What did it matter, saying a name? Jane gasped just a little in surprise. Because it was the person who was needed here the most who had been locked out. Breathing slowly as it occurred to her the one person in the universe who was as powerful as Loki was, because she was a part of him.

Jane was mated to Loki, which made her as Asgardian as he was by bond, but she had no title or place yet without marriage and so no exile could be applied. And though she was no longer mortal she would always be human. She was the loophole. She was the exception Hela had been waiting and planning for 704 years. She could feel magical weight against her tongue, warning her in speaking the name but she ignored it as she looked up. “Hela. Your name is Lady Hela, Queen of Hel and Goddess of the Underworld. Ruler of Helheim and Niflheim.”

A sound filled the air, like a key clicking a lock open. Sif paused to look up before her head jerked around to stare. The edict had been specific. No AEsir may say Hela’s name on Asgardian soil, but only an Asgardian had the power to break the spell. A feminine figure appeared out of nothing and knelt down, not stopped by the shield. She smiled that trickster smile as she spoke. “And as I call him father, you are worthy to be mother.” Hela touched Jane’s tear-stained cheek lightly with her palm.

An unfelt wind blew the folds of her black cloak aside as she stood back up, revealing Asgardian armor black from the blood of thousands. The armor she’d worn to defeat the hoard of demons overrunning Helheim with Loki at her side. The scepter Mischief and Indel held flew into her waiting hand and a perplexed expression crossed Hela’s face. She pushed her confusion to one side for now, concentrating on her target. Rolling her eyes, she reversed the staff and felt the pulse of power flow.

She gave a quick inspection of Thanos’ armor with a tendril of magic and smirked, realizing Loki had done a thorough job of compromising the integrity of it. She jerked the staff down and Thanos’ footing was lost, falling to the ground. Eyes turned to her, Tony’s widening in delight but Hela was focused. With staff and arms outstretched she tossed Thanos around like a ragdoll, Hulk grinning toothily. With a grunt of effort she sent a punch of power into his chest, Thanos tumbling back before rising to his feet. Inclining her head towards the broken remains of the metallic globe. “I might be willing to wager you don’t have two of those.” Because assuredly without that globe now that his armor was weakened, Thanos would not have beaten Loki. She grinned toothily. “Let’s find out.”

She hurled a volley of magic, her path unimpeded as she ripped a section of his suit off his body. He howled in pain, gripping at the raw patch of skin left behind and her grin widened. He retaliated with a pulse of energy, Hela catching it without flinching before dusting off her hands. She tilted her head slightly, curious what other little tricks he was going to produce. A compartment opened and he hurled a small box in her direction. It appeared empty but Hela wasn’t an idiot. She
could have just teleported, but there were some vulnerable people behind her.

Instead she strengthened and stretched out the shield spell. The box bounced away harmlessly, but something seemed to be eating away at the shield. Barking at Thor in command. “Lightning, uncle.”

Thor nodded, focusing on the storm that had been at just the edge of his thoughts. Thunder crashed a second before a singular bolt of lightning connected with Thanos’ feet. He didn’t look any more impressed than he did against the heroes fighting him. “That is your concept of impressive, child?”

Hela smirked slightly at Thor, both of them ignoring Thanos. “I meant for you to hit the shield with it but no matter.”

Making an upward gesture, the citrine gem around her neck pulsed and the shield brightened in intensity, small little dots along the magical field popping and burning to a crisp. Tony asked from under his HUD. “Problem?”

Hela shrugged. “Not at all. I was just destroying his nanites.”

Thanos growled and brushed aside his attackers with ease. With a snarl he charged forward. Hela smirked and stood still. As soon as he was close enough she stretched out both arms and two dozen doubles appeared and circled around him. He ran through her, the entire surface of her body rippling as if made of water. She turned as her eyes flashed green, an action repeated in all of her doubles. One of them darted forward, ducking under an aggressive swipe to rip off a panel of armor. As soon as the armor clanged to the floor, the double faded. The Gem of Reality was ever so useful for making the impossible possible. She didn’t say anything, repeating the process in removing the panels of his armor as painfully as possible, enjoying the chorus of his screams. The others just stood back to watch, looks of satisfaction on their faces.

Thanos collapsed to his knees, reduced to a loin cloth and nothing else, his technological masterpiece nothing more than a pile of useless scrap thrown about the room with the remains of his army. She walked once slowly around him, her fingers trailing along his shoulder. He snarled up at her as he demanded, “Who are you, pitiful creature?”

Hela raised an eyebrow. “I believe I’m the one who just kicked your ass…who’s the pitiful one?”

Tony smirked tightly. “Oh yeah. You just got served.”

The citrine Gem of Reality around her neck flashed again and Thanos’ eyes widened. “You had it!”

She grinned toothily. “If it makes you feel better it was his note.” A gesture and a wall of energy appeared on the right, denying the heroes access but also keeping Thanos from striking out. It firmed into the carefully constructed cage she’d made for him in Niflheim. “This gem is ever so useful, turning a dimensional pocket into something so much more.” Another gesture and the left was contained. Each gesture, another wall of the cage. To destroy his soul or to contain his living body, the only two options. Thanos turned his gaze, eyes blazing on her just as the last wall confined him in a cube on all sides.

“WHO ARE YOU???”

Smirking slightly as she walked slowly forward. “I shall tell you who you are. My slave. I
will give you some company of course. Malekith would be so terribly bored if he didn’t get to suffer with you. You are to be the permanent guest of my court in Hel…I am certain they will delight in your screams.” She spoke carefully, a long forgotten dialect of a moon called Titan and his face showed his horror as he understood her. “I am Hela Lokisdóttir of Helheim and Niflheim, Queen of the dead…and your beloved Lady Death. For I know you delighted in my father’s screams and there are severe penalties for bringing suffering to my house.”

His scream of rage and fear ended as soon as it started, cut off and lost as the shadows consumed him and he was sent to Hel.

ELSEWHERE

Loki opened his eyes and sat up before taking a look around. Light. Gold. It wasn’t the throne room of Asgard and he pulled himself to his feet. There was no feeling of weakness and he looked down at his hands. He’d never felt so light…dead. He was dead. His green eyes roamed around the vast emptiness. Where was he?

“Always the hard way, my son.”

“Mother!” Whipping around with a bright smile, as soon as he saw that familiar golden hair he ran into her arms. Frigga tilted her head to the side a little as she laughed in joy. His hold was strong, as was her own as his head ducked down towards her shoulder. She could feel his shoulders shaking a little; the place that his face was pressed felt damp. “I’m so sorry.”

She shook her head as her eyes danced, one hand moving to thread through his hair. “Foolishness.”

“But what I said--…”

Sighing a laugh that was that comforting, indulgent sound he had often heard. “You think I listened to anything you said?” She kissed his cheek to calm him and used her thumb to gently wipe away a tear track. “I know better than to listen to your words. You were still my son in your heart. You still loved me…I died knowing that. Never doubt love, Loki. You will always be my son because I love you.”

“Really? You’re not…disappointed?” It was one of the things that he feared the most. That his actions would leave her disappointed in him.

“No, Loki.” His eyes widened and his heart clenched. He hated that phrase with every fiber of his being. But she continued to speak and eased his distress with a smile and a gentle thumb running along his cheekbone. “My brave boy found his way home. How could I be disappointed?”

His face was contorted with distress, thinking of everything he had done over the centuries. Particularly those of the last few years. “I did--…” He shook his head helplessly, unable to complete his thought.

“Shh…you are not the only one who made mistakes, my son. I would venture that it is we who should fear disappointing you.” Loki leaned back down to hug her tightly, not wanting to hear apologies from her. As far as he was concerned they were unnecessary. He sighed softly in contentment and an eternity passed in an instant.

After a time he lifted his head curiously, looking around. “Is this Valhalla?”

Amused laughter filled the air again. “No, this is merely a…hmm, there is a Midgardian
term for it. Ah, a waiting room.”

He frowned a little, not familiar with such a thing. Nothing that had ever been said about Valhalla or any of the other realms for the dead ever spoke of it. “Then what do we wait for?”

She pulled back now, a palm touching his cheek. “For Jane.”

“Jane?” Loki’s eyes saddened, thinking about Jane, Mischief, Talia, and Indel standing on the shoreline, left behind to grieve. But it was a strangely distant sadness, because with death it was only a matter of time before they would be reunited.

A small smile, tinged with brief regret and relief pulled at her lips. “You look so much better, my son.”

Loki shrugged and replied honestly, the thought of lying not even a possible consideration here. “I’m not lonely anymore.”

She nodded as if she completely understood. “I knew that Jane would be the best suited for the task.” There was a wicked little twinkle in her eyes as she spoke, as if she had more than one meaning. And considering this was his mother she did.

But because this was his mother he was horrified she would even bring it up. A slightly embarrassed look crossed Loki’s face. “Mother…”

Instead of responding Frigga turned and held out her arm. “Come meet him, precious one.” Loki blinked in surprise, looking down at a little girl who stepped towards him and hesitantly smiled up at him. He found himself echoing her. “This little one is called Freyja.”

Loki gave his mother a curious look. “It means ‘lady’, does it not?”

The girl giggled and ducked behind Frigga, peeking out to glance at Loki. “I believe Hela chose her name wisely.” His confusion deepened but his mother didn’t seem inclined to explain. “I am certain she can give you more details but just know that I will look after her for the whole of eternity.”

“But…”

“Can I have a hug?” Little Freyja asked her question softly, a hint of longing in her voice.

He knelt down without hesitation, Freyja wrapping her arms tightly around his neck instantly. He found his own arms coming around her as if it was the most natural thing. As if he had held her a thousand times before. She giggled and kissed his cheek before running to hide behind another figure. Loki’s eyes widened as Azni smiled at him gently, lovingly, before both of them faded.

His mother’s voice pulled him from his thoughts. “This was the only way we could speak before you leave.”

His smile fell as he shoved himself back to his feet. “Leave?” After all that, he was still going to Helheim?

Her grin turned impish. “If all goes according to our design Jane will gain your life back and Thanos will find himself in a great deal of suffering until the end of time.”

Protesting that he wouldn’t get to stay. He was finally, finally at peace. “But I want to stay
Frigga touched his cheek again lightly with her palm. “Loki, you have an entire lifetime ahead of you with your family.” He immediately put his own palm over her hand to keep her touch there, leaning into her.

But then what she said penetrated. “Whose design?” He slowly frowned in thought. Hela’s involvement in much of this he’d known and allowed but who else was involved?

Her impish grin only grew and it didn’t look as out of place on her face as one might expect. “You have some very powerful women in your corner, my son. Are you surprised we’ve talked?”

He blinked silently for a moment. “You knew G’dath.”

Laughing and shaking her head fondly. “Yes, but she is not the one I speak of. I knew Azni. And Hela.”

Squeaking, horrified he’d underestimated her so badly. “You planned this??” With her gift of foresight she had the capability but he’d never dreamed she would actually do so.

Frigga brushed his jaw with her thumb. “It was your choice to make, but I had faith in you. We just wanted to be sure the reward was worth the work.”

He was stunned. A plan that was involved enough and encompassing enough that it could drag him back from the brink of being eternally lost to hatred. A family of his own, as well as the family he thought he’d lost. A title. A home. Speaking of…he looked pensively at her. “Do you know how long father can lecture when he’s angry?”

Frigga threw her head back to laugh. “Well, do you not deserve it?”

“No.” His expression was sour.

She raised a single eyebrow. “Loki?”

“No.” He didn’t even twitch.

She smiled and adjusted his collar. “Well, your father lectures because he loves you.”

Sighing softly, Loki rolled his eyes at the familiar excuse. Considering how long some of his lectures were his father must love him an awful lot. “I know…”

“Tell me about them.”

Loki grinned in spite of himself, at ease as soon as his thoughts turned to his children. Then a thoughtful look briefly appeared. “Have you seen them?”

“Of course. This is more than eternity, it is a reward for life. I am able to see any moment I choose…even those that occurred in the past.” Loki stilled and refused to look at her. Frigga softly sighed, easily able to guess where his thoughts had shifted. “I have never cared where you were born, Loki. All that I see is my beautiful baby boy who has grown into a man. While the past I wish was different for your sake, I still do not care how my grandson was born.”

He tried to turn from her. “It is--…”

She caught his chin and coaxed him into facing her. “I do not care.” She brushed her
thumb along his cheekbone again and smiled when his searching green eyes met hers. “I love you, Loki. I’ve loved you since the moment I held you in my arms. I will continue to love you until it truly is your due time and beyond. Let me see your children through your eyes.”

His smile grew and softened all at once but found himself eager to share with her his pride in his children. “Indel is brilliant. He’s so very much like me it’s frightening, but there’s a sweetness to his nature that I am unsure where it comes from.”

Frigga brushed her fingers along his cheek. “You were very sweet as a little boy, I’m certain he inherited it from you.”

His green eyes became a little distant. “Talia is as lovely as a song. She’s artistic by nature and quite clever. She loves to draw and has quite the imagination.”

“As appropriate for any enchantress.” At his look of surprise she asked, “They are the most creative of the cast, are they not?”

He smiled and nodded in agreement. “And Mischief…he may be modeled after me but I think he will be the most challenging.” She laughed soft, but then he felt it. A tugging sensation around his heart. It was light but insistent. Brow furrowing, knowing what it meant. “I don’t want to leave you.” There was so much more he wanted to talk about. So many things he never got to say.

Frigga reached up to kiss his temple. “You’re not leaving me. I watched you learn and grow on Alfheim. I watched your courage on Midgard. I watched your sacrifice on Asgard.” Now she smiled freely. “Now I will watch you at peace on Asgard, happy with my daughter-in-law. I will watch over my grandchildren. You will advise Thor as he reigns and your father steps down. I will live as you live and wreak mischief and one day in the far distant future you will join me here.”

He wrapped his arms around her again and hugged her tightly for as long as he could, eyes closed.

ASGARD

Steve was the first to relax and started to shakily grin in relief. Natasha had yet to move from Clint’s side, monitoring his vitals but the tension in her shoulders had eased. Hulk was scowling, trying to figure out where the bad thing had gone. The AEsir all eyed Hela warily, except for Fandral who was staring longingly at her. She gave them a cold look before turning to the picture before her. Jane was sobbing softly, her fingers running through Loki’s hair over and over again. Mortal grins slipped and the AEsir tentatively approached. Three little heads were resting on his chest, whimpering and crying.

Thor turned from where Thanos had been an instant before and dropped Mjolnir. “Loki!” He ran the distance, skidding across the cracked marble to a knee and immediately taking his hand, searching Jane’s face. “What happened?” Jane found herself strangely mute and didn’t even have the interest in answering him.

Odin hesitantly laid a hand on his son’s shoulder, his voice betraying him when it cracked. “I am sorry, my son…he granted me his life to save mine.” Thor kept himself from flinching from his father’s touch, his brow furrowing before he hung his head as tears slipped free and he silently wept without shame.

Tony tossed his helmet roughly to the side, running a hand through his hair. He ignored the pain of his wrist. He ignored everything. He did not sign up for five thousand years that didn’t
include the God of Mischief.

On reflex Fandral’s head jerked down to the necklace around his neck, his face crumpling to see that the glass was empty. Sif pursed her lips to keep the burn in her eyes at bay while somber expressions slipped over Volstagg and Hogun.

Hulk frowned before shrinking suddenly. Natasha’s brow furrowed silently. Steve put away his gun and bowed his head in silent pray. Sigyn sheathed her sword as Logan put away his claws, both of them as somber as the rest. In the distance, a roar of celebration and victory could be heard but no one had the heart to join in.

Hela reached into her dimensional storage and pulled out the spool of golden thread she’d borrowed from the Norns. She was Lady Death but her domain ended at Valhalla. Thankfully she knew, with Frigga’s help, that Loki wasn’t in Valhalla yet. Odin had averted his heartbroken gaze enough to see her and his blue eye widened. She turned over her empty hand and the end of a cut thread that was attached to the world tree appeared in her palm as the citrine gem around her neck glowed. Several feet of the thread rested easily but there was no other end to it, as if it was connected to something on the opposite side that was unseen.

She froze and locked eyes with him, no one but him hearing her. “Why should I give him back to you?”

Odin replied immediately, no one hearing his response to her. “His family needs him.”

A single shoulder shrugged, her eyes staring into his soul. “Without doubt, but I can merely return him to Alfheim or Vanaheim and they can settle quite happily into a house there. That isn’t my question. You had him for a thousand years and you failed miserably. How can you guarantee to me that this time he will be happy if I give him back to you?”

A million thoughts crashed together and yet none of it was proof. No matter what he said, Odin knew it wouldn’t be good enough for Hela. She knew that as much as he wanted to, he didn’t completely understand his son. And then the answer came to him. “I will ask him.”

Her lip twitched in amusement, proud he’d finally figured it out. “Remember that. No one knows Loki as well as he knows himself…save perhaps Jane.” Hope bloomed on Odin’s face and Hela winked, smoothing some of her stolen thread to the golden yarn cut short. The two sides fused together before it all vanished. A cut thread was an ended life. But now it would all be absorbed back into the world tree as if the end had never come. But because he chose death the knot had been circumvented, his fate irrevocably changed.

Hela moved fluidly and knelt down, even as the mourning started; the tears and wishes that friendship and reconciliation could have happened sooner. Their movements slowed, all but Jane’s and his children since a visit from Lady Death was not witnessed lightly. Her porcelain white hands cupped his jaw, her face now an expressionless mask. She studied his still features before leaning down and touching her lips to his, breathing life giving magic back into him.

Magic coiled in his form, nestling into his mind and heart, then reached outward to reclaim his soul. He gasped and bodily jerked as his markings faded back to smooth pale with a little bit of her help, his green eyes flying open as Hela smirked just a little. She spoke softly, “It appears, father, you will be alive to hear that lecture after all.” Loki groaned weakly and four sets of eyes jumped to his face.

“Papa…”
“Dada!”

“Father.”

They were gentle with him, afraid to hurt him, but they covered him with some much needed hugs. Hela smiled gently at Jane who couldn’t seem to get over the shock, holding Loki but her eyes moving back and forth between the pair of them. “…Loki…”

Jane gasped and covered his face with kisses, her tears now from joy instead of sorrow while Hela held his staff. “Does he always hold it like this?” Loki shook his head slightly ‘no’ while Jane nodded a tired ‘yes’. She narrowed her eyes at Loki. “You were holding it upside down, father.”

His voice was hoarse but it was there as he asked, “…point?”

“If you had been holding it properly it would have helped ground you.” Which in turn would have prevented Thanos from draining his magic to his current state. Loki looked like he wanted to retort, but after a moment of wordlessly opening his mouth he pressed his lips together tightly. Jane laughed softly from relief while Loki’s eyes fluttered closed, his sleep more peaceful than it had been in centuries.

With her hand through their hair, Jane gentled their distress and worry until the tears slowly dried on their young faces. Time reasserted itself, no one else aware of what had transpired except Odin. Tony tilted his head slowly, his left arm gingerly braced against his chest and sorrow swept aside for confused curiosity as he studied Loki’s pale face. He didn’t remember seeing the change happen. One second Loki was a blueberry popsicle and now he wasn’t.

Indel tugged lightly on Jane’s bracer. “Dada doesn’t like cold floors. They make him cranky.”

Jane sniffed and nodded, unwilling to take a hand off of Loki to wipe away her tears. “You’re right.” Her brown eyes flicked in Thor’s direction. “Thor, can you help me move him?”

Thor looked up slowly from where he’d been sightlessly studying the ground before nodding as he swallowed hard, tears dripping and tangling in his beard but refusing to allow his eyes to return to his brother’s still form. “Of course. There are…preparations…”

Frowning slightly, not really understanding the significance and not really caring. Bed and bath were currently very high on her priority list. “Well, you can prepare for a feast after you move him to bed, I really want to get him out of those dirty clothes…that didn’t sound nearly as bad in my head.”

Natasha frowned at Jane. After assessing that Loki had indeed died she hadn’t moved her gaze back to him. She doubted if anyone had. She wasn’t the first to realize the disconnect but she was the only one unafraid to ask. “Jane…you do realize he’s dead?”

Indel nodded, sniffing and wiping his nose with the back of his hand. “Yep, and then big, big sister came and kissed him…which was weird, but it brought him back.”

Steve cried. “What?”

“Was it hot?” We all know who asked that.

Several healers entered the throne room cautiously, escorted by several more armed elves. Immediately they fanned out to assess Clint, Tony, and Loki as the top priority. Thor’s hands shook,
reaching out to stroke Loki’s temple. It registered that his brother’s skin had warmed to his more normal AEsir pale. “He’s alive?”

Understanding broke across Jane’s face. “Yes.” She smiled gently at the trickster queen. “Hela said he just needs rest but he’ll be just fine.”

Cries of relief echoed through the throne room, Sif letting out a whoosh of breath and leaning forward with hands on her knees. A brief contest of wills ensued over who would carry him and Odin won by default with Jane’s approval.

Fandral met Hela’s eyes an instant before she gave him a weak smile and vanished.

Author's Notes:

Not too terribly long of a wait. THIS is why I had to break them up. Way too long of a single chapter and hey...a little suspense is healthy. I think. :D

Next:

Thanos' backup plan; Cleanup
NIFLHEIM

Hela stared silently, a small smile on her face as she watched Thanos rage within the confines of his prison. He screamed threats and rattled at the bars with his fists but it held. It would always hold. She looked to the left at the demon hoards who were eager to run forward and play. It was so rare she brought them fresh meat and hot blood.

She walked forward slowly, Thanos frothing at the mouth he was so angry. She blinked and changed forms, smiling with sharp teeth as he froze to stare at her in horror. Purring to him softly. “The mighty Thanos…in love with a Jötunn…runt.” She put a blue hand on the bars and he flinched back from her. “Mhmm…I shall have to share this memory with father. He will be delighted that you were so easily vanquished.”

“He’s dead.” Thanos said this with a vicious edge to his voice and a victorious grin. It had been a delicious victory, yet so disappointing the runt hadn’t suffered more. “The runt—…” Her red eyes flashed green and he decided not to finish that sentence.

She had used the insult against herself for irony. If he continued using it she would rip his tongue out. “I am Lady Death, you titanic fool. He was dead. Now he is not.”

His grin slipped. “Impossible!”

She shifted her weight slightly to lean back, her arms crossed loosely. “I want to take a moment so that you appreciate that all of this could have been avoided.”

He bared his teeth at her in fury. “You betray the realms that you hold rule over! You have more love of life than of death.”

Hela ignored him, playing with the necklace around her neck with her fingers. Since she wasn’t doing it, she’d had the demons remove the two gems that had been in his possession. They were currently in a felt pouch in dimensional storage. “When the late queen of Asgard had me utilize the Gem of Reality to whisper Malekith’s name in your mind, I had no idea how clever a plan that truly was.” Hela doubted if Frigga had known the result at the time but from an analytical perspective she could still appreciate the genius of it. “That one whisper kept Malekith alive long enough for Indel to be conceived. That child kept Loki on the correct path, which in turn led to both your and Malekith’s defeat.” Hela smiled brightly while Thanos’ face slackened in horrified surprise. “Were it not for the two of you, Loki would have seized the throne of Asgard and ultimately brought about Ragnarok. I must aspire to be like grandmother when I grow up.” She tilted her head slightly, curious, when Thanos started chuckling. Then the chuckles graduated into nearly hysterical laughter. She lifted an eyebrow and asked, “Whatever is so funny?”

He shook his head, giving her a look of disgust. “You. The Queen of death protective of one little realm.”

She shrugged as if bored with him. “I am protective of them now. They have passed my test. They are worthy of that protection.”

He leaned in closer, the obsessive love in his eyes bleeding into a hate that was all consuming. “You believe I will be content with their victory? Even now the Shi’ar amass their entire armada for Asgard. The AEsir will be obliterated.”
The Shi’ar. They were a massive collection of different species even larger than the Skrull Empire. The most prominent cast, their species descended from birds, held a fierce pride. Once an ally was accepted by them, it was very difficult to change that position. Their advancement wasn’t impressive but their ability to use stargates to jump from point to point was. Between that and their starrcracker technology, which were mechanics capable of forcing suns to go supernova, it made them a very real threat.

Or it would have. Even as she grinned, she reflected on her actions over the last couple of days.

Sif grunted as she landed on all fours. She didn’t even have to look around. Only one person in the nine seemed to delight in yanking her around without warning. She growled and stood up. “Hela!” Hela was lounging on her throne, an eyebrow slowly rising. Muttering softly, not forgetting that Hela was not nearly as lenient with informality as Loki. “Queen Hela.”

The trickster queen smirked devilishly. “Lady Sif, how wonderful that you’ve decided to visit.”

The AEsir warrior glanced around the Helheim throne room. She hadn’t seen it, but she suspected a shadow had delivered her here. One of Hela’s more annoying tricks. “I had a choice?”

Hela shrugged a little. “Not really.” She gestured lightly and the few ghosts milling about departed to give them privacy. Sif walked forward slowly, not from fear but from respect. The woman responsible not just for Loki’s life but for all of their lives. Hela rolled her eyes, liking that Sif had a bit of spunk to her. “You don’t tiptoe around Thor. Stop it.”

Sif looked at the throne thoughtfully before replying. “I would have thought you would wish me subservient.”

Hela rolled her eyes. “There is a vast difference between that and respect.” Her palm tilted and a glass was placed there and filled by a wisp of a ghost before he faded. “I have servants. I find respect more useful, particularly in warriors.”

Sif stiffened, thinking that Hela brought her here concerning Freyja. “I never spoke a word of his daughter to Loki.”

Hela’s eyebrow lifted slightly, tone sardonic. “I know or you would be very dead.”

Sif felt her eyes widen in surprise and she swallowed once. That hadn’t sounded like a quip. “I assume you summoned me with cause.” Hela nodded slightly and tilted her head towards a basin of water. There were rocks within the bowl, creating a tall waterfall. In the cascading water Sif saw an armada of silver ships hovering over a dusty world. Sif walked the distance, studying the ships closely. “What is this?”

“The Shi’ar.” Sif frowned to herself. The name was vaguely familiar but she wasn’t quite sure why. She silently sent Hela a questioning look. “You do not truly believe that a monster like Thanos has but one plan, do you?” Hela made a tutting sound. “Thor’s distraction is understandable. Odin’s as well. Loki is unconscious and most of Asgard either mourns or celebrates their victory…you have not their excuse.”

“I’m worried about him as well!” Sif growled as she shouted this without thinking.

Hela studied Sif for a moment and realized Sif truly was. Waving a hand dismissively. “He
will be fine.” She tilted her head again towards the image. “They amass to attack Asgard.”

Sif’s eyes widened in horror. Their allies were already being sent home and many a brave warrior had died. There wasn’t time. “Asgard hasn’t the strength for a second assault.”

Hela was already nodding her head in agreement. “I know. And Thanos knew this as well. He was counting on it. This is a creature who has no respect for life. With his defeat he will find solace in Asgard joining him.”

“What can be done?” Sif licked her lips anxiously, shifting on her feet and clearly wanting to do something.

Hela stood up and slinked her way down the short steps of her throne. “I am going to their home world. You are coming with me.”

Sif didn’t look particularly pleased with the prospect. “To reason with them?”

Smirking that wicked way again. “To threaten them. Well, it isn’t much of a threat since I will carry it out. Ah, to promise them a trickster queen’s vengeance for defying me. Yes, that sounds much better.”

Frowning thoughtfully at the Helheim queen. “Why do you need me?”

Hela shrugged lightly as she walked by. “Someone has to carry my bags.” Sif scowled.

Hela turned away from Thanos to crook a single finger. Very carefully two demons approached the queen and her prisoner with a golden box. Each side had a handle, the metal smooth and perfect. Without looking Hela moved her hand and the top of the box went translucent. Something pulsed and throbbed within, a soft purple anomaly with strands of light that caressed the confines. And around that purple being looped a band of green with more than four dozen small, twinkling stars. Every single demon except for the two carrying the box fell to their knees, faces to the ground.

Her form reverted back to AEsr, yet her green eyes seemed like frozen chips of dark jade as she stared through Thanos. “The Shi’ar will not come.”

Thanos lifted his head arrogantly, his voice filled with confidence. “I visited their world. Their king swore an oath to me in blood.”

Hela smiled again.

Sif kept an even pace with Hela, who was slinking through the streets with one destination in mind. The bags that Hela had been referring to was a golden box that felt practically weightless. When questioned as to the contents, the trickster queen just smiled maliciously and said nothing.

The warrior goddess could feel the might of the fleet hovering above them but Hela didn’t seem the least bit disturbed. She climbed up the metallic steps carefully before walking forward. Unlike most courts that Sif had entered, the Shi’ar had columns surrounding it but no roofing. The people in attendance, the upper class of their races, were humanoid in appearance but had feathered crests instead of hair.
A strange series of clucking sounds filled the air, the king emitting a sharp sound and instant silence descended as he asked, “Who dares to enter my realm and my court without invitation?”

Hela stopped walking, expression blank. “Lady Death.”

The guards on either side of the king froze and the females of the court scattered. No doubt they went to hover over their hatchlings. Hela didn’t even glance in their direction. The king immediately bowed. “We are doing his bidding as agreed, oh infamous lady.”

“I find it amusing that you truly believe I am pleased you are doing as Thanos desires.” She gestured slightly behind her and Sif came forward with the box. The king shifted, recognizing the AEsir armor for what it was. Then his focus moved to the box as Hela brought their attention to it. “This is not a gift, before you even assume so. I wanted to present evidence of how serious I am.” Her voice deepened, a growling purr. “You will stand down.”

The king stood slowly, regally. “In blood I vowed to carry out the titan’s desires.”

Which meant that not only would he not stand down, but he couldn’t. So he would have to be an example for the others. Something gruesome enough that she wouldn’t have to repeat herself. Not that she wouldn’t enjoy herself. “Very well.” Hela’s lip twitched before she moved the distance. Dagger in hand, in four moves the guards fell to the floor dead before she roughly shoved the king onto his face. He caught himself on his hands and knees, but had no opportunity to move to defend himself before she gestured and gravity seemed to yank him the rest of the way down. Sif stood taller, a look of satisfaction in her eyes.

Hela twirled the knife in her hand as she slowly circled around the king, her green eyes shining brightly. “There is a curious turn of phrase that is often said in jest: I am going to rip his spine out.” The green in her eyes deepened and Sif paled. “I do not say this in jest.” Twirling her fingers, thick vines crawled up the columns, stretching out and up into a tangle. It blocked out the sights of the city, but it also blocked escape. Hela turned her head enough to address all those who remained. “You will not be permitted to leave. And when he is dead I will ask the next in line to stand down. I will continue to do so until you yield and if I must butcher each and every one of you so be it.”

Hela smiled grimly at the memory. She also smiled with victory at the titanic fool before her. “I, too, visited the Aerie and had a brief discussion with them. For just as my father knows how you think, so too do I. I at first tried to reason with them, but I should have known better. Any species that would willingly work at your behest are not reasonable creatures.”

Thanos stood up a little straighter, arrogant. “They believe in something greater than you could conceive—…”

Cutting him off, not interested in what he had to say. Her only interest was in conveying this lovely little tale so she could gloat. “So I settled for a not so subtle threat. After I killed their king as an example to the others they were quite eager to bow to my will.” Hela purred softly. She hadn’t been kind and it had been a hard death. She’d forced his court and the most prominent of the species to watch. “You see, for each realm that sustains life, there is a mother. A heart if you will. Not here, of course, since there is not life here for a mother to sustain. The nine carry some of the most powerful mothers, but outside of the nine the mothers are much smaller.”

“Stories…”
Correcting him with one word. “Reality.” She found it ironic that most didn’t believe in such things, yet they were proven so deliciously wrong when their mother died. Hela gestured to the pulsing, soft purple entity within the box. “This is the mother of the primary home world of the Aerie, the Imperium. Their empire contains more than a thousand worlds so I selected 50 others. Only I know which ones.” She turned to take the golden box and vanished it to dimensional storage. “I will keep it safe for them, for they know if any of them dare to cross me I will destroy 51 worlds… and every single resident within them.” Even should they grow the balls to amass for Asgard, by then her spells would be in place. An intricate layer of protection over the city as a first defense, a hundred times more impressive and more deadly than the current physical wall that protected Asgard. No, that much death wasn’t worth one ally. Not to them. “They’re not coming, Thanos. You have lost… to two Jötunn runts.” Thanos flinched back, sagging to the ground as the truth really started to sink in. She crooned softly. “Death will never claim you. Decay will never touch you. You will suffer, but neither starvation nor thirst will fell you. All the wounds that you receive will heal at sunrise… to begin again.”

She turned her back on him and walked, her hips swaying. Hela crooked a finger and the demon who kept all the others in line stepped forward and bowed. “My queen?”

With a single finger she brushed its cheek and asked, “Do you see that creature?”

“Yes, your grace.”

Hela turned to look at the others piled on top of one another, a tide of pain barely held at bay. “The rest of you. Do you see him?”

There were screeches and growls, teeth clicking and chattering in eager anticipation.

Malekith pulled himself up by one hand to lean against the bars. Unlike Thanos he was very dead. He and Thanos were trapped here, the cage that they shared separated them by a metal divide. His left hand as well as both of his feet were gone. Hela hadn’t been kind enough to retrieve them for him so this would be his constant state. But this was Niflheim. He may be dead but he still felt pain. This was his punishment. This was his eternity. His hatred of all AEsir made it impossible to ever regret his hand in their deaths. His one regret was that he had been felled by three infants and a female. That was a blow to his pride that he would never recover from. Especially in hearing that his siring the boy led to both of their downfalls.

“He is the enemy of your Queen.” Hela raised her voice to be heard, met with the thunder of their cries. “He is the enemy of the nine realms.” The chaotic magic of Yggdrasil filled her, her form glowing green and her words reverberating through time and space. “He will never leave Niflheim. I declare him rejected by death. For all time.” Screeches and snarls filled the air, clawed feet stomped on rock. “And whether in this life or the next, whoever kills him I will take the greatest pleasure in ripping apart… slowly.”

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**ASGARD**

Odin slowly nodded to himself, his face not betraying his thoughts or emotions on the matter. Eir’s face was full of professional apology but she took his nod as a dismissal and with a bow went to her next patient. The war had been brutal, both in terms of deaths as well as damage. Currently two adult crystal dragons had made a nest for themselves in the mountains next to the pine forest, but it was the furthest thing from his mind in terms of priority.

Those that fought were slowly collecting their dead and Asgard would be hosting several funeral rite ceremonies for their own warriors, unable to host an event of such scale at one time
because there were so many. Death had touched most of the citizens in one way or another, though the civilian casualties were virtually nonexistent thanks to his sons’ planning.

Hela’s army of the dead had departed as soon as the Phalanx had fallen, those creatures dying in the same instant Thanos had been defeated and sent to Niflheim. He had no doubt Loki’s daughter would make very certain the titan never died and never escaped. He felt himself smile a little with pride.

But the smile was tinged with bitter disappointment. Disappointment in himself because of his foolish, stubborn pride. He fully recognized that he had allowed this to happen. It wasn’t something he would have acknowledged even a few years ago, which only made the regret sharper. Even now, the barrier was torn down yet still Hela flitted about, never staying. He was starting to doubt that she ever would. That the time to have her here was an opportunity long expired. Closing his eye for just a moment, he sighed softly.

_Come home, Hela._

With his right hand Odin lightly touched Gungnir. The cool metal still felt right and true in his hand, but the hum of power that was usually under his palm wasn’t there. During the battle, after Loki’s sacrifice, he hadn’t noticed. He did now. A gift that he had taken for granted, always focused on steel and might. A gift that was lost to him forever.

He glanced up when G’dath sat down next to him on the healing bed. There was something very somber in her eyes, but then he knew that she and Azni had been close. “I gather you have been informed.” She nodded slightly, slowly, but didn’t say anything. She and Eir were working in concert to ensure that everyone left Asgard as healthy as possible. She’d seen to the mortals personally. She was aware of the health of Asgard’s king. “You would know better than any...how long do I have?”

Eir was the best healer in Asgard. She knew the AEsir body inside and out. She had discreetly learned all that she could about Jötunn physiology. Still, even with her knowledge there were some matters concerning magic that only this woman knew.

After a considered moment G’dath held out her hand and Odin put his hand in her palm. She noticed there was a slight difference in his features, the lines of time not as deep. She grasped it lightly, frowning slightly to herself as she followed the magic before her lip twitched. “Your son did you the greatest service.” Odin’s brow slowly furrowed. “With your magic at your disposal, you had less than a decade in hand...something neither son was aware of.”

The look she sent him was full of reproach and he sighed. “I saw no point in burdening either of them with that news.”

“But knowledge like that would make every moment more important.”

Odin could feel his frustration mounting and he didn’t even attempt to keep it from his voice. “Loki knew one of us would die in that war and look what he did with that knowledge.” Hela popped in for a few seconds at a time over the last couple of days, but she’d been blunt in telling him that particular fact.

“Yes. Let us examine what your son did.” Now that it was over and done with G’dath said this was pride. “The AEsir have an average life of 5,000 years with Idunn’s apples. The Jötunn have the same with the protection of their icy world. Loki has never needed those apples, his magic powerful enough and his will strong enough that he could choose an immortal’s life if he wanted it.”
Odin frowned a little to himself. No, that didn’t sound like something Loki wanted. “But he will not.”

“He will only choose to live as long as she does.” If something were to happen to Jane, Loki would force himself forward until his children were grown, but she couldn’t see him going much further than that. “The point I am making is that you shouldn’t be here. He may have made Hela from himself but he isn’t her. What he did shouldn’t have been possible. Yet here you are.”

“I have more than a decade at my disposal.” His voice was filled with surprise. He couldn’t decide if there was also joy or disappointment.

G’dath nodded slowly, explaining at least a little of what Loki had actually done. “He gave you not just magic, but a gift of his life force. The magic that keeps our souls anchored to the shell you see. You no longer have an external gift of magic, but what you have is so much more precious. I would be surprised if you pass on to Valhalla before Indel is a recognized adult.”

Centuries. He may no longer be able to use magic outward, but his youngest had gifted him with the opportunity to correct his mistakes. “Enough time to pay my debt to him.”

She let go of his hand and sighed. “He’s forgiven you.” Odin glanced at her in surprise but she shrugged since it was obvious to her. A gift given so selflessly cannot come from a heart filled with rage. “You’ve done enough, now just continue forward and enjoy the trickster for who he is.”

He felt himself smile without his consent. Enjoy the trickster. The mischief and the pranks. Now there were three children, all of whom seemed to have the same proclivity to one degree or another. But with the sweet there is also the sour. His rumbling voice softened with respect. “My condolences for Et’ana Azni. For her bravery she is no doubt walking the streets of Valhalla as we speak.”

Words that reassured an AEsir were not nearly as reassuring to an elf but G’dath nodded. “Thank you. I knew she was tired. She had been wanting to rest for quite some time. Her meeting Talia and Loki delayed that but…this outcome was inevitable.” She glanced out the windows, staring out towards a distant sun. “Now she is at peace.”

Odin nodded. He understood that feeling. Once Eir had confirmed he had but a few short years was when he’d started pressing for Thor’s coronation. With Frigga’s loss, he’d lost his focus to the desire to join her. “I had almost been looking forward to that.”

G’dath was no fool. She understood only too well how easily you can look forward to death, forgetting the joys you once held in life. “I see that. But Azni was tired for 3,000 years. She lost her children and her mate but she kept going because Alfheim needed her. Do try to follow her example or I will be most disappointed.” A slight frown furrowed his brow but he didn’t respond. “Will you be crowning your son soon?”

Standing, thinking of all that was wrong that needed to be righted. There were still over a hundred thousand people to send back to their homes, not to mention their dead. The damage to the city itself was minor but needed to be addressed. There was also Loki to consider. “The dead are due their respects and that will take days if not longer. There are repairs to complete which will take even more time. Plus this event is too important, Thor will refuse if Loki is physically unable to attend.”

“And will you be crowning your eldest before or after their marriage?”

His answer of a few years ago would have been to focus on the coronation, for the good of Asgard. But he was seeing now that the stability and happiness of his family was also for the good of
Asgard. “After. This coronation is important to all of Asgard but Lady Jane has more than earned her place in this family.” A woman who not only saved his son from the path he had in his foolishness unwittingly set Loki on, but who defeated Malekith. An act worthy of recognition and reward before the eyes of Asgard. “She deserves her place on the steps when Thor wears the crown.”

He noticed the gleam of approval in her eyes. But she didn’t address it, instead speaking softly. “I would expect he will be waking soon.”

In spite of how long Loki had been unconscious, both Eir and G’dath had assured anyone who’d asked that it was his body’s way to focus on healing. Hela may have given him back his full life expectancy but only time could repair the damage done to his body and his ability to use magic. Once he woke up, that process would slow so his body was keeping him asleep as long as possible.

“Then I believe it is my turn to sit with him.”

Thor knelt down next to the burn marks along the marble floors, courtesy of his lightning. Between the scorch marks and the cracks from obvious combat the entire area was going to have to be replaced. His blue eyes moved to circular indents from where bodies had landed. He could still play it out in his mind. Every throw of the hammer. Every move and countermove to stop their foe.

But where his fingers brushed was where his father and then his brother had fallen. He’d never doubted Asgard’s success. When he started to doubt the survival of his family; that was when he’d regretted that it had come to this. And a soft doubt fluttered in the back of his mind. A doubt that he could have stayed in Asgard if he’d lost both of them.

“Thor?”

He glanced up but didn’t move, nodding slightly in her direction. “Sif.”

She looked over the damaged throne room. The servants were moving silently, trying to sort things to begin the repairs. The rest of the palace had suffered surface damage, the most extensive of it here. Asgard was stretched thin at the moment, even with Vanahheim and Alfheim offering the aid of their skilled labor. The city was mostly intact, buildings damaged from debris and fallen air ships but the civilian death tolls minimal.

She was frowning thoughtfully before she asked, “Are you alright?”

Thor nodded slowly, his voice distant. “We were victorious.”

Sif nodded in return even as she stood a little taller with pride. “Even as Asgard mourns, she celebrates.”

They both turned to watch as the toppled throne was righted and braced. Court was still scheduled to proceed in the morning. The surface damage would be ignored so that a sense of normalcy could return to the citizens. The repairs would occur during the times when court was not in session.

“For a moment I feared we would fail.” Sif rubbed her arm as if cold as she spoke, unable to explain her shiver. She’d faced death in battle countless times before but this had been different. This wasn’t a war on a distant realm or an adventure. This had been she stepping forward as a warrior of Asgard to protect her home.

When Loki’s spell had been absorbed and her king had nearly died. When it was becoming obvious that perhaps only might would be the solution—a solution that Thanos seemed
laughably immune to. That was when Sif had felt afraid.

“I did not doubt our success...I doubted the price for it.”

Sif frowned a little. “Asgard has lost brave men before to win wars.”

“But those men were not my father or my brother.” Thor’s answer was followed by a flinch, as if the mere mention of possibility tore at his heart.

“No. They were not.” She nodded as she looked down. Speaking of fear. “Your niece is truly frightening, Thor.”

“I suppose she is when she chooses to be.” Thor didn’t know the context behind Sif’s observation, he just agreed since Loki was just as capable.

Sif had asked why she’d been chosen to witness Hela acting on Asgard’s behalf. The trickster queen had shrugged slightly and suggested that since Thor had Odin to learn from for kingly behavior, it was fitting that Sif see the hard choices that a queen sometimes had to make. Sif looked at the throne again and imagined what the appropriate action would be now that Thanos was finally defeated, even more than anyone else knew. “No doubt your father will hold your coronation soon.”

Thor nodded to himself again, agreeing with her. “And I will refuse until all of my family may attend.”

She frowned that that was the stance Thor was choosing. Asking, “Is that wise?”

He shrugged his shoulders slightly, not really concerned about what anyone, including father, thought about his decision. “I do not know if it is wise. I simply know that it is right.”

She didn’t try to persuade him otherwise. Both because she doubted her success and because she agreed with him. Loki had more than earned the right to attend. Not that it was something she believed he had to earn. In the back of her mind she was worried the trickster would do something to disrupt the ceremony but she kept that worry to herself. But her treacherous thoughts moved to the coronation and pain tugged at her heart. “And then you will name your queen.”

A slight smile crossed his face. “The matter has already been discussed. My father knows I will not name a queen at this time, but I will begin to court the woman I hope will become my intended.”

“Then I offer well wishes in that regard.” Sif looked like she’d just swallowed glass.

Thor stood back up slowly, watching her try to be stoic when it was obvious it pained her to do so. His eyes had been opened, perhaps not fully but certainly a little more aware when it concerned Sif. Loki wasn’t the only one who had grown.

He walked forward slowly until he was less than an arm’s length away from her. Her brow furrowed slightly as he held her elbow, his thumb lightly rubbing her upper arm. “That woman’s name is Sif.” Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped open. Thor smiled a little. “You are trying, Sif. Even Loki sees that. It was all I asked.”

“I don’t...” She pulled in a steadying breath, forcing herself to regain control. “I don’t abide your brother’s presence for your sake.” Slowly she was learning to find an appreciation and respect for him.

Thor nodded and chuckled softly. “I am aware.” Tiling his head slightly to the right in
invitation before turning. “Come. The training yard awaits.” She grinned with interest and followed.

Clint was slow to open his eyes, his reluctance easy for anyone to detect. Especially when that someone was an assassin called Natasha Romanoff. It wasn’t the first time he’d woken up, which is why he was reluctant. He pressed his lips together for a moment before he asked softly, “They told you?”

Natasha nodded grimly in return. “Perhaps SHIELD--…”

The archer glanced the other way and asked, “You really think they’re going to give me a better prognosis? I can’t feel my legs. With time I’ll have 60% use.” When he’d hit the pillar his back had been broken. A malady that could be fixed here but there was also damage to his spinal chord which was not as easily repaired. His aim may be unaffected but his ability to actually get into position was severely hampered. Which wouldn’t do SHIELD or anyone else any good.

Her face was devoid of expression, her jaw tight. “You need a second opinion.”

Clint waved his hand slightly, looking defeated. “They’re all in agreement.”

“No all of them.” It was the way that she emphasized ‘all’ that he knew she was talking about Loki.

He didn’t look any more optimistic. “Our deal was for an apple, not for my legs.”

Natasha’s eyes narrowed just a little but didn’t have an opportunity to respond. Tony drawled out his question as he swaggered into the room. “What’s with all the gloom and doom?” It hadn’t even taken a day to heal the inventor’s broken wrist. Considering Tony had hit on every single healer to come within range it was 15 hours too long for Eir.

Clint glared dully at the other man. “Get out, Stark.”

Tony just smirked and leaned back against the wall. “Nah.”

“I mean it.”

The billionaire just shrugged dismissively. “Whatever, it’s not like you can make me.”

“I can.” There was a hard glint in Natasha’s eyes.

Naturally Tony ignored the warning and pushed himself away from the wall, holding up a single finger. “One: lose the pity-me face, it’s pathetic.” Clint’s face contorted in irritation and his eyes narrowed. Tony considered that a personal victory and held up two fingers. “Two: you’re really underestimating my BFF if you think he’s just going to let you roll around for the rest of your life.” They both looked at him blankly and he held up three fingers. “Three: even if Locks agrees with the healing babes I’ll think of something tech-wise.”

Clint snapped at the inventor, hating the man for giving him hope. “Take a long walk off a short pier in cement shoes.”

Tony smirked and rocked onto the balls of his feet. “Ooh, middle school insults. Progress.”

Before either SHIELD agent could respond, Eir strolled into the healing room, giving Tony a pointed look. “Are you disturbing my patients, Enchanter Stark?”

“Not you, too.” Tony groaned this at the healer. Every female or magic user he came
across who wasn’t from Earth called him that and he found it annoying. Then he gave her a playful leer. “He-elllo, nurse.”

Eir didn’t rise to the bait, her expression carefully blank. “You remind me of someone.”

“Do I?”

She nodded slowly in confirmation. “Indeed. He was quite mischievous as a lad. Actually he never quite grew out of it but he learned to keep that mischief away from my healing rooms.”

Tony knew she was talking about Loki. He didn’t understand the significance yet but he had a feeling she’d make sure he understood. “Did he?”

Eir nodded again, both of them ignoring the interested looks on both Natasha’s and Clint’s faces. “He was a smart lad who knew it was never advisable to annoy a healer with an expertise of the body.” Her expression changed just enough to betray her annoyance with him before she moved past him to check Clint’s status. With a final nod to the mortal recovering from his injury, she exited as silently and gracefully as she entered.

Tony waited until he felt confident she couldn’t hear before stepping closer. “I might see why he fears her. Anyway, legs. You. Don’t let hope die and all that.” In spite of how flip he was acting, Natasha could see how serious he was. One way or another, Tony Stark would make sure Clint regained the full function of his legs. He turned on his heels to leave. “I’ve got some squirts to annoy.”

As much as Clint might not want to admit it, he felt better. “Or will they be annoying you?”

“They’re Lock’s kids, it’s a toss up.”

Tony sat on the floor with his legs crossed, Mischief sitting across from him. Talia and Indel were currently attempting to thumb wrestle just like Uncle Tony had taught them. Surprisingly Talia was winning.

Mischief was frowning intently, having been trying to teach some of the basics to the inventor. “You have to concentrate.”

Tony frowned right back. “I am concentrating.”

“He looks constipated.” Somehow Talia managed to say this with a straight face. Indel tipped over as he started giggling.

Tony sniffed indignantly at the girl. “You’re constipated.”

Talia stuck out her tongue. Tony stuck his out in return.

Mischief lightly tapped the Avenger’s forehead with a finger. “You’re still talking so no you’re not.” Tony gave him a look and the boy huffed. “Picture what you want.” He held up his own hand, green flame leaping from his palm. “Think about what fire looks like. Now…say the word.”

Tony held up his hand and whispered softly, his eyes widening as a spark weakly winked before extinguishing. “Ha!”
Smirking in praise, Mischief let the green flame skip up and down his arm as it grew legs. “When you get really good, you won’t need the words.”

Stark scowled at the boy. “Show off.” They all turned as Hela appeared, looking annoyed, with Pepper hanging onto her arm. Tony scrambled to his feet, surprised and pleased all at once as he asked, “Pep?”

Odin was finally getting around to letting Heimdall send them back to earth the day after tomorrow so this was a nice surprise. Actually that was the story they were telling Fury unless Loki still hadn’t woken up yet. There was also Clint to consider. From his perspective, he’d voted on going last because he wanted his best bud to know he hadn’t been forgotten.

Pepper gave the trickster queen a sweet smile. “Thank you, Hela.”

Hela’s eyes flashed as she lightly batted Pepper’s hands off her arm and snarled. “That’s the last time or you won’t have a voice. Ever again.” Pepper stared back without saying anything and after a pause the trickster queen rolled her eyes. “Just consider me an immortal taxi service.” She shook herself out as if settling riled fur and stomped out the door. “I’m off to bug grandfather.”

Indel ran after her, leaning outside to yell. “He’s in dada’s room.”

Hela whipped around in the corridor. “Is father awake?”

Two other rugrats leaned out the door, Mischief replying. “Nope.” The four of them all shared pleased grins before she vanished.

Pepper was focused on Tony, a very serious expression on her face. “Tony. We need to talk.”

After a second Tony sighed and glanced at the three children who were now lined up. Mischief frowned at them before rapidly shaking his head. “No way. This is our room. Go somewhere else if you want privacy.”

Tony took the advice and escorted Pepper down the corridor to his guest quarters. She was silent the entire way and that worried him. It was worse when she took the first available seat and stared down at her hands. Tilting his head slightly, frowning deeply. “Pep, what’s wrong?”

“Nearly three weeks and you ask me what’s wrong??” Her voice was soft at first but it certainly increased in volume quickly.

Jabbing a thumb over his shoulder as if pointing at Odin. “Big king on campus is shuttling everybody else home first. Pepper??!”

His eyes widened in horror as she broke down in tears. She slapped her legs with her hands and wiped at her face even as more tears fell. Her voice sounded as watery as her eyes even as she took the washcloth he rescued from the bathroom. “I’m not sad, I’m angry!”

“Ri-ight.” He leaned back, looking at her like she was a ticking time bomb.

She sniffed and dabbed at her eyes, her light makeup hopelessly ruined. “The doctors say it’s perfectly normal--…”

“Doctors.” He cut her off, feeling a rush of worry and kneeling down in front of her.

She looked up, pulling in a slow breath before exhaling. She’d promised herself as soon as
the war was over she’d tell him. The weeks that had slipped by since she’d last seen him just made the wait worse until she couldn’t take it anymore. Bugging Hela had been a last resort but she couldn’t delay or she’d lose all her nerve. “I’m pregnant.” Tony froze, staring through her and she slowly glared. “And if you ask who the father is I will castrate you.”

He heard the words but he wasn’t processing it. Not at first. The first thing he remembered was his adamant statement that he never, ever wanted to be a father. The second was Loki’s quiet observation that that would change once the abstract became a reality.

A father. Him. Some tiny little person was currently growing inside Pepper and in the not too distant future he would get to meet them. He’d spent enough time around Lock’s kids that he wasn’t as intimidated by children as he had been. He would get to hold a tiny little person with Pepper’s gorgeous features and his brilliance. Or maybe it would be the other way around but there was no denying that excitement swelled within him.

“Tony?”

He grinned, jumping to his feet and picking her up. He spun her around, stopping to put her back on her feet when she started looking a little queasy. “Sorry, sorry, just…I can’t believe it. I mean I do believe you but it. It is what I can’t believe. I never, ever, ever wanted a kid but that was mostly just because of Stark Senior but me as a dad might be alright since I’ve been subbing in with Lock’s kids for like weeks and I haven’t broken them yet and—…”

Pepper smiled and cut off his rambling with a kiss. Once she sensed he had settled a little she pulled back with another smile. “So you’re happy.”

The wide smile on his face put some of Loki’s manic ones to shame. “I was talking?”

Author's Notes:

Tada. Those of you who guessed Pepper was making bread...congratulations!

Next:

Loki wakes up; Hela makes a decision
Chapter 90

ASGARD

The sound of steady breathing caught his attention. By scent Loki knew he was in his rooms, wrapped up in warm covers and quite comfortable. Comfortable enough that he really didn’t want to move. The impulse to play dead was very tempting to obey since there was no doubt several people who wanted to express their displeasure with him, Jane being the one he actually feared. But his body was ready to wake up and he was very curious as to what he’d find. He slowly opened his eyes, hoping it would be the children or Jane at his bedside. Loki would begrudgingly even accept Thor. His luck was never that good. Odin raised an eyebrow, closing the book in his hands. Loki groaned in the back of his throat, voice hoarse. “Can I plead temporary insanity?”

Odin chuckled softly and reached for a glass of water on the table next to his bed. “I am afraid not.”

“About the torch incident…” Odin shook his head, his amusement obviously growing. “…it was a really, really long time ago and there has to be some sort of statute of limitations.”

“Drink, Loki.” Odin’s voice was a gentle chide, not interested in chastising his son about an incident that occurred centuries ago. There was also his promise to consider. “I was in a generous mood and I have surrendered the right to lecture you.”

Loki’s hands were shaky but he managed to drink without spilling it all over himself. “Surrendered? To who?”

His father shrugged lightly. “Who better than your future bride?”

Flinching, Loki’s voice small. “I’ll take your lecture.” Jane was going to kill him. Not just slightly. Oh, no, it would be brutal and messy.

Odin took the glass back and put it back on the night stand. He had no doubt once Jane was done Loki would be truly repentant. But his mind was on the tragedy that almost happened. His hand, weathered but strong, rested on his son’s shoulder. “Loki, I have nearly lost you too many times in one lifetime. Make that the last time.”

Loki felt his brow slowly furrow, hearing the almost silent plea hidden in the words. “It wasn’t exactly in my plans.”

The old king nodded slightly in understanding. “Being a hero never is.” Loki made a protesting noise but Odin ignored him. “The next time my due time is upon me do not use up the life you’ve been granted in exchange for my own.”

Loki still scoffed when an adjective like ‘hero’ was used to describe him. But then he found himself frowning slightly. “I thought you weren’t going to lecture me.”

“Loki.” The look that Loki was given was that familiar look of exasperation and he found himself comforted from that.

“Alright, I won’t.” Loki sighed, then coughed roughly and his father helped him drink a few more sips, his hands too shaky to accomplish such a simple task a second time. But even when the glass was set aside his father didn’t let him go, gathering him close and hugging him tightly. He was being held up so all Loki had to do was let his head rest on Odin’s shoulder as his eyes closed.
Loki wanted to hold him in return. He wished he could. But that little action of taking a sip of water had him trembling like a newborn colt. He hated his body right now.

Odin’s hand gripped the back of his tunic, voice rough. “Don’t ever do that to me again, Loki.” And suddenly Loki was transported back in time. He was suddenly a little boy and his father was holding him close, something he’d been sorely missing for centuries. Odin rumbled softly, pulling him from his musings. “I do hope you’ve prepared yourself.”

Frowning slightly but not opening his eyes as he asked, “For what?”

“I’ve made mistakes with you that I am highly motivated in correcting. I will be handing over Asgard to Thor soon, which means I will have an excessive amount of time on my hands. You will find yourself never wanting for my attention again.”

What could have been taken as a threat only filled him with contentment. This was exactly what Loki had been wanting that all his tricks and mischief hadn’t granted. Not just his father’s attention, but his focus. He wasn’t an optimist and he never would be. He’d have to see that for himself before he’d believe it but he found himself timidly hoping it was true. Smile wide on his face even if his tone was filled with false dread. “I will struggle to endure.”

The absolute cheek. Odin felt the strangest of impulses, something he hadn’t entertained since he’d had a very small trickster running through the halls. Deciding not to ignore it for once, he ran the tips of his fingers down Loki’s ribs in reply and Loki’s eyes flew open as a choked shriek escaped his son’s lips. Loki’s arm shifted slightly in a protective maneuver over his side, grinning again when he felt a kiss to the side of his head, still being silently held.

He wished he could just stay and drift forever but even he knew he couldn’t. After several minutes of just enjoying the moment his concern for those he befriended brought him back to reality. “Did everyone survive?”

Odin nodded and let Loki rest back against the pillow before settling back in his chair. “We lost a good many warriors, and without our allies our forces would have been devastated. The Midgardian Avengers suffered injuries but nothing fatal. Lady G’dath fared well but Queen Azni has been lost to Valhalla.”

Loki didn’t say anything. His memory of meeting mother would never pass his lips, just because he knew it would be painful for his father. But from that he’d known Azni was gone. Once father left, he would quietly mourn her. In the back of his mind he reminded himself to ask Hela who Freyja was.

“When you are more recovered, King Helblindi would like an audience with you.”

Loki pursed his lips to himself before glancing at Odin. It wasn’t practical for Helblindi to wait for him to recover before the rebuilding of Jötunheim could begin. “To retrieve the Casket of Ancient Winters.” It wasn’t a question but he could see the affirmative in his father’s eye. “I left it in the vault.”

Odin nodded grimly, that act of preparation making it very clear to him Loki hadn’t anticipated surviving. “I am aware. He has insisted on waiting for you to give it to him but I believe the decision of when will be entirely in Lady Jane’s hands.”

Loki moaned softly, refusing to label his tone as whining. “She’s going to kill me.”

“Only as much as you deserve, I am sure.” Odin’s lips twitched in amusement.
“Dada?” A blur of white and blue jumped onto the bed and Loki’s arms were filled with a small elfling clinging to him.

Odin smiled. “Your brave little protectors have rarely left your side.”

Two more blurs were quick to follow, tears just as quick to make an appearance. It didn’t take terribly long for those to disappear, once everyone was assured he was alright. Indel sniffed and glanced up, speaking softly and worry in his voice. As if Loki’s refusal to eat would confirm he wasn’t going to be okay. “Are you hungry? Mama brought boar.”

Jane was biting her lower lip to keep herself contained, having been warned by G’dath to bring something from the feasting hall. Odin stood up and gave her a respectful nod before departing. She was quick to switch places, her brown eyes roaming over Loki anxiously. She was a mess of emotions right now but some were more practical to indulge in right now than others. She saw his fingers nervously playing with the tips of Indel’s white hair and slowly shook her head at him. His green eyes met her own for just a second, took note of the devastating hurt there, and flinched away. He wanted to promise her he’d never do it again, but he knew himself too well.

Jane focused on the little ones, forcing a reassuring smile. “Let’s get your father propped up so he can eat.”

“All right!” All three of them answered in a chorus.

They propped him up with fluffy pillows, Jane leaning down to put a plate carefully in his lap and murmuring in his ear, “Are you skilled at sleeping with one eye open, prince?”

Loki slowly frowned at such an odd question. “Not particularly.”

A soft growl entered her voice and he swallowed. “Do that again and I highly recommend it.” He eyed her as she straightened, judged the look in her eyes and realized she meant it.

He rallied just enough of his courage to give a slight nod when she raised an eyebrow at him. She nodded in return, satisfied for now, and helped him eat when she noticed just how weakened he was. Mischief curled in close, the tallest of the three so the one who could touch the most of his side. Talia pouted before crawling over him. Jane lifted the plate out of the way so Talia’s ear was resting on Loki’s chest where she could hear his heartbeat. Indel pouted the hardest since they were hogging all the room before shrinking into a white kitten and curling into a space between the two of them.

A third of the way through the meal, Loki wrinkled his nose slightly and yawned with a slight shake of his head. Moving the plate away, Jane helped tuck him back in. She was angry. She was hurt. But she loved him and those emotions could be dealt with later. Right now his health mattered more. Pressing a gentle kiss to his temple. “Sweet dreams.”

Smiling as he closed his eyes and murmured, two children and a tiny white kitten piled on top of him. “You’re here to protect me, of course they are.”

“He’s alive. Alive!”

Loki cracked an annoyed eye open to glare at Tony who hadn’t thrown the door open but he certainly wasn’t quiet. “I am…you may not be for much longer.” He hadn’t even been to sleep for two hours since he’d woken up the first time and he was still exhausted. Jane peeked over the top of the physics book she was reading. She was sitting at Loki’s bedside and gave the inventor a warning look that he ignored.
Tony crossed the distance, hands shoved in his pants pockets. “So…I have it on authority that you can sense things other people can’t.”

The trickster rolled his eyes before asking tiredly, “Meaning?”

The inventor retrieved his right hand and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “One of the blue dudes congratulated me on knocking up Pep. You knew, didn’t you, you asshole?”

“Mr. Stark.” Jane had lowered the book into her lap, giving him a censoring look.

Tony blinked at her in surprise before he asked, “Janie?”

Her lips pursed just a little, equal parts annoyance and humor in her tone. “Healer’s orders. The two of you can play once he is released by Eir. Until then you will not antagonize him.”

“No fun, whatsoever.” Tony sighed but held up his hands in surrender when her expression didn’t shift. “Fine. Wasn’t here to ruffle your feathers too much. Wanted to get your opinion on something.”

“Yes.” Loki replied without any prompting.

“Yes?” Tony’s brow furrowed as he asked.

Loki’s lips quirked just a little, settling back heavily into the pillow. “Yes, I find your armor shameless and garish…and keep in mind the appearance of AEsir armor.”

Tony decided to just ignore him and ask, “Will Tweety walk again?”

“Tweety?” Jane asked with a look of confusion.

Loki replied, but his words had started to slow and his eyes had already closed. “Barton. Has G’dath…seen his prognosis?”

“That’s the elf nurse, right?” Tony tilted his head a little.

The words were quiet now, almost as if he were talking in his sleep and the last could barely be heard before Loki stilled completely. “If you truly…have no…survival instincts I…recommend…calling her that. To her…face.”

“Ha ha.” Tony’s brow furrowed when there was no indication of a response from the other man. “Locks?”

Jane stood up make sure Loki was still tucked in properly, but it was just an excuse to give her hands something to do. “You didn’t think he was just going to bounce back, did you?”

Tony winced a little and shrugged. “Guess I kinda did.”

She wished she wasn’t worried but she was. Nearly losing him had scared her like nothing ever had. Both G’dath and Eir had assured her that he would be fine but the worry never faded. Instead of focusing on that, Jane distracted herself by focusing on Tony. “You should talk to her. Technically she’s Loki’s mentor so of the two of them she would be the expert for medical spells.”

The billionaire didn’t respond to the advice, instead he focused on the source of his own worry. “He’s going to be alright…right?”

Jane smoothed a hand down over the covers, watching Loki’s sleeping face. “Both Eir and
“G’dath have assured me he’ll be fine.”

Tony silently came up to her side, asking, “Then why do you look like…that?”

She turned her head a little so that he couldn’t see her expression. “I can worry if I want to.”

The inventor took a step back, hearing the bite in Jane’s voice. It was different than Pepper’s but it was a sure sign of female temper. “I surrender, Janie. Don’t bite my head off.” She didn’t turn back towards him and he had a feeling that until Loki was back on his feet Jane was going to stay this prickly. “Well, I’m off to find this G’dath.”

“Enchanter Stark—…”

Tony whipped around, his voice a pathetic whine. “Ple-e-e-ease stop!”

G’dath only raised her eyebrow, not at all impressed. “Lower your voice. Stop acting like a child. Follow me, Jane?” The two women shared a look and Jane offered her a slight smile but was unable to get the worry out of her expression.

Hela appeared in a flash of green. “Mother I was able to sense your distress from Helheim.”

“Gorgeous!” Tony greeted her with enthusiasm, hoping at least someone would be in a good mood. He really should have known better.

The trickster queen’s eyes flashed in warning. “Anthony, if you antagonize mother or father further I will turn you into a eunuch…and leave it to your imagination to determine how I will do so.” Tony’s eyes widened and his hands immediately moved to protect his most prized possession as he slowly backed away.

G’dath swallowed a tickle in her throat and turned, knowing she was going to be followed. Once the pair of them were out of the rooms Jane all but pounced on Hela who forestalled her barrage of questions by raising her hand. The trickster queen crossed to Loki’s side and moved her hands intricately, her brow furrowed. Jane knew just enough to know that Hela was using several different spells.

The tension that Jane hadn’t even noticed eased in Hela’s shoulders as she turned back to Jane. “He’s fine. He’s physically weaker than after his battle with the Other, but now he has no magic to support his stamina. His magic will return with time, faster than his body will recover but what’s important is he will recover.”

Jane didn’t know why she was immeasurably relieved to hear that from Hela, words nearly identical to the reassurances both Eir and G’dath had provided. Of the three women, Hela was the youngest with the least healing experience. But perhaps it was because Jane knew without a doubt Hela would do anything to protect Loki. Anything. Nor would Hela try to placate her with false hope or kind words.

For the first time in longer than she could label the tense ball of worry in the pit of her stomach untangled and she was finally able to breathe.

MIDGARD

Fury stood at the front of the conference table, his hands behind his back and a strangely
mild expression on his face. All of the Avengers who could return to earth were arranged for the 
debriefing, but it was more than just relaying information to the SHIELD director. Decisions were 
about to be.

“I’ve reviewed the reports that each of you submitted.” The approximate casualty list, and 
the offhand comments of those that survived. Fury refused to label his feeling of Loki’s survival as 
relief. “Descriptions of the creatures that attacked. Examinations of the fighting styles. Profiles of 
where these creatures might have come from. I have reports on dragons and unicorns and elves from 
each of you. Schematics of Asgard. A play by play of the battle with Thanos.” Nick slowly 
narrowed his eye, his lips forming a grim line. “But what I don’t have is an explanation for why the 
hell it took three goddamn weeks to hear from any of you what the hell happened.”

Steve glanced around the table at the others. “Sir--”

Fury talked right over the super soldier. “Do have any idea how long we stayed on red 
alert before saying the hell with it?”

Tony barely kept his chuckle under control. “Guess Gorgeous didn’t come back to spread 
the good news.” Fury sent the inventor a glare, who was glancing at Bruce and talking under his 
breath. “Does he want us to answer that?” The scientist just shook his head.

Steve met Fury’s glare evenly. “With respect, director, but we weren’t a priority for 
return.”

Close to snarling, Nick’s tone barely restrained. “Three goddamn weeks, Captain.”

The soldier tightened his control on his own tone. “Several hundred thousand people to 
send back to different worlds, both alive and dead. King Odin made the call, sir. We were shuffled to 
the bottom of the pile.”

Tony crossed his arms over his chest and muttered quietly. “Not to mention none of us 
were going anywhere until Locks opened his eyes.” Natasha glanced at him out of the corner of her 
eye and buried a smirk.

Fury met Steve’s eyes for a moment longer before nodding and shelving his ire. He 
suspected there was more to it but they were all sticking together so he let it go. “Where is Barton?”

Natasha felt her jaw tighten before she could control her expression. “Injured but 
recovering.”

Nick stayed silent for a moment to just stare at her. Then either he decided to take her 
words at face value or knew he wouldn’t get anything further. “Luckily we stayed mostly quiet or it 
would be your asses.” Sliding a folder towards Steve as he moved on to the next topic. “Now we--
…”

Tony shook his head. “Sorry to say but…I’m out.” Fury swung his head around towards 
Stark. “You’ll have Stark Enterprises backing you financially but I’m out of the game for a while.”

“Any particular reason or is this just a current whim?”

The billionaire grinned proudly. “I’m going to be a father.” Tony exchanged a look with 
Pepper who was tucked into a shadow by the doorway. Then with a smirk he lifted his hand and 
concentrated, delighted when a little, light blue flame leapt onto his palm. It imitated the same color 
as his former arc reactor. “Besides, I promised to teach a couple of brats how to play baseball. And 
the oldest mini trickster is really good at teaching magic tricks. I’m curious what else he can teach
me.”

Nick swung back around to Natasha. “Is he actually injured or just decided not to come back?”

His question didn’t need clarification for the assassin to understand what he was asking. She considered her words carefully before responding concerning Clint. “I cannot speak for him, sir. He is injured. What he chooses beyond that is his decision.”

Fury eyed the assassin thoughtfully. “I suppose you’re going with him.”

Romanoff kept her eyes focused on her hands, both of them folded together on the table. “No, sir. I still have a duty to the Avengers that remain. I’m staying.” Her own tone lowered and everyone pretended not to be listening. She was of the firm belief that the lives that she had taken would never balance against the good that she did now. She didn’t think she deserved a fairy tale ending. But it was more than just that. She didn’t want it. She only felt alive when she was fighting. This was what she wanted. She was the Black Widow. She was an Avenger. This was her life until it ended.

Steve looked at Bruce who just nodded quietly. He was staying.

Fury looked at the Avengers that would be remaining. He also knew that Thor’s visits to help would be few and far between, especially if he was about to become king of Asgard. As useful as he might be, Nick just couldn’t see Loki filling in the thunderer’s shoes for anything short of a world ending apocalypse. “It’s hardly an initiative with only three members.”

Steve nodded slowly to himself before standing with conviction in his voice. “Then we recruit, sir. No one lives forever, this was inevitable. The Avengers will change with new members, new leaders, and new evil. But we’ll endure.”

Tony clapped his hands together once as he stood. “Okay. I may hurl soon.” He turned and held out his hand to Bruce who stood up and clasped his palm. Tony’s free hand moved to squeeze the scientist’s shoulder before releasing him. “You ever change your mind, I’m sure Locks will think of something to keep you around. I gotta go pack. Hemi’s picking us up in a couple of hours.”

Pepper dropped her face into her palm. “Tony. Don’t call him that.”

He shrugged dismissively, never one to hesitate in handing out a nickname. “Why not?”

“He might leave us here.”

Tony visibly thought about that before shrugging dismissively. “Nah…Locks will rescue us.” She raised an eyebrow and Tony paused for a moment. “Eventually.” She just continued staring at him and Tony realized as rough a condition as Loki was in that rescue could be months from now. Sighing. “Fine.”

HELHEIM

“Come home, Hela.” One little phrase, a tiny entreaty that Hela shouldn’t have been able to hear…and yet she had.

The force of her rage from centuries ago couldn’t be stopped, only conquered. That was exactly what had happened. The hordes created and assimilated from that rage had been beaten back
and subdued. Asgard had passed the test, even if some cheating had been involved so that they could. But, she thought as she smiled, she liked cheating.

Hela had entertained visiting Asgard as often as she pleased, watching over them and continuing forward. Soon the old ways of the AEsir would be forced to change as generations of tricksters and physicists brought them out of stagnation. Loki and Jane wouldn’t live forever, but the legacy they left behind would. And in that distant future when neither walked among the living she would fade from Asgard, to focus on her own realm. She had duties and responsibilities, after all.

There was another reason for that distance. As the queen of Helheim she would never die, which made a relationship with a very mortal AEsir impractical. Not to mention a permanent long distance affair would never last. But with that sentence came the realization that she could have what she wanted. Loki and her siblings were reason enough to visit Asgard, but that small plea made her living with them a possibility. It had been what she’d wanted, desperately so. To make them all suffer for what she’d lost but also the freedom to choose the life she wanted.

Hela stared up at the throne of Helheim that had been hers for over 704 years. A drop in the bucket of time for most races. But it had been a desperate act of survival, not ambition, which had inspired her. The crown that she had worn for just as long sat serenely on the table next to the throne.

There was no denying she had enjoyed it. Power, but more so than the power to control others. She had enjoyed the power over her own life. But that was also the problem. She was alive and the living were never meant to rule over the dead. That had been the fuel behind the rage. Home. She’d just wanted to go home. And now…finally, she could.

“Queen Hela…” Amora paused, her words trailing off to silence as she studied the rather plain way that Hela was dressed. She’d noticed that all the children that had been frolicking amongst the forests of Helheim had vanished and she’d been curious as to why.

Farbauti entered a second later, she also stilling. But then she nodded slowly, understanding what Amora hadn’t yet. The children had been drawn to Helheim because Hela was here. Now that she was leaving, they had all found their way to Valhalla. “Your Jötunn blood has found its mate.”

Hela didn’t turn, still staring. Her dark hair was pulled back away from her face but there was nothing fancy in the binding. The same with her clothing. She looked almost ordinary. Almost.

“Is that what it’s called?” A drive that, with her rage ended, shifted her entire focus to wanting to protect the home of the man she wanted. The fact that her father also called Asgard home made it all but impossible for her to resist.

Farbauti’s eyes held a lot of knowledge, as well as regret. She had never approved of Laufey’s stances but her instinct in life had been too strong for her to resist. In life she had been weak-willed, only becoming strong with the freedom of death. She’d never forgiven Laufey for Loki’s loss, not knowing until after her death that her son had lived, but she had still given Laufey two more sons. “Yes. Sometimes we are but slaves to its will…and sometimes it is our will that breeds it.”

Amora’s green eyes shifted from one woman to the other before the shout escaped her without control. “The underworld must have a ruler!” The demons of Niflheim would overrun Helheim, just as they had before. Thanos could escape. So much could happen without Hela or someone like her to keep the citizens in control.

Hela slowly nodded. “Yes, it must. Just as Mjolnir is enchanted to only accept possession of one who is worthy…so is Helheim’s crown.” She glanced slyly in their direction. “Or perhaps the
crown will fracture into two, for one queen of each realm...it is up to magic to decide.”

Farbauti stood a little taller, realizing what Hela was saying. The trickster was quite confident the two of them would be chosen to rule, most probably with Farbauti ruling Niflheim and Amora watching over Helheim. Instead of commenting on that the Jötunn asked, “You will never return, will you?”

A question that wasn’t really a question at all. Hela had proved herself, defending the nine realms with as much determination and honor as any AEsir warrior. As the former trickster queen, she would age and eventually die but only Valhalla would await her.

Hela shrugged helplessly. “Loki finally gathered the courage to live again. Who am I not to emulate my father’s example?” Then she laughed. “Besides, a few centuries from now there will be a small army of compassionate tricksters and sly physicists running amuck on Asgard. Grandfather will need the support.” She gave the two of them a toothy grin. “And if Thor really is going to marry Sif, as queen or as wife, then I need to be there to slap her around.”

Amora turned away, a bitter twist tilting her lips. “This isn’t...this isn’t the way my life was supposed to end!”

Hela studied the enchantress for a moment. “Not in any reality did Thor choose you.” In some they remained at odds and in some Amora faded quietly but they were never truly together. “Not one. Perhaps you don’t die in every possibility but the two of you are never together.”

“I died forgotten.” There was a broken note in Amora’s voice.

“Actually I made certain a boat was sent for you. The bards were told of your story and it had been added to the tale of the smiting of Thanos.” It was a mere footnote at best but Hela didn’t mention that. She noticed Amora held herself a little taller after that.

Hela looked over each of them, holding out her hand silently to Farbauti. The Jötunn queen grasped her forearm, surprised to find herself solid, and the two silently said farewell. Their arms fell away from one another and Hela stepped up to Amora, running a gentle hand down the AEsir’s face. Amora gasped as she solidified. Her smile turned sweet as she stepped past the both of them, walking for the entrance to Hel for the last time. Turning to bow. “Farewell, my ladies of death. Rule wisely.”

ASGARD

Heimdall looked to the left as a figure stepped through the golden passages onto the observatory. She wasn’t any more remarkably dressed than any other AEsir commoner, the long sleeved green dress simple cotton but well made. The only item she wore that was familiar were the boots on her feet, barely hidden by the ankle long dress. Hela turned to bow slightly to him before turning with a smirk to walk for the palace. After a moment the stoic gatekeeper smiled ever so slightly.

Hela walked the pathway, smirking a little at guards who stuttered in their steps but didn’t even try to stop her progress. Three paths became one and she followed it through the main gate and through the familiar double doors.

Court was in full swing when the inner doors opened to admit her. Both sides murmured as she walked slowly up to the throne. She felt her breath quicken and her face pale. She wanted to run. She wouldn’t let fear rule her, but the feeling to bolt was strong. Thor took a step closer from his
place next to Odin, halted when Hela jerked her head ‘no’ and stopped a few feet from the steps. She curtseyed as if she were just an ordinary woman to come before Asgard’s king. “All-Father.”

Odin nodded slightly, feeling very curious as to why Hela dressed and acted the way she was. She, like Loki, almost always had a purpose. “Lady Hela. To what does Asgard owe the pleasure of your visit?” She was free to visit as she wished, but that was just Hela saying hello. Her coming here before the throne was an official visit.

Her index finger flicked slightly to the right, a shadow of herself standing next to his throne. Her shadow spoke quietly enough that he almost didn’t hear her. “You asked me to come home.”

Odin blinked in surprise, his shock plain enough that a flurry of whispers ensued. They didn’t hear her shadow’s response, their reaction concentrated on his own. Hela stood tall and proud, her head tilted just enough to show respect as her shadow faded. “I have renounced my titles to Helheim and Niflheim and seek to return to Asgard.” She refused to let her voice waver. Just as she refused to look at anyone but Odin.

“I see. And do you believe you are worthy to return?” Odin gave her a considering look but his question was void of any emotion.

She felt her mouth tighten, blinking quickly twice before controlling herself. He had asked for her, she was not about to grovel. “As worthy as any lost child who has found their way home.”

“Child?” Odin made a scoffing noise, glances exchanged amongst the courtiers. Then he leaned forward in his throne to question her, “Was it a child who defeated Thanos with the ease of a cat being entertained with a weak mouse?” Hela stared up at him in surprise at the compliment. She was very much aware of the warriors standing taller in pride. Odin added further to this with an incline of his head towards Sif. “Was it a child, witnessed by Lady Sif, who confronted Asgard’s enemies to defend us from further attack during our recovery?”

Hela felt herself blush and snarled in her head. Dammit. She didn’t get embarrassed. There was also no doubt that every resident in Asgard would hear all of this before nightfall and she wasn’t completely sure if she was proud or mortified.

“Were these honorable acts committed by a child?” Hela’s brow furrowed just a little, not seeing Anya pushing her way through the crowd with an out of breath Jane following.

Her mind was a roaring fire compared to the tame flicker of most AEsir residents. Enough so that many found her intimidating if not frightening. But what these fools had always failed to realize, her intellect may be beyond her years but her emotions were not nearly as advanced. To be the Queen of the Underworld she’d been forced to shove the child in her to the side but that child would always remain, perhaps because she’d been forced to grow up too quickly. She didn’t know the answer he wanted. But she knew how she felt. She refused to feel weak when her voice cracked as she answered softly. “Yes.”

Odin nodded slowly to himself after a moment before he asked in a more formal tone, “What is the name you acknowledge?”

She felt slightly relieved. Finally, an answer she knew with confidence. Tilting her head up proudly. “Hela Lokisdóttir, sire.”

Jane smiled even as whispers were exchanged amongst the audience. Loki would be so proud of her. There were tears threatening to fall in Anya’s eyes. Accepted, it would mean Hela
would finally be folded within the family. Recognized not just by Asgard but by the nine realms as a daughter of Loki and his granddaughter. Even if she never received a title, which neither he nor Loki would allow, she would be within the house of Odin until Loki set his own house by marrying Jane.

Odin stood, thumping Gungnir loudly on the floor. “Former ruler of Helheim and Niflheim. The recognized daughter of my second son. You have protected Asgard during her time of need as a true AEsir warrior. I and Asgard do not recognize you as Hela Lokisdóttir.” Hela jerked back slightly, her mouth parting in surprise. She wasn’t the only one. Gasps filled the air and Jane’s head snapped around to glare at the monarch.

Hela wasn’t aware of anyone else. Her entire world narrowed in focus to him. She would kill him. If this was all a ploy just to humiliate her she really would kill him. But he didn’t hesitate in continuing and the hurt was swept away. “You are hereby acknowledged and recognized as Princess Hela Lokisdóttir of Asgard.” Her mouth opened further, an objection caught in her throat but no sound coming out. There were polite claps from the courtiers but from the warriors gauntlets hit armor in proud response to the proclamation. Thor was absolutely beaming, glancing at Sif who had hastily turned to brush away a tear.

Odin broke protocol, walking down the steps. For an instant Hela poised to run. But he ignored her instinct and pulled her into his arms, kissing her temple and murmuring against her ear. “If only your grandmother were here to see this day…welcome home, dear girl.” Hela painfully squeezed her eyes shut as she held him in return.

“You have no idea how awful you look right now.”

Loki smiled just a little to himself before his green eyes met Hela’s. He was propped up under a mountain of pillows, wearing a simple tunic and tucked into bed. He sighed softly and rolled his eyes at Hela who had silently entered. “I didn’t need the reminder.” He’d had plenty of reminders in the way that everyone hesitated in even touching him for fear of breaking him. The mortals had been particularly horrified. He wasn’t sure what a scarecrow was but once he found out no doubt Tony was going to regret calling him that once his magic was stronger. Then there was Eir and G’dath, whose combined glare was truly a force unto itself.

Hela crossed the distance and sat on the edge of his bed, raising an eyebrow. “I gather mother is relentless.” Since she was the one who told him Jane was going to rip his spine out it wasn’t quite an I-told-you-so but pretty damn close.

Right now Jane was too good to him but he knew it was only a matter of time before she expressed her feelings. He shuddered as if frightened. “I am never, ever angering—…you called her mother.” He blinked, surprise in his eyes.

“She’s worthy.” She shrugged slightly as if the answer were obvious. But she was also studying him. He wasn’t surprised she was here. Which wouldn’t necessarily mean anything since she was free to visit now that the spell was broken. But it was something else. A knowledge in his eyes. The question was more rhetorical than anything. “You’ve known this entire time, haven’t you?” For however long was unclear, but he’d known she was what caused the events of the war.

His lips quirked a little in amusement. “Winning was contingent on Asgard making the correct choices this time. Once I pieced that together I knew without the details. Details we will discuss later.” He didn’t say anything further on the subject, just carefully lifted his arm and with a slightly trembling lower lip she snuggled into his side. She wasn’t sorry her plan worked but she was sorry for the pain and difficulty he was facing because of it. He frowned suddenly as he eyed her dress. “This is a different look for you.”
She didn’t lift her head to look at him. “I’m a commoner now, it’s appropriate.”

He took in her meaning but didn’t address it. Instead Loki instantly scowled. “No daughter of mine is a commoner.”

Hela groaned softly, a teenager’s whine coloring her voice. “Not you, too. I just want to be Hela.”

_Not him, too._ Which meant that she’d already been before the throne and accepted by father. As much of a pessimist as he was, he had to admit Odin was doing an excellent job of feeding his hope to a happier future. “Absolutely not. Mischief stomached the ceremony. You’ll live.” His fingers trekked lightly through her dark hair. “Then you can be Hela.”

She scowled as she lifted her head. “I’ll live on Vanaheim.”

He raised a single eyebrow and countered, “I’ll pout. I look particularly pathetic right now.”

“Jerk.” She rolled her eyes and lowered her head back down. Like a cat Hela rubbed her cheek against the material of his tunic, pulling in a deep breath and smiling at the familiar scents of books and magic and father. But being home reminded her of a problem she needed to address right now. “I will court whom I like, when I like.”

Instead of the protective snarling and growling she would expect Loki’s silence was thoughtful. “If he comes to me with the proper intent I won’t kill him.”

Well that surprised her and it showed on her face. But then she’d noticed that Loki was always more reasonable when others weren’t around for him to perform for. A smirk entered her voice. “What if we want to use each other for sex?”

“You’ve had sex?” Hela opened her mouth and he reminded her of the importance of her answer with one sentence. “You’re not on Vanaheim.”

She huffed against his neck, her fingers moving to play with the material of his tunic. He knew that nervous habit anywhere so he waited until she was ready to ask her question. “…what if that’s all he wants?”

He was going to have a chat with Fandral. He tilted his head a little in her direction and asked in all seriousness, “This beautiful girl? He’d have to be blind not to fall over himself to have you as his bride.”

That teeny, tiny insecure voice that he wasn’t used to hearing from her whispered in his ear. “Really?”

Maybe he would just throw Fandral through a wall. It usually worked in gaining Thor’s attention. Actually, perhaps he would let Thor handle it. What was the use of having an older brother if he couldn’t use him to his advantage? He tilted his head enough to look into her eyes. Her face betrayed nothing but her dark green eyes were a little too wide. By the slight movement of her jaw she was also biting the inside of her lower lip. She was scared because Fandral mattered to her. They were both tricksters but there were some matters that weren’t lied about, no matter what. His lips quirked in reassurance. “I know so.” She hummed softly and snuggled into his shoulder.

“Your father is going to have to add another wing to the family corridor soon.” Jane had remained quietly in the shadow of the doorway until she sensed a lull in the conversation. She wasn’t eavesdropping, but she didn’t want to interfere from some obviously needed father-daughter time.
Loki grinned at Jane’s voice while Hela lifted her head and stuck out her tongue before replying tartly. “I had a room here once. Unless the space is being used I’ll just move back in there.”

Jane smiled and crooked a finger. With a sigh Hela kissed Loki’s cheek and bounced out of bed. Loki attempted to lift himself a little, wilting when both Hela and Jane glared at him. “Loki, you are following Eir’s orders to the letter or I’m tying you to the bed in the not fun way.”

Hela jerked back and wrinkled her nose. “Oh, ewww, I’m waiting outside.” The idea of one’s mother and father doing…that. Repugnant to put it mildly.

Loki’s grin was devilish as he winked wickedly at Jane. “I seem to recall it wasn’t me tied up—…”

“Not listening!!” Hela ran out of the room, her hands clapped over her ears as she shouted.

Hela tentatively stepped forward, her green eyes sweeping over the room that had been sealed but kept in pristine condition. Her hand hovered over the furniture, getting a feel for the old spells in place to keep everything exactly as it had been and swallowed thickly. She knew that golden magic of his anywhere. She willed away tears that grandfather truly had been hoping she would one day return.

Jane gave her a few minutes to wander and touch things, remembering, before walking quietly over to the wardrobe. Inside she found dresses for a young girl. There was nothing in tatters thanks to the spells protecting them but Hela needed a clean break from the past. “Anya has made it her personal mission in life that Loki and the children have their hearts’ desires. She’s already making appointments for a fitting for you. Furniture. Upholstery. Anything you want.”

Hela looked over her shoulder and growled possessively. “Mine.”

It spoke volumes that Jane understood exactly what Hela was saying by that statement. This was her room just as this was her home. “You have two choices. We can keep this room preserved and create a new suite for you, complete with clothing that fits. Or. We can add a second wardrobe for your new clothes but the rest of the furniture here will be replaced, as well as new bedding.”

Those dark green eyes narrowed as she studied the other woman who was ridiculously younger than her but also very wise. When it came to power Jane couldn’t hold a candle to her. Technically the only one who could force her to do what she didn’t want to do was Loki, but he was in no condition at present. But that didn’t mean Hela didn’t respect the brilliant mind within that vulnerable package. Sniffing and turning her back on the comforter over the bed designed for an adolescent. “I didn’t like that color anyway.”

Hela started to wrap her arms around herself without thinking before Jane moved and pulled her into a tight hug. “You never have to do that again.”

Hela’s brow furrowed but after a hesitant moment that betrayed how infrequent hugs were for her, she returned the gesture. She pulled back after a few minutes before frowning slightly as she looked down into Jane’s expressive brown eyes. “You’re still mad at him, aren’t you?”

Jane grimaced, hoping she’d hidden it better than this. “That obvious?”

Hela shrugged casually, spotting a small marble partially hidden by the bed and picking it up, playing with it. “We’re both female. It’s obvious to me.”
Jane forced herself to slowly exhale as if to rid herself of the emotion. “I know I just need to get over it—…”

Hela cut her off, frowning. “No you don’t. You need to talk to him, before he’s capable of retreating.” Jane still didn’t look convinced so the trickster gave at least one reason why Loki would put off addressing it indefinitely. “He won’t discuss it voluntarily for fear you’ll call off the engagement.”

Jane sucked in a shocked breath. “I thought it was binding.”

“Okay, for fear you’ll postpone the wedding indefinitely. That is still within your power and he’s aware of it.” A sweetly sad smile crossed Hela’s face. “Someone very wise once told me as I’m sure Loki was told that you can only yield to compromise so much. If this is the dynamic of your relationship you abide then say nothing. If, however, you demand an equal partnership then now is the time to let him know that because he may not hear you later.”

Sadness filled Jane’s expression as she asked, “Azni?”

Hela shook her head and tossed the marble onto the comforter. “Frigga, actually. She told me, who I passed on to Azni for when Loki was ready to hear it.”

“Then I have to tell him soon.” Jane pulled in a fortifying breath as she said this as if to convince herself. Not yet. Loki was barely capable of walking around yet and he would go entirely on the defensive, but soon.

“I would recommend before Eir loosens his restrictions beyond his rooms.” Then Hela grinned wickedly. “I’m also going to teach you a spell.”

Author's Notes:

He's awake! ...for about a minute and a half but still, progress.

Next:

Fandral gets talked to; Loki gets shown the past
ASGARD

Each step was tentative. Clint had people on both sides of him but after that first step he found his confidence grow when his legs held him. There was a narrow brace strapped around his waist but it wasn’t uncomfortable and it didn’t make a sound. It was just a short trip from one side of the healing room to the other before he sat tiredly in a chair. G’dath, Tony, and Natasha all watched him with varying expressions, the inventor’s the only one that was decipherable.

Tony smirked first. “Nice going, Robocop.” Clint instantly had a scowl ready for him.

Then the elven healer nodded. “Expected.” But she was commenting on her patient’s exhaustion after such a short journey.

Clint was frowning heavily. “I wasn’t off my feet for that long.”

G’dath remained un-phased and explained. “Long enough. As you adjust to the brace your strength and function will return.”

“How long?”

She tilted her head a little to consider a reasonable prognosis. “Perhaps a month.” She easily read the disappointment that flit across his face. “This was not a simple matter, archer. Were you not in a realm of magic function would not be possible.”

Stark snorted. “Nothing is impossible when I’m involved.”

G’dath refused to even look at the inventor. “Your spinal chord was severed, not merely damaged.”

Tony tapped on his screen, updating as he went so JARVIS could input the data. This was the perfect solution for Clint, but the benefits for the rest of humanity could ripple forward for centuries to come. Perhaps the next big step in bringing humans out of their infant state and into some sort of harmony with the other realms.

Clint sighed softly, glancing at Nat who was still watching him with an unreadable expression. “Then I get to decide Alfheim or Earth.”

G’dath’s expression turned grim, thinking about either possibilities as things stood. “I recommend neither.”

“Why?” Natasha was the one who asked though there was a lack of surprise in her eyes.

The healer held up another unit, a spare in case this first one malfunctioned. It was made of metal, but it was an elven alloy that was as flexible as it was durable. It absorbed magic almost as well as Uru, but unlike the AEsir metal the retention had a shelf life. “This brace has been imbued with magic. Unlike certain artifacts, weapons, and even armor, this solution must be renewed yearly.”

“I’m not seeing the problem.”

This time G’dath sighed. It was so difficult to make a mortal see how differently time was
observed. “Humans are mortal, so they are very aware of the passage of time. Someone like an AEsir or even a light elf, even though time moves in the same direction it is marked differently. It is very easy for humans to remember yearly anniversaries. This is not the case for other races, who mark events in terms of centuries rather than singular years. It would not be done maliciously, but you could be forgotten. Do you really wish to be rendered immobile during such times?” Particularly if Clint ate Idunn’s apple. If that were to occur it would probably be better if the archer didn’t return to Earth. “What if there is a war? The Bi-Frost would not be used during such a crisis…and keep in mind the last war between Vanahem and Asgard lasted 500 years. A hundred years feels like a year to an immortal.” Clint’s jaw closed with a click.

Natasha appeared thoughtful, obviously not disagreeing with G’dath’s recommendation. “Why do you not suggest Alfheim?”

For once Tony decided to keep his mouth shut. He was having a similar struggle in deciding if he was going to stay on Asgard permanently or not. With the little one on the way his earlier conversation with Loki about how slowly this baby was going to age kept him up at night. As selfish as he was, he knew what the right decision was even if he wasn’t happy about it.

G’dath sighed softly, but her face held amused affection as she addressed her answer to Clint. “As well intentioned as Loki’s offer is, I don’t believe he took elven instincts into consideration. Light elves would have much in common with your skills, but I would fear their instinctual reaction to a human, mortal or not.”

Clint frowned ever so slightly. “You don’t have a difficulty with us.”

“I am not young, and even I have difficulties at times. You should ask Lady Jane of our first encounter if you doubt me…or her first encounter with the village without Loki there as her protector.” G’dath grimaced, feeling slightly embarrassed from her initial reaction. It had been beyond her control but it was certainly not one of her finer moments. “Given your circumstances I would suggest remaining in Asgard, at least for the short term. The elves here will acclimate to you if they have not already and it would be useful for the children to have an archer as skilled as you are to learn from. I doubt they will gain such skills from the AEsir.”

“I’m not a teacher.” Clint kept his frown in place as he said this but he couldn’t help a feeling a small flicker of interest. It certainly wasn’t how he envisioned the rest of his life but there were worse ways to spend his time.

G’dath gestured slightly with her chin out into the general direction of the rest of the healing ward. Rooms with warriors that had survived this war, many of them banged up and battered but many more with missing limbs that not even magic could repair. They were receiving replacement appendages but if they weren’t retiring, they would spend the rest of their days training the next generation. “Warriors that are permanently injured learn to adapt and often they choose to share their skills with the children who will one day be their replacements in the ranks. Consider it a possible suggestion.”

“Another!”

There were fewer patrons than normal but the merriment was slowly returning to the tavern. Those that had died were celebrated as the remembered fallen now entering the gates of Valhalla. They were now toasting to victory in the great feasting hall. Still, for those left behind it was the sadness of such a long separation before meeting them again.

A bar maid brought over another tankard, Volstagg grinning happily. As far as he was
concerned he couldn’t ask any more from life. His wife and children had been uninjured. The royalty that he defended had survived. Life was wonderful.

Hogun nursed his own mead quietly, grim with the knowledge that eventually another battle would ensue and eventually they would not be so lucky.

Sif leaned over the table and shredded her slice of bread of a small plate. She was relieved at their victory and she was annoyed with Loki for making her worry. She’d secretly took G’dath to the side to find out exactly what his chances were for a full recovery. Apparently there was no worry on that end, but his insistent need to push his body too far might slow his recovery time. She scowled silently to herself. Idiot.

Fandral leaned back on the bench, resting against the wall behind him and silently staring at the table. He’d seen her. Walking the family corridor with Lady Jane. He’d listened with both ears as the gossip had spread. Lady Hela was finally home but she might as well still be on Helheim. She was beyond him and he’d destroyed any chance he’d had with her.

Sif glanced at the blond swordsman before sighing. She’d seen enough of that lovesick expression in the mirror to recognize it for what it was. “Talk to her.”

“You heard the prince.” Fandral didn’t even flinch. He didn’t even glance in her direction. He just stared distantly with a distinct lack of hope in his expression.

Rolling her eyes at his ignorance. “He said what was expected.” She leaned in a little closer. It wasn’t that she understood Loki any better than she probably ever would, but she knew the rules of courtship. “If you approach him with honor he will accept your intent to court her.”

Fandral ran a hand through his hair, displacing the immaculate strands. “She does not wish for my approach. Can you not see that?”

“No.” Hela was much more subtle but Sif had seen moments where her control wasn’t solid. Where longing had filled those green eyes as she’d looked at Fandral from afar before hiding it again. She always vanished before he saw her.

A chair was pulled back next to Volstagg before it was filled by a thunderer who was looking at Fandral intently. Those blue eyes were a strange combination of curiosity and protective fury. “Why does my niece feel your only intent is physical?”

Fandral’s eyes widened in surprise and panic. “I never--…you have to know--…”

Thor slammed his fist into the table, the wood splintering and Volstagg was barely quick enough to rescue his mead. “I know my brother’s observations and since he is currently unable to enjoy the fruits of his mischief I can only assume he speaks truth.” Sif grabbed her mug to keep from commenting, keeping her mouth busy. Loki often committed mischief just for the sake of it. It was a bonus if he was able to observe and laugh about it. Just this once she suspected there was a lot of truth to what Thor was told. “He has asked that I resolve the matter on his behalf and I will honor that request.”

Fandral didn’t flinch, his eyes meeting Thor’s filled with resignation. “I did not approach her for I feared being unwelcome with her eminent status as princess.”

Thor pulled back, scowling heavily. “Has it ever mattered to me who I call friend?”

“No--…”
A snarl matched that scowl. “Do you think Hela so shallow--…”

“Of course not!” Fandral leapt to his feet as he shouted his response. He pulled in a deep breath, shoulders pulled in tight. “The prince made his own rejection of my worth as Hela’s suitor painfully clear.”

Thor sent Sif a look who rolled her eyes while Volstagg sighed and put down his mead. “To be fair to the lad, I had yet to inform him the way the game is played.”

“Game?” Fandral sat back down as he asked his question.

Volstagg nodded firmly. “Lady Hela is protected by the men of her house until a suitor is approved by the father. Loki said everything that he was supposed to as her father. Your response was to persuade him with an act of valor or the fulfilling of a task.”

Thor nodded with a slight grin and ordered a tankard for himself. Fandral looked floored. His father had died in war when he’d been a boy. He’d never heard of such things.

Sif pulled a face to herself. “How utterly barbaric.”

Hogun glanced at her. “It is tradition, to prove his worth as husband. Only if he yields and does not pursue her further, then he is proved with ill intent.”

She sighed. “I am aware, but it is still barbaric.”

Fandral glanced around the table. “So I should ask the prince for a task to prove my worth?”

“Aye.” Now grimness edged Thor’s face as he glared at his comrade. “If you do not then what she believes is correct…and I will stand in the honor ring in my brother’s place.”

Fandral’s eyes widened before he nodded and ordered mead for himself. Loki’s retribution made one wary but he had always been more intimidated by Thor. The thunderer wasn’t bluffing.

Loki still looked like he’d escaped from a concentration camp but he now had enough magic at his disposal to help him move around a little. He was still confined to his rooms, the wrath of every woman he knew including Sif waiting on the other side of those doors. He already had a few pranks lined up for when he could leave his rooms.

He looked up over the book in his lap, sitting next to the open windows of the balcony as Hela slipped inside. She was wearing a lovely long sleeved green dress with flared sleeves that fit her curves and pooled almost to the floor. It was similar in fit to the dress she’d returned to Asgard in, but neither Anya nor Jane would hear of her even keeping that previous dress. This one was well made and obviously AEisir designed for a member of the royal family.

He noticed she was still wearing her boots under it and smirked a little to himself. She was never going to change and it delighted him. He carefully put the book to the side, sighing with a huff when it wobbled in his hand and magic helped see it to the table.

He grumped softly. “I hate my body.” Hela sat down in the chair opposite him, tucking one leg towards her torso and looking like a little girl sitting there. But she didn’t say anything and that grabbed his attention. Frowning lightly. “Hela?”

She pulled in a deep breath before slowly exhaling. “I want to give you a memory.”
“A memory?” She nodded slowly, looking down and idly playing with the leather strap that went over the front of her boot. Then he understood, recognizing the tell for what it was when he did it. She wanted to show him how these strange turn of events came into being but she really didn’t want to talk about it. “Alright.”

If it was anything like the memories he’d shared with her, it would be as if he were living the moment that she had already lived through. She nodded as she reached her hand out and touched his temple lightly…and the world as he knew it fell away.

Loki frowned to himself, looking around at an Asgard unlike any day he’d ever seen it. The buildings were pristine. Impeccable. Untouched by age or imperfection. In the distance he could see and hear the great feasting hall, no doubt teeming with the most valiant of the warriors that had fought, bled, and died for the glory of Asgard.

Valhalla. This was Valhalla. How? He glanced behind him to see a wrought iron arch without a gate that led to starry nothingness. Looking down, he saw the marble formed cobblestones under his feet, kissed by mist. Then he noticed the long dress with the green lining. The pale, feminine hands. Hela’s body. Hela’s memory, but he was actually living the moment.

He walked forward, the pace slow but not tiring. An ever expanding realm of peace that had all manner of species living in harmony with one another. He knew in the distant fields there were warriors training. Battles were being fought with no agenda other than to enjoy the thrill of victory and combat. Loki was curious to see what the purpose of Hela’s visit was and when this had happened.

The pathway expanded suddenly as he entered the road of kings. Only the noblest of warriors, the highest honored of the honorable dead, found peace within these structures. He walked up to a wooden door that opened for him without knocking. He entered slowly, barely containing a gasp of surprise to see his mother sitting at a small loom, humming softly.

Her golden armor was brilliant, her dress a flow of ivory. Such a sweet smile crossed her face as she rose, her work abandoned, and embraced him. He couldn’t help the tears that came to his eyes, even though it was silly to cry. This was just a memory. But it felt so heartbreakingly real. Her fingers moved through his hair, such a familiar feeling that he committed to memory.

Frigga pulled back just enough to smile reassuringly, her thumb brushing away a tear on his cheek. “Come sit with me.”

He was helpless to do anything but obey. He sat down on a loveseat but instead of sitting with him Frigga chose the stuffed chair across from him. He felt slightly stung but wasn’t given time to say anything.

“Your people are idiots, grandmother.”

Loki blinked in surprise and turned his head to the right. It was Hela who had spoken, sitting next to him in the dress he had seen. He glanced down to see his light armor on his body. How in Hel?

After a moment Frigga nodded knowingly at Hela. “I know.”

Hela’s brow furrowed slightly. “How can you know?”

Frigga’s smile was sad. “With death the veil of secrets and lies are abandoned. The dead
do not continue on, oblivious to what happens to those left behind.” That sad smile remained and Loki’s keen eyes detected Hela not quite squirming.

Hela glanced away, bunching up the material of her dress between her clenching fists as she thought of the past. She hadn’t been physically kicked out of Asgard but she’d had little choice to run unless she wanted to die. “I raged then…I’m angry now.”

“I know.” Frigga smiled softly, knowing without asking what Hela meant as she looked her over. “So much like Loki. When his rage breaks free of his control it is a true fright to behold.” But his beautiful mother had never been afraid of him, which made him love her more.

“You think he was wrong?” Hela frowned dangerously as she asked. In her opinion Loki’s loss of his temper was centuries in the making. She was amazed he’d held it at bay for as long as he had.

Frigga was quick to shake her head, her eyes holding a regret that she’d held in life. A regret that drifted away as she spoke since there was no room for regret in Valhalla. “No. We were wrong for keeping the truth from him. I should have had the courage to defy my husband…and by the time I was strong enough to do that Loki had grown up and I knew the truth would only hurt him.”

“Then you don’t blame him for rejecting you?”

Now Frigga smiled. “Loki would say and do whatever was necessary to keep the truth hidden. He didn’t reject me, just as I never rejected him.”

Hela was watching Frigga carefully. “And you don’t blame him for his envy?” His envy of the place that Thor held in their father’s heart.

“No. I loved him as much as I could, but I know that little boys need the love of a father more than a mother.” The two women shared a knowing smile but even in death Frigga was perceptive. “It is wonderful to see you, Hela, but why have you come? What is troubling you?”

Hela pulled in a slow breath, wincing almost imperceptibly. “I’ve pushed it back as long as I could but I can’t stop the events anymore. In my rage I wished for Asgard’s downfall…and now it will happen. Through Thanos.”

Frigga looked thoroughly confused. “And so you come to me instead of Loki?”

Hela turned away, looking out the window that showed nothing but soft perfection and finding herself irritated by it. “He won’t care, even if I could visit him in the dungeons. He’s so lost he would help it happen.”

“How long have I been dead?” Frigga asked as if asking about the weather.

Loki found himself absolutely riveted, watching each woman in turn. Hela was right. At the time he’d been too angry to care. Even later. Even after Svartalfheim his petty need for revenge would have clouded him from giving a damn until it was too late.

The younger woman winced but answered, “Not even a day. But the path is opening, I sense it. I can’t beat it back because Fate is trying to arrange it.” Loki sucked in a startled breath before his eyes narrowed. He’d never liked fate, now he had another reason.

Frigga spoke without accusation, “I would have thought you would assist them.”
Hela’s mouth formed a hard line. Yes, she wanted the AEsir to suffer. But not all of them. It had been centuries but she still remembered Anya. She was torn, in all honesty. Love and hate, battling for dominance. “Not when the burden falls on father. Why should he suffer because of the rest of you?”

“Then there’s still time.” Hela frowned while Frigga leaned forward and took her hand, her soft tone insistent. “Love can save him. Love can bring him back to us.”

“Love? His heart is shattered, more so because you are gone.” Hela looked as incredulous as she sounded.

Frigga was silent for a moment, used to guiding without revealing. But she was dead now. There was no reason she couldn’t express herself completely. “My last vision, I saw something. I saw a girl. The Lady Jane Foster.”

Hela slowly lifted an eyebrow. “I think uncle wishes to court her.”

“She is the one who can save Loki.” Hela blinked in surprise but Frigga continued speaking. “There is so much that is possible but there are two who must find him. Lady Jane…and a boy.”

“A boy?”

Frigga nodded grimly. “Your brother.”

Hela snarled. “Where?”

Frigga shook her head, her eyes distant. Even now her vision was not a complete picture. Merely a series of pictures. A name. A face. “I wasn’t shown that. There are tasks you will need to complete but you must show Loki something before he leaves Svartalfheim.”

Hela felt her eyebrows jump up. “Loki is escaping the dungeons for Svartalfheim? When?”

Frigga didn’t answer her. She lifted her hand and Hela tilted her head, eyes closing as fingers caressed her temple…and gifted her with a memory. A very specific vision. Loki’s eyes widened. It was what he’d seen on Svartalfheim, when he was torn between rescuing Indel as an infant or leaving him behind. His vision of his father rescuing him from Jötunheim’s snow…and Frigga’s gently chiding face. He felt his eyesight blur. “The timing has to be perfect.” Frigga’s hand touched Hela’s face to convey the importance of her words. “Perfect.”

Hela nodded even as Loki ducked his head, trying to stifle a sob. Hela had known where to go on Svartalfheim to kill the dark elf clan and he’d never questioned it. But that wasn’t what was tearing at his control. His mother truly had known he loved her until the end. He startled as arms came around him and he cried silently against her shoulder.

The conversation continued as if uninterrupted, Frigga now sitting on the love seat and cuddling Loki to her as if he were a small boy again while Hela occupied the chair. “Thor and Loki will part ways on Svartalfheim. Make certain he finds the smallest moon of Alfheim. Et’ana Azni is there.” A curious little smile crossed Frigga’s face, her head tilted slightly as if she were listening to something. “She found her way there a long time ago.” Her hands continued to rub soothingly up and down Loki’s back.

“You think I should speak with her.”
Frigga smiled after a considering moment. “You might leave an impression.”

Hela lifted an eyebrow and snorted. “To what end?” Not that she had a problem helping Loki. But she was more interested in what Frigga was planning for the rest. “Asgard will burn. When Loki let go he not only turned his back on all of you…he was the only reason Asgard wasn’t consumed centuries ago. The rage will not be quieted. This isn’t about defeating a foe. Asgard has to make a choice. The right choice.”

Frigga nodded even as Loki lifted his head with a soft sniff. Her thumb brushed away tears even as her gaze remained focused on Hela. “And what is the right choice, Hela?”

“Asgard has to accept father back as a prince, whether he chooses to embrace his Jötunn side or not.” Hela growled softly. “Thor and especially Odin have to admit to their guilt in these chain of events and strive to fix it.” Then shrugging as if the last were obvious. “My banishment must come to an end.” It was also the least likely to occur and her lack of faith showed on her face. “When those three conditions are met, the rage will end and the wish will shrivel and fade.”

Frigga nodded slowly, her face reflecting her own doubt. “These are not choices that will happen easily, perhaps not at all without guidance.”

Hela’s expression soured. “It’s hardly a test if I have to guide the solution.”

Frigga made a slight chiding noise. “It’s still a choice. You are merely voicing an option they might not have thought of.”

Loki moaned unhappily as the memory-vision-whatever it was faded. He craved just staying and basking in his mother’s company. Hearing her soothing voice. Feeling her wrapping him in motherly protection. Slowly he opened his eyes to see Hela sharing the chair with him, snuggled into his side. He passed a hand over his face, wiping away the last of the moisture.

He tapped the arm rest with a finger before slowly nodding to himself. “And so you guided.”

Hela nodded slightly in return. “When grandmother mentioned mother I knew she was the one.”

Loki frowned thoughtfully. “Why?”

“Jane’s special. I knew it when I met her, I just couldn’t figure out why at the time.”

He glanced at her with a raised eyebrow. “And later?”

“She’s smart enough to be entertaining, has enough backbone to put you in your place, and has enough fortitude to put up with the rest of us.” They both shared a smirk. But then her own expression became thoughtful as she thought about the rules of fate. “She was the only species that could break fate’s hold on you with the bond you share.”

“Fate’s hold? Please don’t mention that Ragnarok mess.” It was hard to say if he was sulking but he was definitely not happy.

She waved a dismissive hand. “A moot possibility that will no longer happen. With her bonded to you she was also the loophole to break the spell keeping me from Asgard without facing exile for it.”
He studied her, speaking softly, “And now you call her mother.”

A mischievous look flit across her face, there and then hidden. “Well, anyone who kills Malekith is worthy of respecting.”

“What??”

Hela had already flashed out of reach, a devilish smirk on her face. “You really should get the details from her since I wasn’t present at the time.”

“I will.” Then his lips thinned, looking from her to the vacated space and back again. She took the hint with a small smile and snuggled back against him. He tilted his head to the side until his head rested against hers. “How did you know Asgard would choose correctly?”

Hela shrugged a little, her expression clearly stating her lack of optimism at the time. “I didn’t. Grandmother did.”

“And Thor? Father?”

She wrinkled her nose. “A gamble. Thor found regret at your loss on his own. I just pointed out a few arrogance/neglect issues. Grandfather was the real challenge. You can’t just tell him he’s wrong. You have to show him and beat him over the head with it since he’s more stubborn than both of us combined. When he secretly visited you on Alfheim he and I chatted. Thankfully he’d already come to a few conclusions. I suspect Anya had something to do with it. He fears her.” She grinned a little to herself when Loki chuckled quietly, liking the image of the AEsir servant pushing around Odin. “Plus he had time to think. He spent months moping without you around to cheer him up and I think he started realizing Asgard needs a trickster or two running amuck.”

Loki didn’t reply. He didn’t even look like he was considering it, his green eyes watching the unannounced occupant in the room with them. When the gruff voice washed over both of them, the former trickster queen tensed. “Considering the number of children running through these halls that are tricksters I fear your estimation is low in that regard, Hela.”

Hela peeked over her shoulder, Odin standing there with his hands resting behind his back and an unreadable expression on his face. Whispering at Loki but not taking her eyes off grandfather. “How long has he been there?”

“Long enough.” Loki’s reply was almost droll.

Hela sighed softly, imagining Odin’s revenge would be creative. It wasn’t anything punishable before court, talking ill of the aged monarch since they were family, but revenge was an honored tradition amongst them. “Damn.”

Loki wondered, not for the first time, how in Hel he was stuck in this situation. He could just accept that it was the negative side of accepting Thor as family. Still, he thought he’d made himself clear. He’d asked Thor to take care of this. Stupid idiot.

He’d thrown a glamour on just before the door that had been knocked on slowly opened and Fandral had peeked inside. The little ones didn’t knock, his first clue that whoever was entering wasn’t family. If this was the prelude of things to come when Talia was old enough to start catching male attention he would just happily strangle the first boy and leave his mangled body on the floor as a warning to all the rest.

“Prince?”
Loki shot Fandral a glare, the AEsir not daring to enter further. Which was good. He would hate to have to blast the AEsir out of his rooms, wasting his reserves and then being forced to remain within his rooms longer. He’d never forgive Fandral if that happened.

Pointing to the chair next to his own. “Occupy yourself there before I set Mischief loose and have you blamed for it.” Fandral’s lips twitched but he obeyed, sitting next to the trickster who stared at him before slowly exhaling. “I gather my brother spoke with you.”

“Yes…and he threatened to challenge me in the honor ring.” Fandral’s lip twitched, equal parts amusement and nervousness.

Loki didn’t even react except to raise a single eyebrow. He would never understand why Fandral was more fearful of Thor than him. The swordsman had seen at least some of what he was capable of. But then so had Thor and his brother never even flinched from him when he turned savage. The oblivious nature of the AEsir would ever confound him. “Then shouldn’t you be staying far, far away from me?”

Fandral lifted himself taller in his seat. “I wish to court your daughter.”

“No.” Loki offered no further explanation. There was still no reaction across his face beyond a flat refusal.

“I--…” Fandral paused for a moment, not used to this. Gaining Loki’s attention usually left one with the impression of falling short of his standard. The problem was he wasn’t comfortable with this particular dance and he had no idea what would meet Loki’s standards for who was worthy to court Hela. “I realize I have not proven myself to your satisfaction so I am here to fulfill a task.”

Loki shifted his head enough so that with his elbow on the armrest, he tilted his hand to rest his thumb under his jaw and index finger touching his temple. At the appropriate age he’d been sat down and told about the duties of a man within a family as well as those when he was head of his house and had children of his own. Needless to say that part of the conversation hadn’t ended well. Still, structural damage to the palace notwithstanding, he knew the AEsir expectation about such things. “That is supposed to impress me?”

“Thor--…”

Loki pushed himself out of the chair, glaring down at Fandral. “My brother is not Hela’s father.” His eyes narrowed and flashed. “I had thought he had the sense to warn you away from her.”

Fandral didn’t stand, swallowing once and offering Loki the truth. “I love her.”

Loki sneered. “And you think that sways me? Men in love are fools.”

“Then we’re both fools.” Fandral’s response was quiet but quite correct.

He was most definitely a fool in love, he would readily admit. Loki’s voice quieted dangerously, purring softly as he spoke. “Pursue her and I will kill you.”

Fandral slowly stood, not with aggression but in a posture of formal defiance. “Then you will have to, my prince.” A heavy silence hung in the air.

Then Loki’s lips twitched as he sat back down. “Approach her carefully, Fandral. You may have my approval but never assume she isn’t the deadlier of the two of us.”
After freezing for several seconds, Fandral’s jaw slowly dropped open in shock. “Prince?”

Loki rolled his eyes in Fandral’s direction, tone dismissive. “This isn’t about me. Anyone too afraid to confront me and stand their ground will never last.” Not that he wouldn’t have hesitated in tearing Fandral apart if he questioned the other man’s motives. It was simply that a man who couldn’t stand up to him would never be able to do so with Hela.

“Then--…that was my task?”

Sighing, Loki relaxed back in his chair. “I find tasks a waste of time. Ah, but a test to my standard is much more suitable.” Fandral slowly started to smile. “Hela is a woman with her own mind and her own will. Such a decision should be hers to make.” Which reminded Loki of a discussion with another woman, long overdue.

Fandral had left his chambers some hours ago, leaving Loki to his thoughts. Thoughts that always drifted back to Jane and that she was obviously angry with him. He had to admire her fortitude. He didn’t dare approach her about the subject, because he was afraid of being told no. The engagement was binding, but a marriage could be put off indefinitely. And she was clever enough to figure that out. He’d done everything in his power to help make her into a shield maiden for a prince, to elevate her status from ordinary to extraordinary. He should have worked harder to convince her.

He walked slowly in front of the windows, back and forth. He was tired of staying indoors, specifically in this room. He had plenty to keep him occupied but he was feeling a little claustrophobic. Which he supposed was why Eir had set his release date for tomorrow. The healer had the uncanny ability to know exactly how long healing took, even for his condition. But he suspected G’dath’s influence in this particular instance.

He knew Jane not confronting him yet had everything to do with his health. The thought of hiding a century or so came and was forcibly dismissed. He wasn’t a coward. He would face his fear…who was he kidding, anyway?

Loki turned to walk in the other direction, stopping to realize Jane was silently standing there with her arms crossed which didn’t bode well. He hadn’t even heard her come in, his mind endlessly turning with all the horrible ways this could end. The fact that the look in her eyes said quite clearly she was ready for a conversation made it worse.

His eyes darted away from her towards the door, to ask about the children who were with him every chance they got. It was at their need and insistence, but there was no denying they made an excellent shield to hide behind. She held up a hand. “Their uncle decided they needed the fresh air.” He opened his mouth and she cut him off effortlessly before he could make a sound. “And no, we are not discussing this tomorrow because then you’ll start hiding.”

Automatically he went on the defense with such an accusation. It didn’t mean it wasn’t accurate but he wasn’t going to admit it. “I don’t hide.”

Jane rolled her eyes in disbelief. “Right.” His lips thinned. “You teleport quickly in the opposite direction behind convenient obstacles.”

“Precisely.” It could have been offered as a small attempt at humor. Right now neither one of them were smiling.

“The point is right now you can’t do that or you will suffer the wrath of at least three women trying to protect you from yourself. So I’m taking the choice of conversation away from
His eyes narrowed, irritation and suppressed anger hidden there. “So because of my perceived physical weakness I am nothing more than an invalid to you.”

Jane just slowly nodded, not in agreement but well aware that he wouldn’t take a statement like that well but saying it for a reason. “Not a good feeling, is it? To not be given a choice.”

Loki tightened his jaw to control his tone. “Your point is well made.”

Jane huffed at him. “I haven’t even gotten to my point yet.”

He tilted his head towards her as if to offer a concession. “I shouldn’t have decided for you. It won’t happen again.”

Jane’s eyes narrowed. His tone was a little too soothing. A little too coaxing. And since he was so good at manipulation she knew he was doing it on purpose. “Stop it.”

He blinked once in surprise that she’d picked up on his small attempt at manipulation before his expression shifted to unreadable. “Whatever should I stop? Breathing? Sorry, it is a must.”

It was Jane’s turn to tighten her control on her temper, not about to let him control this conversation. “Loki we are going to talk about this or it’s going to be a damn long time before I’ll even entertain the discussion of a wedding.” He backed up a step unconsciously and she huffed in exasperation. “Is this what you really want—…?”

“Of course it is!”

Jane found herself smiling, crossing the distance between them and putting a gentle hand on his arm. “Not that.” This was not a man who loved halfway. This wedding and the marriage that followed was what he wanted more than anything.

Loki paced his breathing, eyes narrowing just a little as his mind turned. “Then what?”

“A marriage where you’re the man and you decide everything and I’m the meek little wife who just spinelessly obeys your every whim.”

A disgusted look crossed his face, his eyes flashing and obviously taking offense. “You have NEVER been weak and our interactions have NEVER been thus.”

Which Jane could admit was true. She’d always had a voice even when he didn’t want her input. But, and this was the key, there was no meeting her halfway. If he didn’t like what she had to say, he just went and did what he wanted anyway. So she changed the example of the type of unequal partnership that was more to Asgard’s flavor. “Or maybe you want a woman who voices her opinions but has no true voice because you make all the decisions. Is that what you really want? A marriage like your father’s?”

Loki didn’t doubt that his parents had loved one another. Frigga had been brought up in Æsir society before becoming queen. She was used to the way most households were maintained in Asgard, which Jane just brutally summed up in one sentence. He’d seen his mother’s frustrations at time, although he’d been too young to realize the subject of that frustration usually revolved around his being told the truth of his origins. Jane had been brought up on Midgard, a different way of thinking and acting. He had found himself enjoying that common ground of give and take that they shared.
“No.” No, he didn’t want his father’s laughable idea of marriage.

“No. Of course not. You worked too hard to help me become who I am.”

Loki’s voice lowered, not putting persuasion behind it but insistence. “And you should understand that their safety will push aside your wishes.”

Jane crossed her arms and gave Loki a look. “I am not talking about their safety, Loki, and you know it.”

Loki felt his shoulder blades twitch, feeling his defenses rise. “I made a choice for the good of my family.”

“Loki. Let. Me. Finish.” He reined himself in by clenching his jaw and giving her a sharp nod. Only with his acknowledgement did she continue. “You choosing to send them to Helheim isn’t pissing me off. You can talk me around all you want but until we focus on why I’m upset I’m going to stay upset.”

_By the Norns she is magnificent._ Loki gave her a considering look before tilting his head slightly. “You wish to have a conversation as an equal from this point forward, which I have already conceded. What more is there to discuss?” He shrugged just a little.

Jane nodded slowly to herself, understanding where he needed this clarified. “It’s not the lack of discussion, prince. You have no right—…” She took a step closer and used her finger to emphasize the point, poking him firmly but carefully in the chest. “NO right to knock me out and drag me wherever the hell you please. That is right up there with cavemen dragging around their women and I won’t stand for it!”

Loki squashed the guilty impulse to flinch, instead focusing on one very important point. “You chose to be my shield maiden, Jane. A shield maiden is more than just at a warrior’s side. She protects the children during the battle.”

Jane pursed her lips slightly. “She’s someone you trust.”

“Yes.”

Now she was nodding as if in agreement. “Someone you protect.”

“Of course.”

She lifted a single eyebrow at him, sarcasm flowing. “Someone who protects the children in your stead… who can’t do that if she’s unconscious.” Loki grimaced. “Someone who will make her own choices if the children are safely tucked away and protected. Like under Hela’s care.”

Loki had an evasion ready. “Hela had her own plans to see to.”

“Unconscious.” Jane just looked at him as she bluntly said one word as a reminder. He still wasn’t conceding and she grumbled almost to herself but loud enough for him to hear it. “If this is how you see a wife you are making an excellent argument for abstinence.”

“I—…” He paused to stare at her. His mouth opened as if to say something but then it closed again without a sound escaping as if he couldn’t think of a good retort.

Crossing her arms, Jane slowly shook her head and sighed. “Your idea of compromise is laughable and we’re going to work on that.”
“I do not compromise.” His tone was flat. Final.

Her eyebrow quirked as her eyes flashed amber. “That is what having a marriage beyond your father’s means, Loki.” He blinked as surprise crossed his features. Finally. She felt like shaking him but knew this particular misunderstanding wasn’t his fault. Their relationship had no rules, but they were both still burdened with the way they were raised. “There’s no going back to a Jane who wouldn’t be seriously pissed off. The shield maiden you inspired has her own thoughts and opinions and will. There will be give as well as take in this relationship. We’ll clash horribly sometimes. We’ll disagree. But that also means that you don’t always get your way, brat.”

He instantly scowled with that particular adjective. “I’m not a child.”

She stepped into him and he immediately wrapped his arms around her, resting his chin on her head. “I didn’t say you were. I said you’re a brat. There’s a difference.”

She also knew his acting as he had didn’t have to do with a conscious lack of respect. He hadn’t believed he’d be alive to worry about the fallout so he’d let the tactician side of his nature decide the best, safest course without worrying about anything else.

Loki didn’t like compromise. He liked being selfish and getting his way. But he knew to keep his mate happy he would have to learn. He sighed softly and conceded. “I will endeavor to improve.”

Her lip quirked slightly, considering the lack of firm commitment to that statement before retorting. “Then I will consider the wedding.”

He tilted his head slightly as he considered her counter offer. “I will not decide matters for you again and I will agree to work on…compromise.” His face twisted when he said ‘compromise’ as if he’d said a particularly dirty word. He held her gently before his right hand brushed along her side, palm pressing lightly against her stomach. “There is another reason that I acted as I did.”

Her eyes slowly widened, her hands reflexively shifting down as she looked down before jerking her head back up…and caught the wicked twinkle in his eyes. She growled and held out her hand, using magic to yank a rolled up sheet of parchment to her and proceeded to lightly smack him as he cackled and tried to duck out of the way. But all too soon his body warned him to take it easy with screaming muscles and trembling knees and he collapsed back into a chair with a scowl. She carefully sat down in his lap, parchment abandoned, and ran her finger down the top of his nose, distracting him. “See? Brat.”

When he’d alluded to pregnancy, fear and joy in equal measures collided. Not so much over the prospect of motherhood. She already had three little rugrats…four with Hela and five if you counted Loki during his immature moments. The fear was over the whole pregnancy thing. She wasn’t the biggest fan of pain, in spite of the reward. Still, she knew eventually he’d convince her to give him at least one more child. A thousand years was a nice, round number.

He hummed softly against her neck, kissing the skin there softly in apology as he pulled her against his chest. “You enjoy the trickster.”

She conceded that point silently. She loved his naughty, mischievous side. Even when it was an inconvenience she still enjoyed it. But her warning had everything to do with his vow. “Be careful, prince. Don’t make promises you can’t keep. Hela taught me a new trick.” He lightly kissed her jaw before tilting his head back with a questioning expression. “She once threatened to turn Thor into a ball-less gecko.”
A wicked grin curled his lips, easily imagining Hela issuing that threat. He would have to get the details surrounding that threat from Hela later. But his humor slipped to gentle warmth as he cupped her face, murmuring. “I only make vows you will help me keep. You are what keeps me honest.”

Jane sighed as if resigned, a small smile belying her words. “The burden of a lifetime.”

“So you are still marrying me.” He was grinning with mischief but she could see anxiety hidden in his eyes that betrayed the silent question he was afraid to ask.

Grumping softly, running her fingers through his hair. “Yes, I’m still marrying you.” She leaned up to kiss him softly, a gentle caress to his cheek that he took for forgiveness.

With that reassurance Loki found himself back on firm ground, all mischief now. “That’s good. I would hate to see Nicholas burst a blood vessel when I declared I was moving to Midgard to woo myself into your good graces again.”

Poking at his side with a finger, grinning at his reflexive flinch back to ward off tickling. “Thin ice, buddy. Really, really thin ice.”

“Which reminds me. I believe you owe me a story concerning Malekith’s demise.” Jane’s eyes widened and she almost made it off his lap. Not that he would let her escape, his arm snaking around her waist to keep her trapped while he slipped an attentive mask over his face to listen to every detail.

Author's Notes:

Sorry for the delay. Took me a minute but I finally got this chapter published. Almost done, just a few little bits left (perhaps the part a few have been looking forward to).

Next:

A wedding
ASGARD

Hela studied the water as it lapped against the shore before looking out. Far in the distance, the water ended as it fell into nothing. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back slightly, enjoying the sunlight kissing her skin and the light breeze rustling her dark hair. She had missed this so much. An Asgardian day was unlike any other realm and after centuries of being denied she was finally home.

Yet something more would make this moment perfect and she was starting to suspect she would never have everything that she wanted. She had made her choices and she didn’t regret them, even if she might silently, foolishly wish for more.

“Hela?”

She knew his voice anywhere. She may want to cast aside her pride and allow her body to mold against his hard planes but she wouldn’t. For centuries her pride and her father were all that she truly had and she would give up neither now. “What do you want, AEsir?”

Fandral was not so easily run off, having encountered Loki in this stubborn frame of mind more than a thousand times by now. She had a right to it and he didn’t bother denying it even to himself. Instead he spoke from the heart, exactly what he wished, “To court you.”

She spun around she was so shocked, her normally unreadable expression open and honest. Her shock. Her longing. She recovered quickly, her face quickly becoming closed off and asked with a dismissive air, “What makes you believe I would allow it?”

Instead of saying something that he had no doubt she would use against him he presented her with a flower and a boyish smile. It was just a simple tulip. But it was one of her favorite flowers and the fact that he had known that melted her a little. His words were soft and heated, melting her a little bit more as she accepted his token. “I will pursue you, my lady. I will ask you once daily until you have no choice but to agree if only to shut me up.”

She allowed the soft petals to brush the underside of her chin, her tone not giving away the tease she intended. “You underestimate me. One cannot ask if one has no mouth.”

His lips twitched in amusement, well used to such threats from both tricksters. “I can write.”

She lifted a single eyebrow. “No fingers.”

He took a step closer. “I may not have as legendary a pout as your father but I believe I will gain sympathy from it.”

Instead of moving closer she countered, her question the test it was intended to be, “Your opinion of Jotunn’s?”

Fandral regretted quite a few things in recent years, but nothing did he regret more than his ignorant prejudice that had hurt the woman that he loved most. “Of the two that I truly know…they are beautiful, intelligent, powerful people who have my deepest respect. Both of them I would die for…and one I love.”
Instead of being swayed by his words her face crumpled in hurt. “I knew you loved Loki more than me.” Then her lips twitched in amusement.

He kept following, taking the hand not holding the flower. “I love you, my lady.”

A green mist swirled around her and she vanished. Fandral blinked in surprise, his eyes searching for her. Her voice echoed around him as he looked, a gentle tendril of mist caressing his cheek. “If you can catch me…you can keep me.”

He grinned.

The time had fairly flown by. It had been 20 days since the battle before Loki opened his eyes. It was another three weeks before he had enough strength to take short walks through the corridors. Since apparently he wasn’t trusted with the responsibility of his own health, which galled him to no end, Eir had set the earliest date for the marriage at the two month mark post war.

Since neither Jane nor father listened to his objections, he stopped offering them.

On the eve of that date, Loki stood on the steps and held his staff. He watched Thor escort Hela down the runner to receive her title. The little ones were all lined up, Mischief a little jittery but not nearly as bad as when this had been his turn. That should be him escorting Hela but today hadn’t been the best when it came to his physical stamina so Thor was there at Hela’s gentle insistence.

As words of acknowledgement passed between his daughter and his father, his eyes moved to find Jane. She was standing down at the front of the crowd next to Pepper and Tony. As if she were a favored friend of the family and not his intended. He buried the growl aching to be released. She belonged up here. Her eyes met his and she smiled reassuringly. He checked his own expression and realized he was scowling.

A shiver traveled through him as he felt her magic caress his own. But then Hela moved to take his hand, presenting them as a family for the people of Asgard. Almost complete, was all he could think. But then he realized the next time he would be on these steps, they truly would be.

So 83 agonizing days post war drifted by slowly and suddenly it was the day. The day. The day that he was going to become someone’s husband and step away from his father’s house as he started his own. He stared at himself in the mirror and felt a small amount of pity for Jane. How had he managed to convince her to tie herself to a family of tricksters?

Once she was irrevocably his, only then would he gloat.

His armor was his more ceremonial golden pieces, shined to perfection, and his emerald cape flowing over his back. There were intricate carvings in all of the metal, to show himself as the head of his household. It wasn’t the same armor as what he would wear for Thor’s coronation. This would be the full armor that would now be his for anything not so formal, fitted over his light armor. He brushed a finger over the half-moon piece on the front. He would always be Odinson, but he would be officially setting up the house that his children would be under. A bit backwards from the tradition but then he had always balked at tradition anyway.

Thor was almost directly behind him, dressed in his silver armor with Mjolnir on his belt and red cape flowing proudly. “Brother—…” And whining, which was completely unbecoming for a king-to-be.

“Thor.” Loki snapped the word without turning, more than ready to throw his brother out.
of his rooms. Physically that wasn’t going to happen for a long, long time. Technically that could never happen. But his magic had enough of a punch now that he could accomplish it. He was quite used to Thor being a protective bully, but his own nerves made Thor’s overbearing presence grate on his patience until he was ready to strangle him.

Hela made a big production of rolling her eyes, still fussing over Loki’s armor. Odin had firmly told her that her blood stained armor was inappropriate unless she was going to allow it to be cleaned. It would be a cold day in Hel before she allowed that. Instead he’d commissioned a new set for her, golden with green lining. She’d worn it for her title ceremony. She’d wear it again today. She, like Sif, thumbed her nose at AEsir society a little by wearing tight breaches and boots. That green lining came down in armored strips past her knees so it almost looked like a dress until she moved. “Uncle, go pester somebody else if you’re not going to be helpful.”

Indel was adjusting his blue tunic, nodding his head enthusiastically. “Yeah!”

“She’s a vision, father. You don’t want to miss this.” Hela whispered this softly in Loki’s ear, sensing his muscles unwinding. Then she turned to glare. “Uncle, if you have to carry him to the steps of the throne so be it but your little brother is becoming a husband today whether you like it or not.”

Loki froze for just a moment, matching Hela’s glare and making sure he spoke clearly. “You are not carrying me.”

Thor ignored Loki, jabbing a finger in his direction as he focused on Hela. “I know he is hiding by illusion.”

Of course he was. The last thing Loki wanted was for Jane to walk down the runner and see him in his ridiculously skinny form. He took off the glamour behind closed doors, nowhere else. Hela shrugged, well aware it would be months more before he regained even a hint of a healthy physical condition. “So? Eir has given her leave that he is strong enough, that should satisfy you. Grandfather approves, that should further satisfy.”

Tony borrowed a corner of the mirror to adjust his tie, dressed in his best tuxedo. “You really need to get over this brother-hen complex, thunder.”

“L--…”

Loki snarled and cut Thor off. “Do not make me kick you out of my own wedding, brother.” There were times when Thor reminded him of an overenthusiastic golden retriever. With the woeful look that Thor sent his way, right now he felt like he’d just kicked him as a puppy. Glaring mildly, voice soft and clearly not meaning the words. “I hate you.”

“I know. I’ll take over the spot as best man, problem solved.” Tony grinned sunnily as he offered what he felt was an excellent solution. Thor turned to glare viciously at the inventor, who squeaked and hid behind Hela. “Never mind.”

There wasn’t exactly a best man since this wasn’t a mortal wedding. But there were little modifications made to the ceremony to try to incorporate some of the Midgardian traditions that Jane would expect. There was one AEsir tradition that was held with some esteem. Thor was supposed to stand to the right as Loki’s elder brother and act as ‘escort’ as they ascended the steps towards the throne. It was a huge honor that Thor refused to relinquish to anyone.

Hela had clearly had enough. “Continue and I will be taking your position.” Thor glared at Hela, not as viciously, and was completely ineffective on her. Instead she glanced at her father with
an innocent expression. “There are an awful lot of mortals at this affair.”

Loki hid a private grin. He’d invited a good portion of SHIELD, Fury being one of them. With the exception of the director, who had insisted earth couldn’t afford to lose so many agents and him, almost all of them had taken him up on his offer. Odin was less than thrilled but had resigned himself to their presence since he had all but promised that Loki could invite whomever he wished.

Thor frowned at his brother and asked, “Loki. What did father do to annoy you?”

The trickster waved a dismissive hand. “Not him. The courtiers, even without Tia’s influence, are still a nest of vipers. I’ve heard a few whispers concerning the humans now living here that…displeased me.”

Hela bared her teeth to smile in wicked delight. “And since the mortals are your guests, the courtiers will have to stand behind them. How poetic.”

“Irritating father is just a bonus.” Thor huffed as he shook his head but chose not to get involved for once.

“Hela.” A feminine voice caused head’s to turn, Sif in the doorway. The warrior goddess wore her armor over flowing red robes. The silver metal was shined meticulously, sword in its sheath. It was obvious Hela was needed for Jane. Thor’s blue eyes looked over her armor and she may have stood a little bit straighter under his appreciative gaze.

Hela nodded a little to Sif as Indel grabbed her hand, glaring at Thor. “Behave yourself.” Turning her head a little in Tony’s direction. “Anthony, if you do anything that rumples them I will exact the penalty in any manner I choose.”

Hela swept out of the room as regally as a queen, Indel still holding her hand, with Sif following her. Talia grinned, golden hair neatly braided, dressed in light pink. “You look pretty, papa.” Tony made a choking sound while Thor chuckled.

Loki turned with a small smirk and winked at Talia, tweaking her nose gently. “Thank you. So do you, milady.” Her grin brightened and she skipped out after Hela while trying to mimic her.

Mischief rolled his eyes as he followed, wearing his new silver armor over dark green. “Great. Just what this family needs. Two Helas.”

Jane was sitting in front of a mirror as Anya was putting little crystals into her hair, which was swept up and away from her neck. Looking at her in the mirror. “Thank you, Anya.”

Anya smiled, attaching the last crystal before stepping to the side. Jane looked at her hair in awe. Anya pointed to the changing screen. “I had one of the girls put your dress there.”

Indel was bouncing on the balls of his feet, staring up at her with adoration in his green eyes. “You’re pretty mama.”

Talia shook her head quickly. “Nuh huh, papa is pretty, she’s beautiful.” Mischief ducked his head shyly as he grinned, blushing. He did offer a small thumbs up, a rave review from him.

Hela stepped up behind her, sharing a look with Anya before placing a hand on each shoulder. “He is going to love it.”
Jane nibbled lightly on her bottom lip. “Are you sure?”

As much as Hela balked at rules, even she knew there was a time when not to lie. “Would you like me to change into Loki to show you his expression?” The words sounded like they were offered in jest but Hela’s expression was serious as she spoke. She could well imagine Loki’s reaction and would illustrate it to Jane if it bolstered her confidence.

Jane felt herself melt a little, reaching up to squeeze one of the hands on her shoulders. “I’ll wait and be surprised.”

Hela smirked, picking up Indel who kept his arms raised insistently. She rested him on her hip as Jane stood up and slipped behind the changing screen. Indel sighed theatrically. “Are we going to have to stand on grandpa’s steps AGAIN??”

Hela snorted softly at the boy before asking him a reasonable question. “Do you want her to be our really real mother?” Indel nodded his head enthusiastically. “Then yes. Besides, she’s going to be a princess now. It’s her turn to get stared at.”

Jane’s sarcastic tone drifted over the screen. “Thanks, Hela.”

Hela smirked and retorted just as sarcastically, “You’re welcome, mother.”

Indel asked Hela in all seriousness. “Like you and Talia?”

Hela rolled her eyes. Thor had marched her down the runner before the throne but she’d had her titling ceremony. Loki had been rather smug about it until she threatened to tell Tony he still got sick before big events. She really wouldn’t have but he’d backed off so she counted it a win. Strangely enough he was rather calm today.

“Yes, like me and Talia.” Hela answered with a sigh.

Sif had silently stayed to the side, watching and waiting. She was fulfilling her role as escort, a privilege that she took seriously since Loki had been the one to appoint her. It was also the perfect opportunity to ask when Loki should know about Freyja. Not today, obviously, but Hela usually had an instinct about such matters and it was difficult to get her in a semi-alone moment. “Hela, is there ever going to be a good time?”

Hela knew without asking exactly what Sif was alluding to without needing clarification. She was actually surprised the blunt warrioress had refrained from asking for as long as she had. <I’ll tell him when the moment is right, no sooner.> Sif nodded slightly, hearing Hela’s reply in her mind, and pushed it out of her mind as her responsibility.

“I want tails.”

Hela glanced at Indel who was studying the tails of her armor intently. They were similar in nature to the tails at the back of Loki’s armored jacket so it made sense Indel wanted to emulate him. “When you are old enough armor will be designed as you like it.”

“Really? I get to choose?” Indel asked in all seriousness, wanting to be sure it was the truth.

Hela nodded slowly to the little boy. “Yes, you get to choose.” Indel opened his mouth but Hela cut off the next question that she knew was going to follow. “No, that will not be for several centuries so you may not pester yet.”
“You’re no fun.” Indel stuck his lip in a pout up at her.

“Having a migraine is even less fun.” Her dry tone caused Anya to start giggling behind her hand.

“What’s a…my grain?” Indel asked with a perplexed expression, carefully pronouncing the unfamiliar word.

“A very large headache.” Hela answered with a small shrug and a twitch of amusement on her lips.

“Oh. Why not call it that?” Indel asked in all seriousness.

Jane laughed from behind the screen. Hela turned her head to aim a retort at the laughing human. “Laugh now. He’s about to be your son.”

“But he’s still your little brother.” Jane’s response drifted back to Hela.

Hela huffed softly, “There is that.”

“What?”

Jostling the boy a little in her arms, giving him a warning look. “Because.” It was his turn to huff but he stopped asking since he didn’t want to be put down.

“Is he your boyfriend, now?”

Hela looked down at Talia who was looking up at her innocently, swinging from side to side without moving her feet. The trickster asked the girl carefully, “Who?”

Talia shrugged, explaining as if it was obvious. “Papa’s friend with the hair on his face.”

Hela fought the tickle in her throat. It took a second to get the reaction under control. Then her eyes narrowed. “Who told you to ask me that?”

“Uncle Tony.”

Her eyes narrowed further and flashed green before she snarled, “You can tell Uncle Tony--…”

“Hela.”

Hela glanced at the screen and exhaled slowly to get her temper under control. Smiling sweetly while clenching her teeth. “You may inform Uncle Tony if he insists on involving himself in matters that do not concern him he will soon find himself carrying and birthing his child.”

Sif’s eyes widened incredulously before she asked, “You can do that?”

Hela shot the warrior a dirty look. “I already have the spell bookmarked in my grimoire.”

Jane swept out from behind the screen and everybody took in a deep breath. It was a traditional color of white, the robes flowing to the floor like a ball gown. A carefully constructed bodice cinched her waist to show off gentle curves. With the crystals winking in her hair she looked like a princess in a fairytale. There were a few accessories to the piece to tie it to Asgard. Strong in reality but made to appear delicate, golden gauntlets wove from her wrist up along her forearm. At the front the bodice dipped, a line of gold metal in clear imitation of the half-moon of Loki’s armor.
Jane pulled in a slow breath before exhaling, checking herself out in the mirror. “I think I’m ready to get married.”

Hela clucked her tongue. “You were ready to get married months ago. These are just the details to a role you’ve already accepted.”

Exhaling again, trying to suppress a grimace. “And a title.”

“There’s no crown for a princess.” Hela rolled her eyes. If she could put up with a title, Jane would live.

Jane arched an eyebrow in the former queen’s direction. “So says the Goddess of the Underworld.”

Hela adjusted Indel a little on her hip while Talia started holding up her arms to be held. If anything her title now was Former Goddess of the Underworld but those were details she was not going to bring up because that would require yet another ceremony and if she could avoid another one of those for a century or so she would be ecstatic. “Okay, there might be a title of that nature but I doubt grandfather will announce it today.” Reaching down, Hela picked up Talia as well so there was a small child resting on each hip. “Those are usually just announced in court.”

“Can’t I just inherit Loki’s?” Jane asked looking and sounding a touch wistful.

Hela snorted. “Don’t be absurd. Joke as you wish but it may not even be a concern. There are many in Asgard who are not the God or Goddess of this or the other.”

“Malekith.” Sif’s grim reminder of the proof that Jane was a warrior when required had Hela reconsidering.

“Hmm…there is that.” Hela used a wisp of magic to fix an errant caramel lock until Jane’s hair was perfectly arranged. “There is an order for everything, mother, even though father and I balk at such things. Royal title. Armor. You would need to enter your first proving ground to walk away with a goddess title…and you killed Malekith. That, by definition, was your proving ground.”

Jane turned, her tone lightly pleading. “I had help. Lots and lots of help.”

Hela’s lip twitched in amusement. “For killing such a creature? What matters to the warriors is that you faced your enemy with honor.”

“I don’t have armor.” Jane was grasping at straws at this point and she knew it.

“Considering how many traditions grandfather has been tweaking lately I doubt anyone will quibble about that.”

Talia frowned. “What’s tweaking mean?”

Hela smirked, a ghostly hand appearing to ‘tweak’ her nose. “That.” Both of them giggled.

Darcy pushed open the door, wearing soft purple robes. Pepper followed a few steps behind in a champagne colored dress that pooled to the ground. Darcy paused to assess the dress and nodded with wide eyes. “Wow. Boyfriend is going to be drooling over you.”

Talia made a face. “Boys that are friends drool?” Darcy grinned wickedly while Pepper sent her a strained look.
Hela winked at Talia. “All boys drool.”

Her friend tried to look innocent when Jane sent her a scathing glare. She held up both hands innocently at Jane. “I didn’t say anything.”

Jane sighed slowly, shaking her head and her tone full of warning. “You and Tony are about to be talked to about corrupting little ears.” And it wouldn’t be her doing the talking was the silent part of that warning.

Pepper sighed this time. “What did he do?”

Jane glanced at all the little ears silently listening to the adults talking and decided to not actually say anything yet. “I’ll tell you at the feast.” Three tricksters shared a look before the questions began.

“Do we get presents?” Indel bounced against Hela’s hip as he asked.

Talia was nibbling her lip. She wasn’t as gifted at causing mischief as her brothers but she was trying to learn. “Cake?”

Mischief, being the older brother, pulled the word out of what he remembered Tony saying once. But it was unfamiliar so he flubbed it a little. “A bas-ket-ball…um…cork?”

Indel’s eyes brightened, nodding his head rapidly. “Yeah, that would be hella-fun.” Jane just fumed and pointed.

Pepper sighed again. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Considering the revenge Loki will initiate with your child I recommend it.” Pepper paled and Jane kept talking before her friend could get the wrong idea. “He has a thousand years of pranks to teach and he knows how to manipulate anyone into getting his way.” Pepper opened her mouth. “Anyone.”

Pepper turned and walked away, presumably to go yell at Tony.

Jane slanted a slightly devilish look in Hela’s direction. Mischief started clapping slowly, proudly, while Darcy’s jaw dropped. There was an art to manipulation and that had been to a degree that Loki would have been proud of displaying.

Darcy’s voice was a squeak. “He corrupted you.”

Sif crossed her arms while shaking her head. “You have no idea, human. Pray you never find out.”

A wedding was typically a small, intimate affair with just immediate family coming before the king for a few words and documentation of the changes in a house. For the nobility the occasion was larger, court invited in attendance with the family. But this was the marriage of a prince of Asgard, to a woman who would not just be princess by marriage, but had proved her worth to earn that distinction.

The halls that had overflowed with people for the titling ceremony had returned for such an affair. Instead of the small feast that would be traditionally held, there would be several spread out around Asgard to celebrate and toast to the new couple.
The citizens wore their best, quietly talking amongst themselves. Many were eager to catch a glimpse of the new bride that their king had found worthy of their prince. Whispers had already traveled far and wide with tales of her bravery and beauty.

Trax and G’dath stood next to one another, the healer frowning in puzzlement at a group from Alfheim that had journeyed here. There were other dignitaries here from all over the nine realms for the occasion. The Vanir Queen Sigyn and her consort Logan were known to Loki, their presence was understandable. The Jötunn King Helblindi and his brother Byleistr made perfect sense as well. Welcomed both as Asgard’s allies but also as Loki’s kin. With the Casket of Ancient Winters returned to the planet, their world was slowly healing. Craters were starting to fill, the bitterest edges of winter dulled and even the flowing crystal rivers were replenishing. Loki had an open invitation to visit whenever he chose, already reminded that he would be their representative for trade agreements and it was a task the trickster was eager to tackle.

But the six elves from the Senate made no sense. There were dignitaries within Alfheim who came to such ceremonies already present.

G’dath leaned towards Trax. “Why is Nifen here?”

Trax, the former elder of Alfheim’s moon, whom Odin had appointed to the Advisory Council to be the voice for the newest light elf citizens of Asgard, could only shrug lightly at G’dath. She had elected to stay as well; she and Eir sharing healing responsibilities. Besides, Loki had already stated it was her responsibility to make sure his children were taught magic properly and she was looking forward to it.

The Avengers were assembled one last time on Asgard, dressed in formal attire. Steve had a look of quiet nostalgia, looking over each of them in turn. It had been a good team and he would make sure it continued. Humanity needed people not afraid to stand up and fight.

Erik stood quietly next to them, taking it all in. He was equal parts proud and sad. Pride that Jane was striving for what she wanted, and it was evident even to him that this was what she wanted. Sadness that it took her leaving earth behind to finally find the appreciation that she deserved.

The audience quieted as King Odin walked regally to his throne, Gungnir held in his hand. It was only a matter of time before a new king would sit on that throne so he holding the mantle was a memory the citizens committed and cherished. He nodded slightly to begin the ceremony.

One by one they walked down the runner, Loki at the head of the procession with Thor standing to his right. He didn’t wear his helmet nor carry his scepter; a small, harmless modification to tradition to make this more personal for Jane. Indel. Hela. Talia. Mischief. Each of his children followed behind in clear mimic of his gate and each had an escort on their right as well. Tony. Fandral. Anya. Sif.

Hela kept her face forward but couldn’t stop her eyes from wandering to her escort. She blushed and lightly scowled to see Fandral had no qualms in watching her. “This doesn’t count.”

“I beg to differ, my fair lady. You have permitted yourself to be caught. No rule was stated that I must release you in such a circumstance.” She narrowed her eyes at him and inhaled to snarl a devastating retort, the pair of them not missing a step in their walk. The fight went out of her as his softly spoken words registered. “Hela, I do not wish to cage or trap you. I wish to share my life with you.” She didn’t say anything, the words resting heavily between them for a few more feet. Instead of responding her hand relaxed in his.
For his part, Fandral was on cloud nine. Not only was he escorting the woman that he hoped would agree to his suit, but for the gift Loki had slipped into his hand in passing. The necklace, restored with the strands of gold and green swimming within, was back around his neck and he wore it with pride.

Loki stopped at the foot of the steps, turning his head to the left. He swallowed anxiously once, a moment in time stretching out to forever. His hands tightened into fists nervously at his sides, starting to feel a little light-headed from holding his breath. Would she come? Was he a hopeless fool for believing such an exquisite creature would wish to publically tie herself to him forever?

But then the audience parted, a sea of gasps rising as Jane walked slowly across the distance to him. Pepper and Darcy followed behind her but Loki only had eyes for Jane. A goddess. He would swear she had a glow to her that only he could see. A vision in white with touches that spoke quite clearly she was his as much as he was hers. Then she smiled and he felt his breath catch in his throat. Any nervousness faded away as she met him on the runner, brown eyes shining with love. He froze for a heartbeat, just staring into her eyes before Gungnir tapping very lightly against the marble reminded him he wasn’t done yet.

Breaking tradition just a little, Loki leaned down enough to kiss the back of her hand before resting her fingers lightly in his palm. Jane blushed even as she smiled brighter and squeezed the palm holding her own. She couldn’t stop staring at him, he was so beautiful. How, was all she could think. When Thor hadn’t returned she’d been resigned to spending the rest of her life alone. How could she be so lucky to have found him? With her free hand she lightly grasped enough of the dress to not trip over it, both of them turning from one another to face Odin.

The old king was beaming down at both of them, pride and pleasure evident. “Asgard. It is an honor and a privilege as king to host the union of families and the setting of houses. As a father I have the unique honor of welcoming a new daughter to mine family. Of seeing the first of my sons wed…and the setting of the house of Loki, as my father before me set the house of Odin. Yet even as this day will see my son walking forward to his own house, his own line…he will always be a son of Odin.”

Odin nodded slightly as he stepped onto a small platform on the landing and both Loki and Jane walked up the first series of steps in unison. Thor kept even pace with his brother, his face beaming with pride. Once the pair of them had reached the landing, Thor stopping on the step just before it, the children crossed to the right side of the steps, the escorts taking over the left side.

A servant stepped forward, a silver tray carrying a thread of gold and two gold rings. Odin took the thread in his hands and raised it high for all to see. Ceremonial, a symbol of the union the two of them would share. There were soft murmurs and nods from the audience. He wound it around their joined hands before taking two rings and lifting them high. Not something that was traditionally worn past the wedding day, the trickster and the physicist shared a look. Even as Odin slipped the ring into the palm of each of their free hands, it would be a symbol they would both continue to wear.

Loki and Jane turned to face one another, the golden thread glowing before absorbing into their skin. The rings were exchanged so that they each wore the simple gold bands on their left hand, the traditional fourth finger that Jane was used to. The band fit snugly against the ring that she always wore, as if the two were made as a set. They both turned to face their king.

“Lady Jane Foster, citizen of Asgard, today you are the wife of a prince of Asgard. By marriage you are a part of this house and this family. A sorceress by birth. Mother to these
acknowledged children. But you have proved your worth as the defeater of Malekith the Accursed. Asgard owes to you and your family a debt that can never be paid, except with the highest honor ever given to a human. From this day forward by bravery and might you are acknowledged by Asgard as Princess Jane Foster.”

Odin thumped Gungnir down mightily and a cheer filled the air. Jane blushed hotly even as both she and Loki turned, their fingers interlacing as they faced the citizens. The children, the escorts, Thor, they were all beaming with smiles. Tony caught Loki’s eyes, the inventor wiggling his eyebrows. Jane noticed Darcy winking at her. The pair of them sighed in unison.

Gauntlets to hearts, the men bowed and the women curtseyed. Jane almost silently whimpered and Loki glanced her way before whispering softly. “It will be infrequent.” Which was a relief to Jane.

After a respectful wait everyone rose once more. Loki expected his father to announce the feasting to commence, so the crowd would slowly start to disperse after well wishes was offered. He didn’t expect Gungnir to thump again and the crowd to quiet. He barely kept himself from throwing a questioning look over his shoulder.

“People of Asgard. We are here to start a new future, standing on a new victory and a new beginning.” Cries in echo of that pride immediately filled the space. “All across Asgard, across the nine realms, the healing has already begun. We rebuild. We teach. We learn from past mistakes…and old grievances are forgiven and forgotten. A new understanding, not just to our allies of Vanaheim and Alfheim, but to our new friends of Jötunheim. On the note of change and renewal, a special envoy from the Senate of Alfheim has made a request to share with us all the ceremony of the passing of Et’ana.”

Loki’s eyebrows hiked up, not expecting that. He didn’t mind sharing the spotlight with such an occasion for whoever the next Et’ana would be--…okay. He minded.

Words were whispered amongst the AEsir as a group of six light elves glided forward. The elves bowed respectfully to Odin but didn’t climb the steps, who nodded to them in turn with a small smile on his face. The elf in the middle turned, hands pressed together. “I am Nifen, of the highest chair of the Senate.” Talia sent Indel a nervous look, the two joining hands with Hela who sent them both reassuring looks. Her expression said quite clearly she would tear apart any threat. “Our Et’ana, our Queen was Azni, who was the very last of her great family. In the usual order or things, we would hold ceremonies to search for a family as a fitting replacement. Et’ana, prior to her passing to the next life, left a request of her choice…and Et’ana will always be honored.”

Then Jane jerked when Nifen himself glided forward and held out his hand to her. Gasps tore through the crowd. Eyes widened. Murmurs started to fill the throne room, eyes filling with dawning understanding. Loki straightened a little before beaming. Jane would make an excellent Queen for Alfheim, since her only duty would be to call the light elves to war, a responsibility she would not take lightly. Her eyes widened in understanding, head swinging around to stare at Loki. He just winked at her unhelpfully.

Jane wanted to refuse. It was bad enough to be a princess but a queen? No. That wasn’t her. That was someone clever. Someone wise. Hela tilted her head back a little, green eyes meeting her own as if reading her mind, even though that was impossible here. Those green eyes said quite plainly if she could do it, so could Jane. Jane narrowed her eyes but allowed herself to be led to the front.

It felt like the entire universe was watching her. So many eyes staring at her. Only this time she was facing them instead of turned away. She felt her face burn and her breathing become
shallow but she grit her teeth and forced herself not to run.

A soft murmur of high elvish filled the air, a swirl of golden magic wrapping lightly, lazily around her. Any light elf with magic that sees her will see the glow that no one else could, identifying her for who she was. Jane stifled a giggle as she glowed before it faded, realizing it tickled.

Nifen turned to the crowd as the last of the ceremony was concluded. “Et’ana Jane.”

Loki turned to look over his children. They were her children by marriage, but they would be recognized and revered by Alfheim. Whispers whipped through the crowd as the elves, both those that had journeyed here as well as those that were now Asgard citizens, took to one knee and bowed in respect. It would be the only time such a formal display would be given, the red on Jane’s face deepening.

In unison the elves rose, the remainder of the audience still watching in awe. Instead of turning to move back within the crowd, those six elves bowed to Loki. Realization crossed Hela’s face at the same time it crossed Loki’s, who jerked around to stare at Thor. The bastard just smiled at him, obviously knowing all about this mess. Loki was suddenly thrown back in time, back to when he threw out the poisonous idea of going to Jötunheim that ended up with his brother in exile. He wanted to turn to the elves and plead ‘no, no, no’ but something in Thor’s eyes stopped him.

Equals. Once Thor ascended they would be equals. This was as much his dream as it was his brother’s. Loki swallowed his objections and moved down the steps to stand on Jane’s right. She smiled at him in relief when he threaded their fingers together. He was married to a queen, and while he would never face the ceremony nor hold the title that she had, it still elevated his status to match her own. But it was more than that. It would pass down through the generations just as his magic would, their children inheriting the title of Et’ana.

For one glorious moment, time expanded to forever, seeing the countless generations that would begin from his and Jane’s union. Lives that would impact Asgard and Alfheim, forever joining the two realms. Boys and girls that would grow up and touch the lives of others. Multitudes of spell casters and intellectuals that would not only change Asgard, for better or for worse, but would affect all the nine realms.

Loki grinned, they all did, as a cheer rushed through the crowd.

Author’s Notes:

Ahh, romance. Woohoo, almost done. Just a little look at the future. Who knows. I might find a time to right a sequel...but I promise nothing.

Next:

Epilogue
Hela pulled the necklace from around her neck, vanishing the chain to leave a yellow gem lying serenely in her hand. Serene for now but it was a dangerous dormancy. The bearer of this gem and others like it could send the entire universe crumbling. The Gem of Reality had its uses, because she doubted if this war could have been won without it, but now that she was no longer needed as Lady Death the gem was likewise unneeded.

Loki walked up to her, both of them standing in the empty throne room. He was carefully carrying the Tesseract and the Mind Gem, having retrieved them from the vault. The throne room wouldn’t be empty for long, it was just very early in the morning. Already it bore the runner and banners to signify Thor’s coronation, which would be held this evening.

He studied her quietly for a moment before he asked, “Are you certain?”

Neither of them had gained Odin’s permission and neither felt the least bit guilty, either. They both knew Odin wouldn’t trust magic to dispose of the gems properly. But they also knew that magic was the only true method to ensure they couldn’t be found again.

Hela held the gem up to the light, smiling just a little at the rainbow of color that reflected back. “If no one can claim all six of them, the gauntlet can never been completed.”

He smirked slightly, his reminder gentle. “I think this was the theory the last time they hid a gem between dimensions.” It was what had been done with the Aether that had nearly killed Jane as well as himself.

She glanced at him with that same knowing smirk. “Ah but this time it will be you and I fulfilling the task.”

The Gems can’t be destroyed, as useful as that would be. Locked away or hidden were the only two recourses. What they would be doing would be a little bit of both. A dimensional pocket, but housed with cosmic energy and locked in such a way that only those that created it could open it. Once Hela and Loki passed on to Valhalla, the Gem of Reality could never be found.

They faced one another, creating the little pocket. To someone without an ounce of magic in their veins there was nothing to see. The gem simply vanished. But to a mage there was a great deal to see. It was less that two feet in any direction and housed in black midnight. Yet within there was an entire universe of space and time. A pocket with unlimited stars and systems as if one were looking through a telescope into space. A lid the perfect shape and size fused to the top and as one they let go.

Yellow. Green. Orange. Purple. Blue. Red. Six gems in total, some more volatile than others, and all of them locked away one by one in separate little pockets that vanished into various places on the world tree. Now Asgard would only have possession of a useless Gauntlet that could never be completed. A museum piece that could tell the story of the past but had no more bearing on harming the future.

They breathed a sigh of relief in unison before sharing another smirk. Loki swayed just a little, determined to stay on his feet even though he really felt like sitting down. They were both a little bit light headed from using that sort of controlled power but it had been necessary. Hela grinned
sunnily, obviously a little punch drunk. “That was fun.”

Slowly he lifted an eyebrow and asked, “Fun?”

“Yep.” She popped her ‘p’ as she spoke.

Loki snorted and wrapped his left arm around her waist, pulling her towards the corridor. “I question your definition of fun, daughter.”

She immediately rolled her eyes at him. “Well of course you would.”

“Meaning?” He asked with a sideways glance.

“I enjoy creating spells in my leisure moment. Someone else I know enjoys sex.” Hela gestured vaguely as if he and Jane were in front of her. “You two are trying awfully hard to give Indel that baby brother.”

“Shut up.” He was blushing hotly and she grinned in triumph. He narrowed his eyes, not about to let her get away with that. Purring softly in her ear. “Will you and Fandral be presenting yourselves before king and court soon?”

Hela’s eyes widened in horror as her voice lowered to a mortified whisper. “Shut up.” It made it worse that she actually blushed.

Loki ignored her, pulling her along and musing out loud. “And you frequent Vanaheim so often lately.”

Snarling at him since that was untrue. “Shut. Up.” She hadn’t allowed herself to be caught yet. Two drunken Vanaheim visits didn’t count.

There was silence for a few moments, as if he was keeping track of the perfect timing. Just as they entered the corridor he started talking again. He kept his tone even and firm, as if instructing a child. “Do be sure to remember the order as I would prefer a son by marriage before grandchildren.”

Hela’s horrified shriek echoed through the corridor and into the large throne room. “FATHER!”

Jane took a slow breath, exhaling slowly and enjoying the early morning chill. The air was so crisp and clean here. Home. No, it was when firm arms wrapped around her and pulled her back against the body behind her. That was when the word resonated. Now she was home. She leaned her head back, rubbing her temple against his chest and shoulder.

“Good morning.” Loki whispered the word against her hair.

She hummed softly, smiling. “Morning.”

A room all to themselves. Thor’s coronation was later today, nine months since the war. Currently Mischief was enjoying the uniqueness of his own space next to Hela’s remodeled room. Indel and Talia were sharing a suite since they were young enough and it cut down on the problem of nightmares. There were still occasions where one or both would wander into bed with the parents but they were never refused. Today hadn’t been one of those days.

“Happy, my Lady?”
Jane nodded and leaned into him, trusting him not to let her slide to the floor. “Quite happy, prince.”

They both smiled with the titles. They were terms of endearment for one another, not something they expected nor demanded to hear from anyone. It sometimes still occurred. Loki was a dignitary for Jötunheim in addition to being a prince of Asgard and her husband. Not to mention the elves did frequent Asgard enough now that she was given a similar respect as more than just a princess of Asgard.

“I expect Hela will be in rare form tonight.” It was obvious Loki was smiling when he said this.

Jane slowly raised a disbelieving eyebrow. “Just Hela?” Between Loki, the kids, and Tony, there were a constant series of pranks being initiated through Asgard. The only reason the frequency had been tempered was because of the recent birth of Tony’s little boy Anthony. The inventor found himself very busy these days.

Loki slowly sighed as if heavily burdened. “Well, I am his brother, after all. It wouldn’t be right if one or two embarrassing stories didn’t escape my lips.” Jane grinned.

The castle was abuzz with activity, excitement in the air. The crowning of a king. An event that didn’t occur but once every several thousand years if the fates were kind. Odin would be stepping down and Thor would be taking his place on this night. All of the nine realms were aware of this event, most of them in attendance in one manner or another.

“Do you really think the Director will come?” Jane’s question was asked with a certain amount of polite curiosity.

Thor had extended invitations for an impressive guest list; the scattered Avengers temporarily reunited for this occasion along with a few who called themselves X-men…and the list continued on from there. Jane would get to spend time with Erik and Darcy. Erik had been taken under SHIELD’s wing in a completely non-nefarious role of research (Loki had made sure of that). Darcy had found herself an actor to date who apparently had more patience than a saint.

“He won’t miss it.” Loki smirked privately. Hela might or might not have added a compulsion to the request so that Fury had to attend.

A rush of nerves fluttered in Jane’s stomach suddenly. “Please tell me I don’t have to say anything.”

Murmuring reassuringly in her hair. “Not to worry. Anya will walk you through placement before the doors are opened for the guests to arrive.”

“And you’ll be with me?” She was nibbling on her lower lip and he kissed her lip gently so she’d stop abusing it.

“And actually, no. As his brother I will enter ahead of him…clearing the way as it were.” His green eyes turned distant, remembering the coronation that never was a seeming lifetime ago. “Normally I would be walking mother up the steps but…”

Jane turned to kiss his jaw gently and after a moment he slowly exhaled. A wound that would only take time to heal but one that would never completely fade. But with those he now called family in his life, a wound that was only an occasional reminder instead of a constant source of pain. “And then Thor will be king.”
“And woe be to the rest of the universe.” Loki sighed but what dread he could muster into his voice was obviously false. Jane just grinned, knowing Loki had every confidence in his brother’s abilities. Which is why his pained statement shocked her. “I’m such a horrible brother.”

Jane blinked at him but instantly retorted, “No you’re not. Why would you say that?”

“I want to stop it from happening. Still.” He turned his head in the other direction, letting his hair hide his face as he all but whispered. “I learned nothing.” He didn’t want to see her expression, certain he would see dismay and disappointment.

Jane’s brow furrowed as she raised her arms, a hand pressing to each side of his face. It took some coaxing, but eventually he turned back towards her and only then did she speak, “You’re afraid he’ll revert once he’s king.” When she realized her observation only seemed to be half of the problem she asked quietly, “Or is it more than that?”

He was surprised to not see even a hint of rebuke. Perhaps that was why he suddenly felt embarrassed for doubting her. “It sounds foolish when you say it like that.” He muttered the words in a grumble. But then he sighed and nodded. “Yes.” After another moment he said one thing further of what was truly bothering him. “Or that father will.”

Gently she brushed her fingers along his cheekbone, smiling softly when he leaned into the caress. “They won’t. And if they go back on their word we’ll leave, staying just long enough to watch Hela hex their socks off.” He blinked at her in surprise and she bit back a sigh. Once again she beat back the impulse to give the two elders of the Odin household a thorough tongue lashing. But she pushed thoughts of them to the side. They weren’t important right now. She was resolved to keep reassuring him no matter how many years it took until he believed that she would always be on his side. “I don’t care where we live, as long as we’re together. It’s us verses the rest of the universe.”

“Because you’re on my side.” He was saying it more to remind himself than anything.

Jane nodded decisively before grinning impishly. “Go, Team Loki.”

He had an instant scowl ready for her daring to bring up the series of books that Darcy was currently infatuated with and had the audacity to gift to his wife. Mentally he rolled his eyes at the concept of sparkling vampires.

His hair was in easy reach and she sank her fingers deeply into his locks to kiss him. Not that he offered an ounce of resistance. When breathing became an issue she pulled back and gave his still captured head a slight shake. “Now, stop with all the gloom and doom, worrying about things that probably won’t happen.” She released him with a smile and started prodding him. She knew he had a list of tasks to accomplish for this evening and sent him on his way. “Go. Shoo.”

Tony made a series of silly faces, prompting the infant in his arms to giggle. He grinned back boyishly, right before making a face and holding his son away from his body. “Pep--…”

Pepper glared over the contract she was perusing. It may not always be practical but for now she was running STARK enterprises from Asgard. In a few decades she may have to hand over the particulars to the board of directors. “It’s your turn, Tony.”

“But--…”

She slapped down the paperwork and increased the severity of her glare at him, cutting him off effortlessly. “Stop right there, Mr. Stark. You promised me a whole afternoon. That doesn’t
mean when he needs a diaper changed you give him back.”

Tony looked from her, to the child in his arms, and then back to her. “It’s…I mean come on…”

Pepper narrowed her eyes at him. “Forget it.” He pouted with slumped shoulders like a cranky toddler but took his infant son over to the changing table.

An amused voice from the doorway froze him. “I see you have matters well in hand, Virginia.”

“Locks! You haven’t said hello to your nephew today.” Tony had declared Loki his son’s honorary uncle since all the mini-tricksters called him Uncle Tony. Loki had rolled his eyes but had yet to truly object. Stark spun around, looking as joyful as a child on Christmas morning and thrust his son who desperately needed to be changed towards the trickster.

Loki just stared at the inventor silently for several long moments with his arms crossed before saying slowly. “…and I thought Thor was deluded.” Tony instantly scowled but after glaring for a moment returned his attention to the task at hand when it became obvious the mage wasn’t rescuing him from diaper duty. Once Tony was engrossed Loki turned his attention to all occupants of the room. “As my brother’s coronation is this evening, I’ve been selected to…I believe the phrase is run a few errands.” Loki let go of one end of the rolled up parchment in his hand and all three of them watched the list unravel to the floor.

Pepper’s eyebrows rose while Tony just asked in horror, “A few??”

The trickster shrugged with a single shoulder, dismissive. “Father knows I can jump from point to point.”

Tony made several faces of disgust as he got rid of the soiled diaper. Task completed, he picked up his son who was gurgling happily and walked closer to the list. He sounded quite unconvinced. “Uh huh.”

Loki’s lips twitched in amusement, glancing at Pepper. “At the moment I cannot decide if I’ve been given this extensive of a list because I’m the most qualified…or if he’s hoping to keep me busy to minimize any havoc I would be tempted to wreak.”

“I’m leaning towards the second part.”

He tilted his head towards the inventor in agreement. “As I am. Hence my presence. I would like to borrow your assistance.”

“Hell yeah!” Tony’s shout startled his son, who started to whimper as his little face scrunched up. A panicked look crossed Tony’s face and he looked tempted to put the boy down. With a roll of his eyes and a few incomprehensible grumbles Loki vanished the list and took the boy, holding him and swinging him lightly in his arms. Little Anthony immediately settled, cooing in delight.

Tony exhaled in a loud whoosh and turned to make a sneaky escape, jumping back to discover Pepper was blocking the door. “Don’t even think about it.”

The inventor pointed weakly to Loki. “But…he needs me…”

Pepper glared at Loki who had settled her son. “Enabler.”
The corner of Loki’s lips twitched as he walked toward her, his tone soothing. “I assure you I can make the temporary inconvenience worth your while, Virginia.”

She crossed her arms. “I’m listening.”

“If I’m not mistaken the infant has finally reached the age that he is sleeping on a schedule.” Loki looked down at the boy in his arms who was the spitting image of his father. Silently he hoped the boy would grow up to be just like the infuriating man. Karma was a bitch, after all.

“Correct.”

“Once he starts teething that will change. Drastically.” Tony’s eyes widened in horror of the promised future nightmare. A sly look stole across Loki’s face. “I may have a solution to present that will minimize that headache.”

Pepper didn’t look convinced, speaking firmly, “I am not drugging my son.”

“Drugs are good—…shutting up.” The glare both sent Tony’s way caused the sudden change of opinion.

Loki gave her a slightly irritated look. As if he would harm a child. “This is a solution I gave Indel. It will in no way harm the child. Quite the opposite in fact.”

Her lips pursed, her expression saying she was considering it and Tony started looking hopeful. “And all I have to do is let him wiggle out of his parental responsibilities this once.”

The trickster bared his teeth. “You could always double the penalty at a later time.”

Tony’s eyes widened, shouting, “Hey!”

Both of them ignored him, Loki continuing, “I am offering my bribe for the present inconvenience.”

The look that stole across both their faces was so similar that Tony stepped forward. “Whoa. No way. Pep, stay away from him. The two of you are not becoming friends.”

Loki turned, only he was no longer a he. He had in fact become a long-haired she and Pepper didn’t look the least bit phased. “You underestimate me, Anthony. We already are.” Pepper had discovered quite by accident Loki’s decision to sometimes wander the village with Jane as a female. For reasons she still can’t explain, she found it easier to get along with Loki after that.

Pepper tilted her head slightly towards Loki, already knowing to identify Loki by his or her chosen gender. “She’s the one who recommended a feeding schedule that actually works.”

There was nothing but horror on Tony’s face.

Thor took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly and could only be described as fidgeted as he waited. His Coronation. Right now, in fact. The day that he would be king. He was older and he hoped wiser. He certainly felt more ready than before. Not to mention this wasn’t just about him. It was about his people, of course, but it was also about family. He taking the throne would be establishing his father’s legacy before continuing with his own. To one day marry and have children.

But that wouldn’t be for a while, yet. He and Sif had all the time in the universe. The distant murmurs of those assembled caught his attention. An ebb and flow of sound, of citizens
eagerly awaiting Asgard’s new king. And this suddenly felt so familiar, all that was missing--

“Is this the part where I come and say something encouraging?”

Thor had been adamant that his brother would not wear a glamor at his coronation. Loki had retorted that that wasn’t going to happen until he no longer looked like a scarecrow (that he’d cursed Tony into being for a week once someone had the nerve to tell him what it was). So now here they were, nine months post war and Loki finally looked what he judged to be presentable enough to no longer need to hide.

The tension bled out of him and he smiled as a grinning Loki appeared from a side corridor and came up to his side, helmet in his hands. His brother still lacked a little in muscle tone but his color had returned and his clothing mostly fit. Not to mention his magic was back in full force, as demonstrated by the variety of inconvenient and highly embarrassing ‘accidents’ that had befallen the now disgraced former council. That smirk on his brother’s face was familiar enough that Thor asked without thinking. “No Frost Giants waiting in the wings this time?”

Mentally Thor grimaced, belatedly realizing how poorly Loki could handle a comment that was meant in jest but could be interpreted very differently. Instead of taking offense Loki winked. “Just the one.”

Thor laughed before lightly grasping him by the back of the neck. As usual Loki surprised him. “All that I see is my little brother.”

The trickster scowled instantly. “I’m only an inch shorter than you.” This inspired another laugh from the thunderer and Loki noticed the last bit of tension drain out of his brother’s muscles. After a small pause Loki tilted his head towards him, a spark of surprise in his green eyes. “I can honestly say that I look forward to this.”

A day when the two of them would at long last be equals. But strangely it no longer mattered to him. His family was complete but it was beyond that. He had the respect he’d craved, the AEsir still slow to learn but change was moving and changing perspectives. The Jötunn were more frequent visitors, enough so that the warriors and guards no longer tensed upon seeing them at a distance. He and Thor being on equal footing just made life a little bit sweeter.

Loki put on his helmet as Thor released him, sighing as he plucked at it lightly with the back of his finger. After being without it for so long he felt a little silly wearing it. Thor was frowning thoughtfully. “I still do not see why Man of Iron calls you Reindeer Games.”

Eyebrow lifting, the darker demi-god thought about explaining it before deciding to give up on the idea. Shrugging instead and stating slyly. “Perhaps if you pester him some more he might explain.” Thor nodded to himself, deciding he would do exactly that.

But his thoughts had already moved forward. Thinking this could all have been avoided if he had just worked harder to accept Loki as he was. “Brother.” Loki glanced at him. “I wish we had always been this way.”

Loki tilted his head thoughtfully. The two of them were night and day. They always had been and they always would be. But they complimented one another because they were almost the exact opposite of each other. They just had had to rebuild the common ground between them.

But then Loki thought about it and realized that if they hadn’t been at odds for these last few years, everything that he now had wouldn’t be his. There would have been peace between them, but he would still be living miserably in Thor’s shadow, feeling unappreciated and unloved. Not to
mention if not for what had been he wouldn’t have Jane. His children. All of his children.

As much as he wished mother was still here, he refused to regret them in exchange for her. He replied honestly. “I’m glad we weren’t.” Thor frowned in confusion and Loki shrugged loosely. “Were it not for what we were, we would not have now.” It was a very old AEsir philosophy of not regretting the past.

The confusion on Thor’s face cleared and he nodded before facing front again. “Aye.”

Loki’s back straightened a bit more. “I am proud to call you brother, Thor…and I know you will be a magnificent king.” Thor turned to stare at Loki, surprised since Loki wasn’t known for sincere overtures. Just before that insolent smirk curled his lip. “Just the way I planned it.”

The thunderer blinked several times because that hadn’t sounded like a lie. Odin had said more than once that Loki’s ability as a tactician was unparalleled in his ability to plot and plan a battle years in the making. Thor’s mind started spinning in a circle: Jötunheim. Midgard. Thanos. Just to make him worthy as king? No. Not possible. “Loki?” A green eye winked and told him absolutely nothing. The trumpets sounded and his brother slipped away, Thor calling after him, “Loki!”

Thor was smiling broadly from his place at the high table, his goblet held high in the air before taking a long swallow. The toasts had been offered for the last 30 minutes, as was traditional since it was proper for honored guests and dignitaries to wish for honor, prosperity, and a long life to a new king.

Loki took careful sips from his cup in between gestures of good will since he did not want to get drunk and embarrass himself. For the occasion his father and brother had switched places at the high table as a representation of the passing of the throne. Currently Odin was sitting in between the two brothers. Going forward they would go back to their previous seating arrangement with Loki on Thor’s right. As the first course was served he put down his goblet and rubbed his hands together with an evil chuckle. Jane noticed and smiled privately to herself.

She wasn’t the only one, Odin putting down his cup to glare at his youngest who hadn’t touched the first course. His children noticed and pushed away their plates to watch the fun. The trickster’s brow furrowed, feeling that glare. His eyes searched before locking with stern blue. He quickly looked away but he certainly didn’t look repentant.

From the perpendicular table that was shared by the rest of the dignitaries and guests, Sif glanced at Fandral as she chewed. “I still do not understand what you see in her.”

Fandral frowned as he asked, “Who?”

The warrioress pointed to the high table. “Hela. Do you find her beautiful?”

He looked almost insulted. “Of course I do. But the most wondrous aspect of her is her mind, Sif. Were I the sort to be inclined to do so and Loki had no daughter, I would have pursued him.” In unison the pair of them slapped hands over their mouths before looking down at their dinner suspiciously.

Within the first few bites it quickly became apparent the effect, judging by the outraged looks. The dinner guests were telling the truth. A truth unfiltered and without polite hesitation.

Odin and Thor exchanged a glance, both of them sighing at the exact same time in the exact same way. Loki, who had been drinking from a goblet filled with water, promptly spit it out to
stare at the pair of them in horror. Jane hid her giggle in her napkin.

Loki immediately turned to his right to glare at her. “It’s not funny.”

She grinned at him. “Oh, I think it is.”

“No, it’s really not.”

“I really think it is.”

The trickster froze when his father’s hand rested on his wrist. “How long will the effect last, Loki?”

Hela, who was sitting next to Jane, slowly narrowed her eyes protectively. She glanced at Jane when the physicist put a hand on her forearm and whispered to the former Queen of the Underworld, “Don’t assume.”

Loki smirked devilishly at his father. “I admit nothing. But if I were the one responsible, I should think the next course will counteract the effects.”

Odin shook his head and gestured for the next course to be brought forward. It was a good ten minutes earlier than planned but the servants were quick to obey.

Muttering into his goblet. “…kill joy.” Not that he didn’t have a little more mischief planned, but it would be later in the evening. Instead of replying Odin just shook his head fondly at his youngest. With a satisfied smile Jane patted Hela’s arm and allowed the servants to put the next course in front of her.

Jane leaned a little towards him, asking quietly, “Other than to toy with people…was there an actual purpose to that?”

Loki responded evasively, “Not everything I do has to have a purpose.”

She pursed her lips a little and mulled though that statement, realizing it wasn’t exactly an answer. “But was there one this time?”

He threw her a pleased smirk. His voice dropped to but a whisper on the wind as he gestured slightly with his chin. “Him.” Jane’s eyes moved to the table. The warrior seemed quite ordinary to her eyes. Based on what she did know, she assumed he was one of the lower guards who patrolled the dungeons. She sent Loki a questioning look. “He fancies the fair maiden next to him but hasn’t gathered enough courage to court her.” The pair of them had been sitting rigidly next to one another. Now the pair of them were staring deeply into each other’s eyes. “Judging by their expressions, I would say he has…with a little assistance.”

Jane tilted her head a little before she asked, “Who is he?” Because Loki was not prone to dispensing random acts of kindness.

“He is called Hunther.” She studied Loki more intently when she noticed the pained expression on his face. The pain of the loss of his mother. The pain from a few years ago that had dulled but would never completely fade. “I was a criminal tossed into the dungeons and forgotten, yet he remembered.” His eyes moved to hers when he felt her hand grasp for his. He swallowed once, but he was determined to get the words out. “He was the one who told me, and expected nothing in return.” Words that not even his brother or father had thought to offer. He forgave them, but tonight hadn’t been about resurrecting the rage and pain he had felt. Tonight had been to repay a kindness. “Debt paid.”
Larnvidia fell to her knees. She winced as the rocks under her hands and knees bit into vulnerable flesh. It wasn’t that she wasn’t used to such things. Since her loss of the throne of Vanaheim she had suffered the fate of a peasant’s life. She’d been forced to change her name to find work, calling herself Angrboda. She worked for her food and the roof over her head and grew what she couldn’t afford. She had become an outcast and not even her uncle would have anything to do with her. And it was all Hela’s fault.

Slowly she picked herself up, looking around and shivering. She’d never seen a night so dark and the air had a bitter, sharp chill to it. She shivered again, hearing the echo of pained screams. Where was she??

The crunching sound of approaching feet crossing rock caused her to turn her head, she paling as a tall Jötunn figure approached. The Jötunn was dressed regally in black, the light material flowing around her like a shroud and she held a horned crown on her head. Her red eyes were cold as they stared through Larnvidia, a sneer on her face. “You must be Larnvidia, the former queen of Vanaheim.” She turned and gestured that she should be followed, Larnvidia jumping as she was swarmed on three sides by horrible creatures. She lurched forward, trying to keep up with the long strides. “Whe--…”

The former queen cried out as she was flung backwards, the right side of her face throbbing in pain from the brutal slap. The Jötunn looked over her shoulder coldly. “I did not give you permission to speak. I bade you to follow, nothing more.”

Larnvidia didn’t say a word, picking herself up and following, thoroughly subdued. The time it took to travel the distance was unknown. At a pit they stopped, Larnvidia seeing that it led quite a ways down. “What is this place?”

Instantly she cringed, forgetting herself, but a chuckle had her curiously tilting her head. Farbauti was gazing out at the world before her. “Mortals are so filled with assurance that the wrongs that they commit that remain hidden have no accountability. That even if it is known by one or two people, eventually accounts will be settled.” Her red eyes sparked with cruelty as she turned her attention to the woman who had been born Larnvidia but had spent almost a century known only as Angrboda. “Can you not guess where you are?”

Larnvidia shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, glancing around and having no more answer than before. “I have seen no place like this on Vanaheim.”

“This is not Vanaheim.” Farbauti’s cruel smile grew. This woman had harmed her son and killed her granddaughter. She was going to take great delight in overseeing her eternity.

“But--…I remember--…I was…” Larnvidia started to stutter as she spoke before trailing off. She couldn’t remember how she had gotten here. And yet she did remember something. Something tickled at the very edge of her mind but it was as elusive as smoke.

“What? What is your last memory?”

Larnvidia remembered her cottage. She’d been hidden there for almost a century, scorned from the rest of Vanir society. Even her uncle had turned his back on her, rather than suffer the loss of social status. Once she’d lost her throne some elven bitch had taken it and even had the scandalous audacity to claim a human for a consort. Disgusting, in her opinion.
Her brow furrowed. What was her last memory, she wondered.

“You don’t remember receiving a visitor?” Farbauti was well used to this temporary amnesia. It happened when a soul was subjected to a hard death. Malice entered Farbauti’s voice as she asked her question. It was as if the question opened the door to Larnvidia’s memories. She remembered…

A knock at the door, so gentle and mild. It shouldn’t have filled her with foreboding but it had. She had covered from the door, afraid to walk the half dozen feet to answer. Slowly that door had opened, no hand visible as it moved to reveal a shadow. A shadow beyond the threshold with glowing green eyes.

Larnvidia felt her heart jump into her throat, staring up at the Jötunn who was smiling viciously now. “You remember now. You received a visit from the father of Freyja, who had decided you had lived by his sufferance long enough.”

Whispering hoarsely, afraid of the answer. “Who is Freyja?”

FARBAUTI at times felt some small amount of pity for those that came here. This was not one of those times. There was nothing redeemable about this one and in her opinion Loki should have killed her a long time ago. But then, to someone like this, suffering in the shadows was a punishment unto itself. “It is the name of the infant you killed, named by her sister Princess Hela of Asgard and honored by her father Prince Loki of Asgard.”

Larnvidia’s eyes widened. She remembered the pain, praying for an end to it, praying for mercy. He hadn’t offered it. Pain that had seeped into her body without harming the skin. Talons somehow slipping beneath her unmarred skin and shredding everything else in leisurely strokes.

FARBAUTI was all too aware of what had been done and found satisfaction from it. “He settled the debt you owed to them, but that is only a physical debt. It doesn’t restore the balance. You are here to spend your eternity Angrboda.”

Larnvidia stared up at her in dread and asked hoarsely, “Who are you?”

The Niflheim Queen bared her teeth. “I am Farbauti, Loki’s birth mother and Queen of Niflheim.”

Larnvidia shrieked as she was pushed forward by one of the demons. Farbauti’s laughter followed her down into the pit. A pit without sight and without mercy. There was darkness. There was pain. Screams. It was all she would know.

FARBAUTI turned away from the pit, locking eyes with Laufey for just a moment as she passed. With her death she was finally free of the burden he had come to represent. Hela had been the one to design his eternity. He was trapped in a too small cage, hanging perilously over a river of lava. The cage was low enough that he was slowly being cooked, yet with dawn his flesh would heal to begin again. A hellish fate for a frost giant and one that he richly deserved. Her teeth gleamed as she smiled and swept past, off to oversee the rest of Niflheim.

ASGARD
Thor listened silently, solemnly as his council presented different needs to be voted on. One modification in place since he’d taken the crown ninety-five years ago was for there to be two seats where once there was only one.

The second was occupied by Loki. His brother wasn’t there for every meeting. There were times when he would be off to different worlds on Jötunheim’s behalf or just to explore with Jane at his side. But when he was in Asgard he would join Thor. Loki was currently lounging in his seat, as he always did. What most would take for a dismissive act was actually his pose when he was listening carefully to both what was and wasn’t being said. Every once in a while Loki would murmur a comment or a recommendation in his ear but largely any feedback was saved for a private discussion between brothers.

Brynjar stood up and the members talking quietly amongst themselves ceased in order to pay attention. “Sire, there is a request that I have been charged with posing before king and council.”

Thor nodded as solemnly as he had for all the other topics. “And what is this request?”

“A young warrior would like consideration to enter his first proving ground.”

This peaked Loki’s curiosity since such a request was usually made and honored by the head of the youth’s house. Thor paused for a moment before asking a reasonable question for a delay in such an important tradition. “Has there been reason that his father has not approved of his rite of passage?”

“Aye, sire, there was reason at the time. But that reason has long since passed.” There was a certain look in Brynjar’s eyes as he glanced at Loki that had the trickster flushing red before he could get the damn reaction under control. He knew they were talking about him. “I believe the father has become overprotective.”

Loki resolved that he was going to kill Mischief. At the time it had made sense to refuse Mischief the rite of passage. But that reason was from almost a hundred years ago. Mischief had grown enough into his own skin that he was ready and had been ready for a while now. Even Jane had been patiently telling him for a decade now that the boy was ready and still Loki had said no.

Thor frowned thoughtfully to himself. “If the boy is of age and his father still refuses then he may come before me.” Then the thunderer glanced sideways at Loki who scowled heavily at his brother. “But I feel that will be unnecessary.”

He was going to kill Thor first.

Those that couldn’t keep their amusement off their faces politely turned their heads. It was a common enough occurrence when the first born reached that age that the father needed a nudge to remind him that his duty to his son wasn’t just to protect. Brynjar nodded with respect to both of them and sat back down.

Whispering, “I hate you.”

Thor was a good king and a good brother. Good enough to know that sometimes, with as stubborn as Loki could be, subtlety had to be set aside. He said nothing to Loki except to lightly squeeze the back of his neck and stand, calling the meeting to a close. But he didn’t actually let go of the trickster’s neck so the brunette maintained a silent glare as the last of them filed out.

Only once the doors closed did Loki slap away Thor’s hand. “Stop doing that.”

Thor didn’t react, staring his brother down. “Loki, the boy is old enough.”
Loki defensively crossed his arms over his chest. “I’ll think about it.”

The thunderer looked exasperated at his brother’s stubbornness. “Brother, do not punish your son just to spite me.”

One of his fists clenched, a growl entering his voice. “I’m the head of my own house--…”

“LOKI.”

“THOR.”

The pair of them glared at one another for a full minute before Thor sighed softly and slowly shook his head. “I should have listened to your lady.”

Loki blinked in surprise, unable not to ask, “What does Jane have to do with your incessant need to interfere?”

Thor had encountered a thoroughly irritated Jane Foster that morning but he decided not to say too much. “She had stated you broke a promise to her. I was attempting to assist but she had stated my plan was flawed.”

The trickster’s brow furrowed in thought. He didn’t make promises often but when he did, particularly those he offered to Jane, he kept. “What promise?”

“You had promised her compromise.” Unfortunately that was a promise he remembered. If Jane was irritated enough with him that Thor had noticed he was seconds away from being banished to the couch until she considered him sufficiently punished. Loki didn’t even attempt to hide his flinch.

“I wanna come!”

Loki looked down and raised an eyebrow at a little girl of six. She was dressed in a lovely light green sun dress, as befitting any member of the royal family, her golden hair was long and flowing freely. Her bright green eyes were narrowed, a fierce pout on her little face. Scooping her up effortlessly, he lightly tossed her in the air and smirked when she squealed in excitement.

“If she gets sick she’s yours for the weekend.”

The child giggled as Loki shifted his hold enough so she was resting on his hip, putting together the rest of his supplies. Her giggle cut off suddenly, almost alarmingly so as she turned to confront the person who’d spoken. “Grandpa won’t make me sick, mother--…” Her little brow furrowed as she considered something. “…if I get sick I get to go with you??” Immediately her attention returned to Loki as she asked excitedly.

Loki still flinched mentally every time this little girl called him ‘grandpa’. He was too damn young to be anybody’s grandfather. His eyes swept from Hela who was leaning in the doorway and smirking in amusement, to the little girl looking up at him hopefully. Little Astrid had inherited her mother’s mercurial moods but completely embraced the AEsir preoccupations. Fandral was currently trying to teach her swordsmanship and she was a surprisingly quick study.

Another quick glance at the child’s mother who nodded slightly in agreement since both Jane and Talia were staying behind. Talia had never held the same love for hunting that Indel had, she wanting to stay to finish her current artwork. Even at such a young age, not many would dispute her skill with a paintbrush and canvas. Jane was staying behind more so that he and the children
could bond a little since his responsibility as the voice for Jötunheim during trade negotiations could take him away from them for days or even longer at a time. “You may come.” Astrid started to squeal but slapped both hands over her mouth to listen when he raised a finger. “Go tell Mischief, he will help you find something appropriate to wear.”

This time she squealed loudly in his ear, making him wince, as she hugged him tightly. He put her down and with a chorus of “thank you’s” she went running out the doors, presumably to go find Mischief.

“Wow that was quick.”

Loki raised an eyebrow curiously and asked, “Whatever could you mean, daughter?”

Hela snickered softly. “Defeated by one of your own pouts.”

Loki puffed up a little unconsciously with pride. “She does get that from me, doesn’t she?”

She just rolled her eyes before replying, her response almost too close to the truth. “Fandral is afraid of having another child because of it.”

“Reassure him it could always be worse.”

“Worse?” Hela asked with an almost befuddled look on her face.

Loki started grinning like a shark as he vanished his pack into dimensional storage before walking across the room to her. “He could have Tony’s demon spawn for a son.”

Both of them shuddered. Apparently Darcy Lewis had been reincarnated because Anthony Stark, Jr. had his father’s brains and looks, his mother’s bossiness, and Darcy’s mouth…or else it was Tony’s mouth cranked up to the tenth power. Not to mention the boy was always in trouble. Thor, not even a hundred years into his rule, already had developed a sigh for young Anthony and the boy had barely reached the appearance of a seven year old.

It was a fact that had Pepper in a constant temper with the boy’s father. Smirking at the visual image of Tony, yet again, on his knees to try to gain Pepper’s forgiveness. Well, maybe that last part was a bit of a stretch but it was a pleasant image nonetheless. “Is Virginia still mad at him?”

Hela rolled her eyes. “I think it’s a turn on for those two.” Loki curled his nose in distaste. She looked over his light armor and smirked. “I gather you aren’t hunting by the traditional AEsir method.”

Since that would require wearing heavy armor and fully armed instead of picking his target from the trees that was a wasted statement on her part. “When have I ever gone with tradition?”

An AEsir raised Jötunn prince who was also a mage and mated to a human. A sly mischief maker who had shamelessly passed those traits on to the next generation. Hela smirked devilishly. “Never.” Kissing his cheek before turning to go check on those leaving. “And that’s what we love about you.”

“How come she gets to go and I don’t, dad??”

Tony rolled his eyes at Loki, ignoring his son whining at him. “I’ll trade you.”

Pepper turned to glare at her husband even as young Anthony squirmed in her arms,
focused on his father and waiting for an answer since Astrid was even younger than he was.

Loki glanced at Mischief, then Indel, and then little Astrid. All three of them were bursting with excitement but the difference was that they knew how to contain themselves when they needed to. Tony’s little brat he’d be tempted to turn into a chattering squirrel. “Not a chance.”

Anthony pouted at Loki and didn’t do nearly as well as Astrid. “Can’t I come Uncle Loki? Please?” He bared his teeth as he said the last word and stretched it out as long as he could before pulling in a big breath.

Loki raised a single eyebrow at the boy. Usually he wanted to just say no and be done with it, but as annoying as Anthony could be he didn’t want to hurt the child’s feelings. If for no other reason than that would earn a frown from Jane and he strived to avoid those…unless, of course, he was trying to anger her. “If you can answer one question. A riddle.”

Mischief rolled his eyes, swearing under his breath. He did NOT want Anthony tagging along. They had barely convinced Thor not to come. Not to mention father had promised if he made his own kill during the hunt he would finally be able to enter his proving ground and he would kill the brat if he screwed that up for him. Since he was AEsir and not Jötunn he had gained muscle as he had aged, looking more like an AEsir youth than Loki ever had. Still, despite his biology, he would always love magic more than physical might. He stood up a little straighter when he felt a hand lightly smack the back of his head. An invisible hand, apparently, since Loki was too far away to have done it physically.

The boy nodded eagerly, always ready to show off his smarts. Unfortunately that was part of the problem.

Loki touched his lips with a finger, thinking carefully before nodding and the hand fell away. “Most of you have two eyes. I only have one. Your eyes aren’t dangerous, and neither is mine. You can see with your eyes but I cannot. Destruction surrounds me but is not within me. What am I?”

Anthony frowned heavily, thinking. A similar expression was on Tony’s face.

Indel started hopping. “I know! I know!” Loki held a finger to his lips and the boy instantly pantomimed sealing his lips, locking them, and throwing away the key. He and Anthony were close enough in age that they were almost the same height, Indel just a smidge taller. Currently the elfling had taken to spiking his white hair to imitate Mischief’s frizzy locks.

Those deep brown eyes were filled with such hope as he tentatively offered what he hoped was the correct response. “A tornado?”

Mischief groaned while Indel sighed with a pout that he didn’t get to say the correct answer. Loki barely kept his lip from twitching. He admired the boy’s intelligence, and there was no disputing the boy was smart. Crooking a single finger, Anthony all but leapt across the distance but stilled when Loki put a hand on his shoulder and stared intently into his eyes.

Whispering softly. “You may come since you are clever but you are not to be underfoot. You will mind the rules or if Mischief is placed in charge you will mind him. I do not compromise the consequences of breaking rules when it is about safety so if you don’t think you can obey I strongly advise you to stay home.”

The unspoken meaning was there and understood. All the children knew it was the only time Loki was stern. Anthony had enough magic knowledge for the small spells that Loki had taught
him. He would have learned a lot more by now, but then he’d stolen Indel’s advanced spell book in an effort to prove himself and had somehow managed to toss himself into dimensional storage. It had taken Loki, Hela, and G’dath working in concert to fish him out. Since then the trickster refused to teach him anything else until he could use the spells he already knew responsibly enough not to blow himself up. Pepper was in complete agreement.

Whispering quietly. “I promise I’ll be good, Uncle Loki.”

Loki snorted a laugh and ruffled his hair. “I’ll settle for mildly behaved since it will be an improvement.”

“Father, this--…”

Loki frowned just enough that Mischief got the point and swallowed whatever he’d been about to say. Anthony could be annoying at times but he was as good as family and that mattered.

“I actually get the night off?” Tony looked as relieved as he sounded.

Narrowing his eyes slightly. “If you spend the evening making another little hell spawn it will be the last opportunity you ever have.”

Tony scowled heavily, glancing down the line. “Look who’s talking, energizer bunny.”

Loki thought about continuing to banter, but then he saw her and tormenting Tony became a distant concern. A hundred years hadn’t changed her a day. He patted Tony’s scowling face as he turned from him to eat up the distance. Jane giggled as he swept her into his arms, dipping her backwards before kissing her. There were gagging sounds in the background but they both ignored that, Jane threading her fingers through his hair to pull him closer. Still her passionate God of Mischief. Only when breathing became a necessity did the two of them part, Loki lightly putting her back on her feet.

He saw her lips part slightly as if she wanted to tell him something before the urge seemed to subside in her. He mentally smirked. As if he already didn’t know. But he had enough patience. He would wait until she was ready and act surprised. He nudged her temple lightly before kissing the skin there, looking over her head at Thor and his father who were both nodding gravely. Fenris was there as always, Odin’s constant shadow and tail wagging.

Supplies were checked. Goodbyes were said. With a last salute to Thor and a wink at Jane, Loki turned and started walking for the pine forest.

Hela sidled up next to Jane, giving her a sideways glance. She sighed softly, unconsciously placing her hand on her middle. Not quite the way the dream had said the future would play out, but then not everything could be planned around a trickster. “I’ll tell him when they come back.”

“You better or I will.” A growl entered Hela’s voice, not happy that Jane didn’t tell him the same day she found out. As if he wouldn’t be anything beyond thrilled.

Tony looked back and forth between the two women, confused. “Tell who him what?”

Hela rolled her eyes at Tony. “No one is telling you anything, you blabber fish.” A man who couldn’t keep a secret if his life depended on it.

“Is that even a real thing?”
“Maybe.” Hela kept her expression serious.

There was a knowing gleam in Pepper’s eyes but she wouldn’t say anything until it was officially announced.

Tony glanced around, not about to take that kind of doubt without at least trying to defend himself. “I’m good with secrets.” No one, not even Thor, looked convinced. “Some secrets.” Pepper gave him a patient look. “Hey, I never told anybody it was Loki and not Hela who turned… Odin’s…hair…green…” An occasion marked and remembered since it occurred during the coronation feast. Hela had been on a role, dragging out the most embarrassing stories she had on Thor. She had been blamed for Odin’s hair and no one had believed the former trickster queen since she couldn’t stop laughing to defend herself. The only other likely culprit had been nowhere to be seen. “Oops.” A vengeful gleam leapt into both Odin and Hela’s eyes. “Time to go.”

The inventor left and dragged Pepper with him.

Well out of earshot, the group continued their journey for a day of hunting and relaxing. Anthony grabbed Indel’s hand, the elfling wiggling loose and hiding on Mischief’s left who started following Loki. Indel had gotten into trouble, too, for leaving his books where Anthony could get to them and hadn’t forgiven his ‘cousin’ yet. The human boy moved as if to pursue Indel until a frown from Mischief convinced him to leave the young elf alone. Then he tried to wiggle free when Astrid grabbed his hand and wasn’t nearly as successful in escaping. But he didn’t dare complain from fear of being left behind.

Loki was completely aware of what was going on behind him. “Anthony, walk up here with me.”

Astrid pouted but let go and the boy leapt forward to try to match Loki’s strides. She grabbed for Mischief’s right hand and he let her, just as Indel grabbed for his left. Loki turned to smirk at Mischief while picking up Anthony and settling him on his hip. The two with the same shade of green eyes grinned in unison before all of them disappeared.

Up in the trees, Mischief and Loki perched side by side on a branch. Above them Astrid, Anthony, and Indel were noisily climbing and giggling. Mischief deflated a little. He was never going to get a kill this way.

Loki glanced at his son, seeing himself in this boy and knowing it was time to let him take his own steps forward. He might succeed. He might fail. But the point was he’d always be here when his boy needed him.

“Go.”

Mischief felt his eyebrows rise in surprise, then realized it was more than just a prompt to go in front of him. It was his permission. With a dazzling smile Mischief walked confidently along the branches, planning to search far enough ahead in areas that the game hadn’t heard his noisy relatives. With a swirl of green Loki shifted into a fox, leaping from branch to branch until he was as high up in the branches as the rest of them.

He ignored Anthony petting him, glancing at the other two mischievously. “Come on. While Mischief hunts let’s go say hello to some dragons.”
Author's Notes:

It's done. Yay. I survived. The monsters have been slayed and the tricksters win for once. Thank you all for your encouragement, praise, critiques, and participation. See? Not every Loki-Jane ship is lame (cause I've been told they were surprised it wasn't a couple of times now). :D

Now, I may do a little snip-it follow up because I do have a few things jotted down. We shall see. Take care and thanks for reading.

Works inspired by this one: Tara by deutschistklasse

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!