Between the Shadow and the Soul
by whimsicalmuse

Summary

Post Avengers slow burn meets trip down memory lane with a side of angst and a dash of gore. Odin's A+ parenting is at least a B-, Frigga is not to be trifled with, Thor has no idea what the hell to do but he shall provide a valiant effort, and Loki adjusts to see where all the players fall on the board, and what exactly Thanos has planned for him now that he’s failed. Or how a pair of gods learned to stop bullshitting and face some uncomfortable music.

Notes

So I saw this http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=kPdWy2EkFZs had an attack of embarrassing feels. I already owed some fanfic and the request was angsty and happy, and the usual harpies were feeding me plot bunnies inspired by fairy tales. I told myself I wasn't going to do a big ole angst fest loosely based off of parts of Tangled.

I lied.

There won't be Rapunzel!Thor or Loki. Sorry. Maybe next time.

I regret nothing.
And lo, 11 chapters of a twisted ride above the SS Tingardian await you. Special thanks to Shawn and Katie for being a sounding board and awesome beta.

Title and chapter titles stolen from Sonnet XVII by Pablo Neruda. Or, what I call the Thunderfrost Sonnet. Google it. I'll cross post this to my Tumblr first, about once a week, if you are so inclined to read it there: http://whimsikalmusing.tumblr.com/
I do not love you as if you were salt-rose, or topaz

There was a flash of light and then lo, the prodigal son returned triumphant, his villainous “brother” in tow. Loki fell from the Bifrost a man half hinged, and returned in chains, muzzled, and disgraced.

And, not that he was surprised, there wasn’t a shortage of spectators who came out upon hearing the herald that announced Thor Odinson’s return. How many were lined up to see their fair prince or Loki in disgrace, he could not tell. No matter, those that were there relished the glares, jeers, and occasional detritus that were lobbed at Loki as he passed. Thor put a halt to the refuse attacks straight away, and had Loki not been gagged he would have told the blundering oaf not to bother.

There was no insult, no disgrace the good people of Asgard could inflict upon him, that would compare to that which he’d endured at the hands of his so called family and then later on when he fell into unspeakable darkness.

Upon entry to the palace the descent to the dungeons was quiet and perfunctory. Torchlight flickered in the dim recesses of the bowels of the mighty capital, and what guards he passed, smirked with the promise of further suffering once the watchful eyes of his brother were no longer around.

And still, Loki was unafraid. In truth, he had nothing left to fear in the house of Odin. No punishment, no judgment would hold a candle to the piercing determined torment that Thanos had promised him for his failure. And even in the muggy heat of the dungeons he couldn’t suppress a shudder. These walls would mean little to the likes of that Titan, and his agents would find him once he put them to the task. Loki only hoped that the Midgardian firepower that the Iron Man had deposited on the God’s doorstep might delay his cause for a spell and give him an opportunity to formulate a new plan.

In the interim, he would bow to this mummer’s dance that Odin called Asgardian justice. He had no home, nowhere else to be, and in truth, Asgard provided more defense than he’d muster on his own in the open. His reputation proceeded him in many realms and those where he was still relatively unknown would offer little defense from Thanos’ agents.

No, best to hold his ground, and see.

“Father will seek an audience with you shortly, brother.” Thor’s sonorous voice echoed in the tight walls of the cell, and Loki slid his eyes over to the man.

He felt the heavy press of seiðr on his limbs as Thor shuffled him into a cell that was reinforced with thick, slick walls. The room had a single cot, a table and chair. Nothing more; not even a candle. Thor scanned the room and Loki’s neck prickled at the intensity of his gaze. He looked away, though he could see his not-brother struggle as if he wished to open that foolish maw and say something.

But the Norns were merciful, and he did not. Instead he removed the chains, turned on his heel, and closed the door, shutting out all but the barest shards of light. Loki tested the waters, calling the energy to summon a bit of light, but the press of the walls grew so heavy he felt as if his very lungs would collapse.

Well.

No seiðr of any sort would be permissible then.
The sun was high overhead when Loki was lead into the belly of the palace. Which meant he likely had several hours before The Allfather would pay him a visit. He sank onto the modest cot, curled on his side, and drifted off within moments, despite the uncomfortable gag in his mouth. It was the first time he’d slept in months.

Restful sleep was elusive for Loki. Almost as soon as he fell into sleep the dreams came like vicious harpies, carrying the horrors he’d forced himself to push to the corners of his mind when waking. He recalled the ice and numbness of falling into the unknown void. The gnawing pain in his chest and the burn in his throat from the ashy ache of unshed tears. Flashes of light and then he was wandering the barren realm he’d discovered when he finally landed. The stab of unfulfilled hunger and thirst. The glistening teeth of the slithering, unnamed things that hid in the shadows of the unexplored parts of the world beyond Yggdrasil. He dreamed of the iron grip Thanos had on his throat. The pulse of raw power beneath scaly fingertips had made Loki tremble. The realization that this Titan could crush him in a moment’s notice, thrilled him. He wanted to be put down. Wanted to escape the persistent, galling sentiment that tormented him so.

He dreamed of the cage they locked him in while Thanos deliberated over what he’d do with the godling. He recalled the stench of The Other’s breath as he hissed the myriad of pain he’d inflict at his master’s behest. The intimate slick fish belly cold curl of The Other’s fingers as they wrapped around him in the inky darkness. The pain and sick tendrils of pleasure at the physical contact after so long. And the breathless, sick gasps, wrested from his throat in spaces too remote for anyone who might care to hear. The glittering cold promise in Thanos’ eyes should Loki fail to make good on his promises.

He dreamed of worse hurts than the rough hands of a god, or the sharp knives of his captors. The musical laughter and hum of bees on endless summer days. The sweet wafts of mother’s scented water, the silken caress of his brother’s hair as they lay on the grass, kissed by the dappled sunlight that crept through the leaves of the trees overhead. The warm callused paws of his father when he’d take them to the weapons vault. The cool slide of water down his throat as trembling hands crept up his bare back—

Loki heard the heralds announce the King’s arrival, and by the time he pulled himself up from his slumber, piercing light flooded his cell, burning his eyes. When he tore his hand from his face he saw the imposing shape of the King, backlit by the flurry of torches held by the guards.

“Loki,” Odin rumbled, his voice the like the edge of a knife wrapped in wool. “Son, I am glad to see you home.”

Loki bit back the urge to sneer a correction as to his lineage as a guard removed the gag, but couldn’t resist baiting the man a little. “And a fine way to extend your welcome Allfather,” he took a bow mockingly. It took some effort to school his face to belie the ache in his jaw.

Odin’s lips quirked. “Think you I am the person responsible for how low you’ve fallen?”

“Yes,” Loki replied whipcord fast. “If memory serves me correctly—”

“Enough.” Odin heaved a sigh and his fingers rubbed Gungnir absentely. “We shall address the consequences for your actions tomorrow. I merely wanted to see you.”
“So you might lord over my failures again?”

“So I might see my son, and know he is well.” Odin snapped.

The pair stared at one another for a long moment. Behind Odin the guards shifted nervously.

“He is not,” Loki replied after a thick swallow.

“So I see.” Odin regarded him with his piercing eye for a moment longer and then spun in a swirl of glimmering robes and silken cape, leaving him in the darkness once again.

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Sleep was just as uneasy and tormented once the King left Loki to his devices. Still, he was determined to make good use of the relative safety—that is until guards approached him some time in the thick of night, and exercised their frustrations on various parts of his person save his already marred face.

They whispered petty insults, accused him of enjoying a number of sexual practices most ergi with various livestock and a host of long held enemies of Asgard, and through it all, Loki felt nothing. The looming promise of Thanos’ wrath was more real than their meager attempts at intimidation. He almost wished one of their blows might have pierced through the cold, but even the cracked rib they gifted him was but a dull throb.

Still, he wasn’t called Loki Silvertongue for naught, and as they beat him he goaded them on, hissing insults as to their prowess, until their fury mounted and one of the men lunged to strike him upon the mouth. He was stopped by his peers and Loki relished the caged frustration that twitched across the guard’s corded muscle.

“The Allfather will surely notice if your pretty face has more hurts,” one Guard, Havaldr, chuckled as they hauled his bruised body back onto his cot. “Sweet dreams, Prince Loki.”

And once again the door was thrust closed, and Loki was left to his hurts and his cresting indifference.

* *

The following morning came too soon for Loki’s weary bones, and the change in guard did not bring friendlier captors. He was given stale bread, pickled fish and mead, and had scarcely taken a few bites before he was hauled to his feet.

“It is time for your judgment, Prince.” Another guard, when Loki probed his mind he found his name was Jarl. Loki enjoyed knowing names. There was power in a name, and it was convenient to create lists of those would might feel his wrath should be evade the double threat of Odin and Thanos’ justice.

* *

He expected fanfare and crowds again, but the halls were decidedly bare as he marched to the throne room. Odd servants here and there shuffled past, stealing looks at a man many were petrified of, but Loki paid them no mind. He was a god, and was once the rightful king of Asgard, he was not going to face the Allfather simpering like a mortal.
Upon entrance to the throne room he was sickly pleased to see quite a contingent of noble Thanes joined Odin’s most trusted advisers and high ranking members of court were granted permission to witness his “trial”. Their gazes burned, though some looked only with sadness, such as Lady Sigyn, Snoori the mage, Alvis his valet, to name a few. A city of millions and the second son of Odin had but a handful of friends in this time of need.

How appropriate.

The guards led him to the base of the dais and Loki willed himself to look up at the glittering royal family. He couldn’t bring himself to look at some of the faces, couldn’t stand the waves of smug satisfaction pouring off of Thor’s simpering friends, the Warriors Three and his pretty, over-sized lapdog, Sif.

Once he’d held a place of prestige, at the left hand of his not-mother Frigga, across from the preferred Thor. Once he’d looked down upon those whose crimes were high enough to warrant the Allfather’s attention.

Odin tapped his great staff upon the floor and rose from his throne. His hair shimmered, blasted pearly white with age. How long would it be before the Odinsleep called him again?

“Loki,” Odin began as the room quieted. “Odinson. We have gathered today to address the crimes committed upon the throne of Asgard and Midgard, a realm we have sworn to protect.”

Loki rolled his eyes at the mention of Midgard. That backwater realm was hardly worthy of protection and the mortals that clung to it were as fleas to a dog. Little harm could be done to shake them from the cur now and again.

“You swore to protect all the nine realms from harm.” The Allfather’s eye patch glinted. “In this you were false.”

Loki swallowed, but held his gaze.

“You swore to preserve the peace,” he continued softly. “And yet again in this task you were untrue.”

Someone made a soft scoffing noise, but Loki still kept his eyes fixed onto the King.

“You final oath was to cast aside selfish ambition, and in this was perhaps your most mendacious offense.” Odin paused and regarded him. “Both to this realm, and to yourself.”

What? Loki blinked. How—

“Your misguided desire to bring about permanent peace, the childish need to please your father, was but a weak balm to ease old hurts and elevate yourself to a stature more befitting your station. And for this, I must myself accept some responsibility, Loki.”

Collective gasps rippled through the hall, and Loki swayed from the icy shock.

“You have done a great wrong to Asgard, and Asgard has done great wrong to you. Thus, this is my judgment. We shall grant you hope, a chance of redemption, and the love you never believed you possessed.”

Something like bile churned in Loki’s stomach. He wanted not their puerile sympathy, their
patronizing mercy—

“And for your crimes against Midgard, Jotunheim, and this realm, you are charged with a term of service. You shall work to repair the hurts you caused until I see fit to relieve you of this task. Or you shall be exiled.”

Odin’s face softened a fraction.

“So many choices have been taken from you, son. I leave this one to you.”

The wheels spun in Loki’s head. Death by exile for sure certain once he’s beyond the glorious light of Asgard, or a debt of servitude like a dog on a leash until the benevolent Allfather saw it fit to unleash him.

In truth he would rather castrate himself with a rusted dagger but oft choices had to be made on the edge of fire. Loki chose the path of least resistance. For now.

“You are most merciful, Allfather.” Loki bowed low. He gave Thor’s idiots a sly grin as he rose, purely to spite their overt disbelief. It was a failing of theirs to be so transparent, just as it was a failing on Odin’s part to trust that Loki was a man capable of redemption. He had little doubt that both would come to realize this during his servitude. He was but a husk of the person he was, rotted and hallowed out to the core. “I will do my best to amend for my misdeeds. I shall serve with humility and compassion.”

“Yes,” The Allmother spoke up for the first time, her eyes glinting. Something quailed a bit in Loki’s chest. Mother by birth she may not be, but even Loki knew Frigga was not a goddess to be trifled with. She still scared him in a way not unlike Thanos. Though perhaps with less bloodshed involved. “You shall. I have need of seiðr in the healing halls.”

Those in attendance grumbled openly now, but Loki did not heed them. Nothing short of peeling his entrails from his person and using them to hang him from the great tree would satisfy many here for his crimes. Meanwhile he’d be in the drab robes of a healer. Woman’s work then. Yet another way he might be further blasted as ergi in the eyes of Odin’s men.

Odin tapped his spear again to bring about silence.

“You are still a son of Odin and a prince. You are welcomed as the second son of Odin, Loki, ere you fulfill your penance to the realms you wronged.”

Gungnir boomed against the inky surface of the floor, and thus His word was Law.

*Loki didn’t have much time to digest. He was swept up and returned to his rooms whilst the King addressed other matters of state. Thor was assigned to escort his brother to his quarters, which he supposed was better company than the guards.

Mostly.

Thor tried, most valiantly, to stay his tongue and just escort his brother, but they hadn’t been far from earshot before he began to prattle on about how fortuitous it was that father had exercised mercy. That he owed a debt of gratitude to mother, who fought with father until the small hours of the morning, pleading with him to come to a solution that did not end in grisly punishment.*
A pang did flicker through Loki at the thought of the woman who raised him going against Odin to spare him further hurts. She had the best, albeit most misguided of intentions, but she needn’t have bothered. Perhaps if Odin had been free to do as his council and impulses bid, then he would have had the mercy of an honest, clean death, free from looming torment.

In a way, Loki knew, they were likely only prolonging his suffering.

Thor left him to his peace shortly after arrival. He seemed to be demonstrating some level of restraint, and managed to only state the painfully obvious a few times before blundering off to join his comrades and no doubt regale them with tales of his glory in Midgard.

Loki’s room had been untouched since he was crowned king. His effects were still scattered from his hasty departure the ill-fated morning they set off for Jotunheim. A layer of dust caked all but the linens, which it would seem had been changed recently. Loki waved a hand and banished the dust and cobwebs, and smiled to himself. The old fool had listened to Frigga’s request and had not suppressed all of his magic. He could but cast defensive spells, and healing commands, basic necessities. He was not allowed to cast shades, or shift his shape save that to his Jotun form, not that he was keen to do that any time soon.

But while the court may have believed the fallen Prince was but toothless, he still possessed his wits. And they had never failed him. Should the time come for him to protect himself from forces greater than Asgard, he knew he would have fully tested the limits of this injunction.

For if he failed, he would die in a manner most displeasing. And messy.

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There was a feast that night, typically. To honor Thor’s triumphant return. Odin came himself and encouraged him to join them and break bread with his brothers, but Loki politely declined.

He was in no hurry to be thrown into the whims of court life, and was frankly too weary at the moment to parry their jabs both verbal and literal. He had little faith that a room full of bawdy men would be capable of suppressing their discontent with Allfather’s decision, and that could only end badly. And while Loki normally adored bedlam and chaos, he best enjoyed it when he was well rested, well fed, and pulling the strings. In this case there were too many unknowns, and he was yet acclimated to the rhythm of the palace. He’d join their dinners when he knew who the relevant players were.

Frigga came to visit him not long after the main course had been served by his estimation. The gentle swish of her skirts and the jangle of her jewelry made something warm try to unfold in his chest and he shoved the notion down viciously. She might not be in the same position as the Allfather, but she was his woman, and no doubt what she voiced was but a honeyed version of Odin’s will. He could not trust her, could not trust anyone.

She sat with him and ordered a carafe of mulled wine which they shared in a near comfortable silence. When an hour had passed by the bell’s tolling Frigga placed her chalice down and touched his wrist lightly.

“Loki—“

Her eyes seemed a bit wet in the glow of the braziers as she took in the faint shadows of the hurts that monstrosity the Hulk had inflicted upon his face. Keen eyes flicked to his torso, and he wondered if she could tell from his gait that the wound he took to the ribs was throbbing now that one uncertainty had been resolved and a layer of tension had melted away.
In the end she simply sighed softly and patted his hand.

“You’ll be my shadow tomorrow, son. After you break your fast, I would have you meet me in the weaving room.”

“Truly?” Loki frowned. Why in all the realms would she have him do work there?

“Truly.” She smiled as she rose. “I know not if there is much left in your heart to possess the hope to believe this,” she leaned down and brushed her cool lips upon his brow. Her scent was like a physical blow to him and he shuddered slightly. “But know that we still love you, Loki. You are our family, and you will always be my son.”

She tilted his head up so he might look at her, and his traitorous throat grew tight. “I missed you, love.”

Long fingers cupped the back of his skull and trailed down to gently squeeze a shoulder. The touch was warm and sweet as honey, and the only kindness he’d been shown in an age. It felt so cursedly good it hurt.

“Good night—F—Mother.” Loki silently cursed the sentimental impulse. He’d address her more formally henceforth.

Frigga smiled. “Good night.”

*

Breakfast was a somber affair. In part, because the great villain had returned and was now free to break his fast with Asgard’s finest as if he had not attempted to commit genocide and unleash an alien army onto helpless mortals but a few days ago, and because more than half the louts were nursing a spectacular hangover.

Loki had disturbed rough dreams mingled with idyllic memories of his youth again, and as such he was feeling more than a little churlish once he graced the high table. He had only his aches to keep him grounded and focused, and the more he thought on how he’d be spending his day with the woman, like a wayward babe in need of time behind his mother’s skirts, the more sour his mood became.

To exacerbate matters, Thor seemed irrepressibly cheerful. If he was ill from drink he did not show it, and he seemed to glow as he was peppered with news of the adventures his comrades had in his absence.

Loki was sure they had to have told him thus yesterday eve, but when did the warriors of Asgard fail to sing their own praises ad nauseam? For Thor’s part Loki was sure he had reason to be cheerful. His precious realm had been protected, even at great cost. He could rest knowing his woman was safe from harm. And now, thanks to the returned tesseract, Thor had means to see her again, and perhaps renew their fumbling courtship.

Disgusting.

That was going to be the way of it, then? He would have mercy, the realm would have order restored, the royal family would be reunited, and Thor would have his love and fulfill his sworn duty to protect Midgard?
He could hardly stand it.

By the time Frigga motioned for him to join her as she departed a veritable storm cloud was looming over his head. He scowled at servants as they made their way across the expansive palace to her wing. He made maids drop their crockery, dogs trip over their own feet, and guard’s armor loosen so parts fell onto the fine marble floors with an abrasive clang.

The mischief was only a bit satisfying, but it was a start at least.

That Frigga, who undoubtedly knew what he was up to, and did not so much as glance in his direction at this, took the wind from his sails. As such, he spent the last leg of their walk seething. The horrible woman would use her maternal powers to sap even the most trifling enjoyment he had left. All thanks to sentiment.

His breakfast curdled in his guts.

Her weaving room was bright, expansive, and comfortably filled with women of varying ages, from the babe in swaddling clothes to the toothless crone. Those of able body and nimble fingers were seated with the spindle upright at their knee, the large distaff swaying with the motion of the spindle’s turn. The woman were already at work, passing the time with the soft noises of their gossip, melodic snatches of song, and scattered barks of laughter. When Loki came with the Allmother everyone paused but for a moment, fixing her with a warm smile, and then casting a stern wary eye onto her wayward son.

Svanhild, a tempestuous old crone that was a crone when Loki was in swaddling clothes, raised her chin at the man and let out a hearty bark of laughter.

“Back here again, are we?” She gave him a sharp gummy grin. “Has the princeling misbehaved and now must do penance with his mother?”

“Shush,” Frigga scolded lightly as she eased into the well carved seat in front of her loom. The rough structure of what Loki suspected would be someone’s marriage quilt seemed to be taking shape. Loki peered at the glittering threads curiously, but it was too early to tell to whom it belonged.

“Loki, do you remember still how to spin?” His mother asked sweetly as she scrutinized her handiwork and then dug in an enormous basket of thread for just the right one.

When Loki was a child, he spent many hot summer days tucked against his mother’s skirts. The heat of the summer made him ill and disoriented. He preferred the shade, the cool breezes from the generous windows, and the salacious gossip, to the grunts, stink, and scuffling of would be warriors outside. And Odin tolerated it while he was young. Perhaps longer than he allowed for Thor to stay up under their mother.

“I do a little,” Loki lied. He hadn’t had the need to so much as look at a spindle in hundreds of years, but his memory was long and he suspected that with a bit of practice he would fall into old rhythms easily.

“Good,” Svanhild grunted. “Come hither, boy. You’ll take this over so I might see to Bryn.”

The girl in question was of about 14 summers and pink with the first blush of womanhood. Her small breasts were scarcely distinguishable, and her long, pale throat was as handsome as a swan’s. She looked at him with guarded doe eyes, the color of the fairest sky, and Loki blinked indifferently.

She was just the sort Thor would have chased after when they were but children. And just the sort who would not have spared him a second glance were they children still.
Loki positioned himself in the chair, wondering silently how the woman endured such uncomfortable seating for as many hours as they spent wasting away, and began to spin. Despite, or perhaps because of the tedium Loki was lulled into a quiet space listening to the rhythm of the spindles, the gentle murmur of the women’s gossip, bright snatches of song, and the occasional lusty cry of a baby demanding to be fed. Svanhild was just as taciturn as she was when he was a stripling, and he felt the sting of her staff on his fingers for sloppy spinning several times before Frigga deigned to relieve him with a break for lunch.

He was allowed free time to reacquaint himself with the grounds late in the afternoon, once his fingers were cramped and aching and a pile of uneven thread had been tossed into the scrap pile to be corrected. He bowed out of dinner again, and took his sup in his rooms, relishing the lack of company and his favorite wine. He imbibed until his limbs were heavy and sleep called him.

Thus a routine emerged. Loki was confined to the spinning for weeks on end, bored beyond reason once he’d consumed all of the gossip worth knowing from the ladies. Without that to occupy him, his mind wandered to the dark places of the time where he was alone in the void... of the choices he made along the way. Often, when his mind would drift, Svenhild would notice, and bring him back to the present with a sharp crack to his fine knuckles and a scathing assessment of his handiwork.

He hated her.

After weeks of idling, he asked Frigga for something different to do, and thus she turned him over to Gerd, the head of the healing houses. She was a busty woman, bullying wife, mother, grandmother, and the sort that suffered no fools.

She delighted in taking Prince Loki under her tutelage, and he spent many more weeks doing the menial tasks lowly apprentices were assigned to do. He bathed the incontinent, changed their pans and linens. He cleaned sick from the floors, and washed instruments from the steady stream of births his mother and her ladies attended. While the women rested from their births he attended to the babies, but only when their nappy required changing.

It was a sentence most vile and it wasn’t long before he seriously considered exile. Foul labor was one matter, but what was most frustrating was how under-utilized Loki’s seiðr was. Frigga had claimed she needed him for his abilities but he had not been asked to so much as heal a paper cut in the three months he’d been working. Dark twisting things inside him hissed that they didn’t trust him, no matter that he was unmanned, de-fanged, chained and whipped. They could never trust the unwanted son of a Frost Giant to heal their precious sick.

The longer this persisted the fouler his mood grew. And he soon gave up much pretense of meekness and humility, and began to let his betters know just what he felt of the work they had him doing.

But no matter how he would tantrum, what mischief he made, the women didn’t seem to care. If he broke something Gerd put her hands on wide hips and told him to fix it. If he refused to obey a request, Frigga was called, and he wasn’t yet so belligerent to disobey her. Especially as she threatened to send Loki on a hunting trip with Thor if he so much as toed the line with the women in the healing rooms again. So he bristled. He collected scraps of information and turned them over in every possible angle in his mind, seeking insight into what it might be developing.

He found nothing. And this unnerved him all the more.

They were in the healing rooms one evening when a small contingent of warriors returned injured from the realm’s borders. Something had come upon them in the night three days prior, and had burned the campsite and its occupants badly. Those who were closest to the point of attack had not lived, and the men on watch barely made it back alive. Their leader believed it only because
they were but grazed with the foreign fire.

“‘Fire,’ you say?” Loki asked casually, as he and his mother prepared ointments at their bedside. “What sort of color was this fire?”

The soldier looked to Frigga, who gave him a slight nod to continue. “It was blue, your highness. Moved unlike any fire I’ve ever seen. More like water.”

Loki frowned. There were not many in the realm that were capable of conjuring the sort of fire to take down even a small encampment of Aesir warriors, and fewer still who would be so bold as to do so.

“Did you see who called this fire?”

The soldier shook his head, wincing as Frigga applied another round of antiseptic. Whatever had caused the burns was impervious to the properties of healing stones. Yet another curious distinction.

“We heard a strange hissing noise though,” the soldier ground out. “And Sigrun swears on the tree that he saw scales—”

Loki couldn’t keep the laugh back. “Are you suggesting that you were attacked by some sort of dragon? In Asgard?”

The solider bristled. “I know not, your highness—“

“—Clearly,” Loki drawled.

“But something unnatural is prowling our borders, capable of great harm.”

“Harm we might not concern ourselves with had your comrades been more diligent,” Loki muttered as folded the enchanted bandages onto the man’s wound. Frigga gave him a sharp look.

“You did your best,” Frigga soothed as she touched his brow gently. “Now rest. You have served Asgard well.”

Loki did not bother to hide his derisive snort as his mother hauled him from the man’s beside by his sleeve. When they were out of earshot she pinched him in the tender underside of his arm viciously. He yelped and scowled, knowing that had he worn something more substantial than the rags the healers insisted he don while serving here, her attack would have been little to worry about.

“You would do well to remember, child, that the terms of punishment are for you to serve with humility and compassion.”

Loki glowered as he rubbed his wound. “Am I not yet low enough? Draped in rough spun rags, half a day spent with babes and grannies spinning, the other half spent cleaning excrement of these injured halfwits who return home after some botched mission and seek my care?”

“Any indignity you perceive to be suffering is by your own hand, Loki.” Frigga replied. “Your work here is a value to society—”

Loki rolled his eyes.

“And in doing so you bring yourself to the level of your people. Know their concerns, listen to their hurts. It is the great part of what it is to rule.”

“Why would I concern myself with rule, mother?” Loki hissed. “There is but one throne of Asgard
and the seat is decidedly taken.”

He left her with a dramatic spin of his robes to wash his sticky hands in a nearby basin. The bandages the women made in Frigga’s weaving room were soaked in a special poultice from the juice of Idunn’s apples.

His temper cooled by the time his hands were clean. He ought not to have bothered to get so riled about these affairs. For what did they matter to Loki? Likely, he would not know the end of this mysterious attack, and truthfully he cared little. Unless the alleged beast was come from Thanos, he cared not if the damned thing razed everything from the most distant border to the golden halls of Asgard itself.
Chapter 2 Or the arrow of carnations the fire shoots off.

Chapter Notes

Phew, this one was a 20+ page doozy! Thank you Shawn and Katie for the militant beta! I hope the formatting behaves. Hope you enjoy! (I forgot to add the most important part of these notes.) THANK YOU FOR THE SUPPORT/KUDOS/VIEWS. Seriously has made my week! :)

“You must take your brother out to be among the people, Thor,” the Allmother declared as they sat together on one of her many verandas, soaking up the last of summer’s generous sunshine. She served him tea and sweet cakes as they gazed at the colorful blossoms of her favorite garden. Soon they would wilt and die, crushed under the weight of heavy snow. Winter was coming.

Thor blinked. “Mother, I am…not sure that would be advisable.” He rubbed his chest absentmindedly. By the Tree, his skin itched as if insects were crawling on it.

The last time Loki had communed with the “people” and harsh words were exchanged, he’d had to intervene. Seven were struck blind for six hours, he had to knock three heads together, and two sorry bastards were bald.

Thor particularly felt bad about the latter, as the curse was aimed for him.

“I have no need for your ham-fisted and tardy intervention, brother.” Loki had hissed at him, hair blasted in every direction, lips shiny with blood from the scuffle. His hands were glowing green with unchecked seiðr. “I can mind myself.”

Thor accused him of cheating somehow, skirting past Father’s command that he not use his seiðr for harm, and that had enraged his brother more so. He carried on spectacularly, insulting Thor’s deductive reasoning, loyalty, and suggested he partook in uncouth things with his pet goats before Thor gave into the bait and tackled his brother.

The little shit.

Thor’s skin twitched at the memory and he resisted the urge to claw at his neck. Again.

“Loki is a tender soul, Thor. But not as temperamental as you might think. That… incident, Tuesday last, won’t happen again.”

Frigga’s eyes flared with the sort of fire that usually meant mucking stables when they were younger, and Thor bit back the urge to smile. He was sure Loki paid dearly for his little tantrum.

“I would have you put him to work. He grows weary of my weaving and healing. Chafes against stagnation.” Her lips curled wryly.

He couldn’t blame Loki. He’d rather castrate himself with a rusty dagger than be confined indoors among crones and babes, henpecked with gossip for hours on end.

“What would you have him do?”
Frigga placed her tea cup down. “I would put him to work on the regeneration of the Bifrost.”

“Truly?” Thor shifted uncomfortably. “Mother, Loki may no longer be the threat he was when he returned, but surely you cannot think it wise to entrust him with such a delicate task?”

“I do.” She folded her hands. “Thor, Loki has an abundance of distrust, and few who will stand for him. Perhaps it has always been thus, and if so it is most certainly at the heart of why he behaves as he does.”

“He could weave some vulnerability into the Bifrost that might prove fatal—“

“Or he could reinforce it so that it might not fall has it had before,” the Allmother snapped. “Only time will tell.”

Thor shook his head. He knew when he was bested, and this was precisely the moment. There was naught he could say against Loki assisting that would dissuade his mother. Likely, he’d end up being cuff ed and sent away without his cakes like a naughty boy. He sighed, and flashed a wry smile.

“I never realized you were such a friend to chaos.”

“Marriage and childbirth are my purview, Thor. What are the two without chaos? Chaos is at the root of all great creation.”

Thor hoped he never knew. He’d caught glimpses of women in labor over the years, and the noises alone made his stones shrivel. “Tomorrow I shall collect him then. The mages will delight in having his talents aiding their cause.”

Or else. He did not want to have to tell his mother he’d failed in this task.

“Very good. Now, when were you going to tell me that you’d been cursed, darling?”

He started. “Come again?”

“Cursed, Thor,” she repeated, as if speaking to a dullard, which he rather resented, as there had been concerns when he was a babe and father had him tested…

“I can feel the fire from your skin from here. Likely some sort of rash…” She leaned and pulled his armor back; peering at the angry skin, then clucked her tongue. “Did you insult your brother again?”

“How am I to know?” He growled irritably and stood up. “His sensitivities are vast, and his patience short. I don’t even recall when he had the opportunity to do so—“

Frigga shook her head and waved him off. “One can never tell with that boy. Go on, see Gerd, she’ll sort you out.”

Thor brushed his lips against his mother’s soft cheek and simultaneously palmed four cakes in one hand.

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“We’ll just have to take it all off,” Gerd declared with a dramatic clap of her hands.

“My skin?” Thor blinked.

“Goodness no! But your armor for certain.” Gerd winked and behind her some of the apprentices giggled.
Thor smiled amiably.

“Oh, you’ll need someone to help in the back—girls!”

“I’m confident I shall suffice,” Loki slid in quickly, all but hissing at the others who scattered. Thor grunted in approval; some of the apprentices were a bit forward.

“I did not notice you lurking among the women, brother.”

“Yes, well you were never known for your observational skills, were you?” Loki’s slim fingers tickled as they unfastened heavy clasps and tugged at worn leather straps that held his cuirass together.

He craned to look at him. “Speaking of such, did you curse me?”

His brother sniffed. “I’ve no idea what you are referring to.”

“You lie.”

“You stink.”

There was a silent battle of wills, and then Loki sighed.

“Lift your arms, you smelly ass.”

Thor did as he was told, allowing his brother to peel back his fish scale mail. The air on the exposed skin burned like wildfire and he shivered as Loki’s fingers grazed the worst of the rash. Thor looked down at his chest, and then eyed his brother, looking for some sign of duplicity.

As ever, there was none.

“Honestly.” Loki clicked his tongue and then produced a jar from thin air, startling Thor.

He hated when Loki did that.

“So tomorrow you shall have a reprieve, brother,” Thor rumbled as he poured a cold, potent smelling unguent onto his chest.

Loki hummed, never taking his eyes from his task.

“We have need of your talents on the Bifrost,” Thor continued, noting how still his brother went at the mention of that cursed place.

Perhaps it was not quite long enough past those dark times for Loki to return. Conflicting desires squirmed in his chest over the matter, and he considered calling the affair off and facing mother’s wrath.

“Unless you desire to be elsewhere—“

“It is of no consequence to me where I shall be asked to do work at a snail’s pace.” Loki snapped. “Only that the work moves thus.”

Thor felt a pang of sympathy and clapped his hand on his brother’s shoulder affectionately.

“Besides.” Loki shrugged his hand off. The pang evaporated, leaving behind a dark stain. “One would think you would be so eager for easy transport back to Midgard and your… beloved
companions.”

“I’ll fetch you at dawn, brother,” he replied, a warm feeling curling in his breast. Loki detested rising early, and Thor enjoyed petty spite where he could, turnabout being fair play, after all.

Loki wiped his hands and gestured for him to dress. “How long until the curse wears off?”

“One more day.” his brother admitted, something close to a smile tugging at his lips. Fitting that he’d be warmed at the thought of Thor’s suffering.

Thor cuffed him. “I knew you cursed me, you sniveling wretch—“

There was a scuffle, some words were said, and Thor left the healing ward divested of pubic hair.

But Loki would have quite a time healing the black eye.

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“I must say I admire your handiwork,” Sif whispered at the dinner table that night.

Thor smiled, a mixture of pride and something that felt rather like indigestion welling up. He hadn’t honestly believed his vain brother would come to the table.

“You shouldn’t goad him so,” Volstagg scolded. Thor wasn’t sure who he was addressing. “Your brother is but a viper with a boot upon his throat. His memory is long, and he’ll not take these slights with ease.”

“I have to admire his cheek,” Fandral chimed in, as he pulled a serving maid onto his lap. “From what I’ve heard, there isn’t a place in Asgard that he can go and not have someone offer to hand him his arse, yet still, he’s Loki.”

Vain. Proud. Spitfire temper and a tongue sharper than the edge of a newly forged sword.

In short, impossible.

“This is not much different than the way things were before,” Hogun pointed out.

There was some truth there. Few challenged him to a match in the sparring ring because they valued their pride. Loki was no warrior born, but he was a son of Odin and loathed to shame the name of his noble house. Thus, when he was of an age, he tore himself from the comforts of libraries and shadows, and out into the open to be trained. He would never have the brute force of Volstagg or Thor, or the showmanship of Sif. He was cunning, whipcord strong, and fast. Most like Hogun, this is perhaps why they often sparred.

Those that were offering to face him now clearly had not spent time with his previous opponents. Though Loki was a master in womanly arts, there was nothing soft or meek about him. And he had no compunction about bending the rules to suit his will – or contorting you to suit the rules. Either way the result typically was a haze of bright hot pain with a side of humiliation.

And thus he was slow to win the hearts of many.

Except, perhaps, those whose heart he should not possess.

Had it always been thus? Thor wasn’t sure. Much of his life was now divided into before and after. Before he was cast out, met Jane, fell in love, and after. Before Loki fell from the Bifrost and after. Before the hunting trip and the sour turn after. Before Loki came into his full powers, and the rushed
secretive fumbling after. Before Loki’s children, before Thrym—

The turning points in a long life burned bright as the stars, but the details around each moment were blurred. Loki often told him he lacked focus, and he was not wrong. He was as near-sighted as a bilgesnipe, only able to see that which was right before him, right now.

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The stars were still out when Órvar roused him to break his fast. The table in his quarters was laden with bread, creamy butter, salted meats, fish, and fruit. Pink sunlight soon bled through the windows, and by the time Thor was satisfied and dressed, the gilded surfaces were aglow. He bid his man good day and went to retrieve his brother.

As Loki was renowned for being the most insufferable person to rouse in the morning, it was fitting that he’d find his brother waiting for him outside his quarters.

“You are awake,” Thor said dumbly.

“As observant as ever.” Loki rolled his eyes. He willed himself not to stare at the dusky bruise.

“You are never awake so early,” Thor pressed. In all of their long years, he could count on one hand how many times Loki was up before him. And when Loki could deign to rise early it was usually to play a trick on him.

On one memorable occasion, not long after Loki came into his power, he’d covered Thor with illusions of spiders. Thor had done the sensible thing, calling his lightning, and the result was that the pair was split into two rooms, as the room they shared was burned to a husk. To this day, Thor was uncomfortable around spiders, and would take the secret that he could be as good as unmanned by one to his grave.

“Yes, let us bypass the redundant conversation, shall we? I am awake, dressed, and once you contain your shock and close your gaping maw, we can be on our way.” He brushed past him, smelling of leather, herbs, and a clean cold scent he suspects (now that he knows of Loki’s heritage), is the smell of winter.

The mages and The Allfather were already at the site of the shattered Bifrost when Thor and Loki arrived. He wondered, not for the first time, exactly when Odin slept. Perhaps that was why he needed the Odinsleep, to restore that which he lost governing the realms otherwise.

“Good morrow, Thor, Loki.” Odin nodded. Nine seiðkona formed a wide arc around the jagged edge, with Odin and Gungnir in the center. Loki moved to stand at the left hand of his father.

“This shall be slow work, Allfather,” Loki murmured as he looked at the raw edge. “Why not utilize the power of the tesseract to expedite the process?”

“The Bifrost was built long afore the tesseract was known to us, Loki,” Odin replied, “and shall be restored thus.”

Loki nodded briefly, but Thor knew from the set of his shoulders that he had more to say. This generally did not end well.

“Centuries shall pass before this is completed… I must say, I simply do not understand—“

“It is not for you to understand,” Odin replied sharply.
Did he enjoy riling father, or was it some residual lust for the source of power he’d used to nearly enslave Midgard?

Loki’s face shuttered and his lips slipped into a hard line. “Yes, of course.”

Odin’s expression softened and he placed a careworn hand onto Loki’s shoulder. “The tesseract is temperamental, unstable,” he said, “too influenced by the shift in the wind, or the mood of the bearer. I would not have this be the foundation of something so precious to us.”

“I suppose it is of no matter,” Loki replied evenly. His eyes were distant. “For what else do we have in abundance but time?”

“Indeed.” Odin turned to the women then, speaking in low tones. The conversation was dripping in subjects little understood to Thor. He strode over to Heimdall, ever at his post, even though his observation dome was destroyed, and nodded his greeting.

“Heimdall.”

“Your highness.”

“Can you…” Thor looked over his shoulder at his father and brother. Their heads were bent together and they were tracing runes on the edge with their finger. The symbols lit up, a sharp relief in gold and green against the pulsing rainbow. “How fare the Midgardians?”

“She is well,” Heimdall replied. “Your comrades in arms work to rebuild their realm…repair the damage your not-brother has wrought. Some work with her to forge a path between our realms using their… science.” The gatekeeper shook his head.

“Thank you.” Thor smiled. Though he missed her wit and smile, he was glad the Lady Jane was well. That gladness crushed against a hollow ache in his chest, for other than confirming her safety when Loki was on his rampage, he’d had little time to think of her. Loki had distracted him.

“Thor,” Odin beckoned him. “Come, we’re ready.”

Thor unhooked Mjölnir from his belt and stood at his father’s right hand. When they first began reconstruction of the Bifrost, he puzzled over why his father had required his presence. But it soon became clear. Odin hoped to harness the raw force to amplify the galðrar of the mages.

Twelve others summoned the spark within that was the gift of seiðr and Thor’s skin prickled with the crackle of reigned magic. The air beside his father was a veritable throb. Odin chanted lowly, and then tapped his great staff, and the others raised their palms, which were lit up in varying shades of blue, green, red, white, and the Allfather’s gold.

“Now, son.” Odin said softly and he raised his hammer and called his element. The air grew thick and heavy with the smell of ozone and unshed rain, crackling with electricity, and he felt the distinct patterns of each person’s magic curl around him, up his arm, and into the head of the hammer.

It might have been a fancy of his, but Thor would swear on the Tree that he could distinguish Loki’s from all the others. The weaving sensation curling around tender parts of his person, up his throat, down his arm, was intimate in a way they had not been in an age. His breeches grew tight and he ground his teeth against the cresting pressure.

“Now,” Odin said again, and Thor exhaled as he released the power that was harnessed in Mjölnir. The inky dark skies of the cosmos crackled, they were near blinded from the tree of lightening that grew above their heads, and then the power compressed, shuddered, and exploded. His nerve
endings caught fire and he felt the shadow of the seiðr he’d held just moments before. He tasted melted snow in his mouth, and shuddered. Stardust rained down upon them, along with a gentle cloudless mist, and the Bifrost pulsed, and grew. Not much longer than his foot.

Loki glanced down at the modest growth and snorted, breathless. “A bit anticlimactic, isn’t it?”

Patches of color were high on his cheeks, and his normally flawless hair was just on this side of disheveled. He was gorgeous, and the sight of him smiling hurt Thor. More than it ought to.

“What is that Midgardian expression? Rome wasn’t built in a day?” Odin smiled.

“Rome was not Asgard,” Loki countered. “Surely we can outpace mortals.”

The seiðkona and Odin grinned wryly. “Surely,” Odin agreed. He adjusted his stance and raised his eyebrows at his youngest. “Are you ready?”

“A moment,” Loki admitted. “I’ve not had to do much more than summon bandages these long months; I fear I shall have to build up my stamina.”

“This is the place for it then, brother,” Thor chimed in hoping to savor the banter while it lasted.

Loki’s face twisted. “I’m ready, Allfather.”

“Let us begin.”

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They worked through the midday meal. Countless times they summoned part of their essence and repeated the process until even Odin was breathless and called the halt.

“We need not spend ourselves in one day.” He panted, as they regarded the modest length of space they managed to produce from the very firmament. The sight was spectacular.

Odin dismissed them all save Loki, and Thor took his leave. Curiosity as to what they might discuss burned bright as fire. Once he might not have concerned himself as he knew he could corner his younger brother and sit on him until he divulged. But now, well, at the rate they were going he was going to run out of hair to be removed, and Loki might move up to disfigurement.

The rest of Thor’s day was spent in a relative calm. His body hummed, alive with the residual energy from the touch of magic, and this lightened his mood. He was a simple man with simple needs. He liked to eat, fight, and fuck, and for now at least he could satisfy two of those needs and then repeat the process before bed.

He exhausted his body sparring with his comrades, saw to his animals (his pet goats and father’s wolves), and visited the stables to sneak Sleipnir some of Idunn’s apples. By that time the sun was low and smells of supper permeated the air. He returned to his chambers to clean himself up.

The tension in the hall was noticeably looser, perhaps because Loki had not been seen by the palace inhabitants since dawn. His brother sat at the high table again, Thor noticed, but his mind appeared to be in another realm altogether. Once, he might have asked Loki what was troubling him so, but then it was likely that during the time when enjoyed the privilege to share his brother’s secrets, he would have been too conceited and arrogant to notice to ask in the first place.

Thus, he turned his attention to his trusted companions, laughed with his warriors, and tried not to stare at his brother.
A routine developed over the course of the next few weeks, in which Loki joined the others to restore the Bifrost bit by bit. And always, there was the heated familiar sensation of Loki’s seiðr pouring over him like warmed honey, leaving crackling trails of electricity in its wake. It was maddening, made more so by the fact that Loki had nothing to say to him before, during, or after each session.

Did he feel it as well? Or was Thor simply heightened to the sensation because it was new to him?

Was Loki doing something a purpose? Mysteries.

Loki’s obvious serenity only exacerbated his frustration. All noted how the trickster seemed the cat that ate the canary. Much of the lines of tension seemed eased from his slim shoulders. Many liked it not, and it wasn’t long before suspicious murmurings scattered among the ranks of the court, each theorizing that Loki was pleased because he was weaving some treachery into his craft. But none voiced these concerns to Odin, for to do so would be to suggest one was more knowledgeable than he in the ways of seiðr.

And that was not possible.

As such, it wasn’t long before tensions mounted between the brothers. Loki’s tongue was as acidic as ever, and soon the only times he seemed his usual caustic self was when he was in the company of his not-brother. There may have been an incident in which the pair was sniping so viciously that they made a young cousin cry, and the ladies of court did not take kindly to this, especially as Thor’s discomfort with the tears triggered an epic unplanned rainstorm on a very much planned picnic.

So when Frigga summoned the boys to tea, neither was wholly surprised.

“My sons, I’m afraid I must tear you from the task of the Bifrost for a short spell. As you are aware the harvest preparations are already underway, and our subjects are sending their tributes for the Yule festivities and your birthday, Thor.”

He couldn’t help but smile. He often thanked the Norns that he’d made his grand entrance during one of the most felicitous times of the year. One feast after the other marked the winter season, perhaps to escape the creeping cold.

“I bid you to visit the villages and graciously accept their offerings. Then, you shall receive the Yule goat from Alf a week hence.”

“Mother,” Loki began, “I can understand the necessity of the crown prince to receive the offerings of peasants and the goat herder.” Frigga’s lips twitched at this, and Thor considered being vaguely insulted. “But surely my talents might best be served elsewhere? It has been many weeks ere I served the healing houses.”

“You too are a Prince of Asgard, Loki,” Frigga reminded him gently as she sipped her tea, “and as such you need to be visible to the people. Asgard needs to see the princes reunited and harmonious.”

Thor shifted uncomfortably under her scrutiny.

“And I cannot think of someone best suited to the arts of diplomacy than you, dear.”

Once again, he suspected this might have been some form of veiled insult, but he was still pleased with the notion of retrieving gifts for his birthday to worry overmuch.
That is until he realized he’d be touring the countryside with Loki. Alone. His only satisfaction was in capturing the exact moment when Loki stopped preening from the compliments and realized his fate as well.

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“Hail, Tanngrisnir! Hail, Tanngnjóstr, you scoundrels!” Thor scratched his unruly pets behind the ears and they head butted him and tackled him to the ground in a pile of fur and grunting happy noises.

He rubbed their bellies, and giggled in a most unmanly fashion until Loki cleared his throat pointedly. The three of them looked up guiltily, and Tanngnjóstr pulled himself up with as much dignity as one could in the situation. Tanngrisnir demanded one more pet with a gentle head butt and Thor obliged before heaving his massive form up and dusting off stray strands of hay.

“Come lads, we must make for the countryside to retrieve offerings and a new friend for you!”

Loki unfolded his arms and snorted. “Don’t get overly attached, boys. He will not be of this world long.”

“Well we can’t all be immortal livestock,” Thor replied amiably as he fastened the goats with the harnesses for his vehicle. Tanngrisnir wagged his tail excitedly and limped-trotted over to the door to their pen, eager for an adventure. Tanngnjóstr bumped into his brother fondly, and followed him. If he noticed that Loki cast the goat a small smile and rewarded him with a fond scratch under the chin, then he didn’t let his brother see.

“Do you remember when you enchanted the goats, brother?” Thor asked, caught in a brief fit of nostalgia.

Loki’s shoulders stiffened slightly as they loaded their gear onto the small wagon. Which was, in truth, little more than a chariot.

“Of course I do, Thor.”

When Loki first came into his full power he experimented with animals. He studied how to mimic their form and to see what sort of devilry he might enact upon them. One of those experiments was to enchant the pair of goats gifted to Thor for his birthday with immortality.

“Any pet left in your care is sure to benefit from the ability to resurrect,” Loki had teased when he announced his intentions to Thor. Then, with a small smile that made Thor’s heart ache in remembering, he had murmured, “Think of it, these goat brothers shall be as we are, side by side forever.”

So they crept in secret to the goat’s pen and Loki began weaving seiðr. Loki enchanted Tanngnjóstr first, and then, to test his work, slit the goat’s throat. The goat let out a pitiful gurgle, sprayed ruby red blood on the fresh hay, and then passed out as Thor watched on, frozen in abject horror. They waited a few moments, and sure enough, Tanngnjóstr shuddered, and then reanimated.

Loki threw his arms up in uncharacteristic glee and then turned to Tanngrisnir, a manic grin on his face.

Tanngrisnir took one his brother, looked at Loki, and with a panicked bleat took off. The gods chased the wayward goat around in circles for fifteen minutes before Loki created the illusion of a pen and Tanngrisnir gave into the inevitable. Just as he moved to cast the enchantment, Thor, who designated himself as the lookout after the blood bath from Tanngnjóstr, barked that a stable hand
was approaching, and startled Loki. He tripped on the poor goat, injuring his leg in the process just as the enchantment took. Thus, Tanngrisnir was lame in one leg for all eternity.

Loki decided this was to be the goat that represented Thor.

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“I must say, I rather miss the experimentation,” Loki announced suddenly as they meandered down a dirt road hours later. The goats weren’t the speediest method of transportation, but they were definitely the most entertaining.

After the guilt for the trauma they induced on the goats wore off, Thor and Loki grew rather reckless. They used them for a number of unkind deeds, including, but not limited to, target practice. When they launched Tanngnjóstr into the main hall and he landed, blackened and bleating, on Odin’s table, their parents put an end to their torment.

So the lads began to have “accidents” in secret.

“What number did we leave count on?”

Loki was referring to the number of ways one can kill a goat.

“367,985.” Thor replied.

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They made good time passing through sleepy hamlets, waving at the grubby masses and accepting their offerings graciously. Thor noted that the crowds were much larger than they used to be, and theorized that the peasants had come to see Loki since his scandalous deeds. By the time they made it to the rolling countryside where Alf, the realm’s most prestigious goat herder resided, Thor’s shoulders were sore from hefting babies up in the air, and his cheeks stiff from his wide charming smile.

Loki seemed fine, though it did bring some small satisfaction that he was dusty and winced when Alf offered them a seat and refreshments.

“I’ve the finest goat you lot have ever seen, your Highnesses,” Alf swore as he downed a generous tankard of ale. “He’s gorgeous.”

Loki looked over his head at Thor and silently mouthed, “Gorgeous?” with a roll of his eyes.

“We thank you for your kind generosity, Sir Alf.” Thor beamed, biting back a laugh. In truth, his goats were the tastiest, so he allowed for the man to boast a bit about his stock.

“Come.” The herder stood up, and wiped his beard with a browned hand. “I’ll take you to him.”

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They ambled down the dirt lane to the barn where goat was kept. Tanngrisnir and Tanngnjóstr had been sent there to keep the prize company.

“Here he is,” Alf gestured to a pen between Thor’s boys, and they beheld the fattest goat Thor had ever seen. His little legs seemed too slim to support his sizable girth. He was like Volstagg with horns. The rotund animal looked up, chewing his alfalfa disinterestedly. Still, though he was of a size, his fur was gleaming white, his hooves were fine and well-tended, and his lashes brushed
against his cheek when he blinked.

“He is…”

“Fat,” Loki supplied wryly.

“Lovely,” Thor added quickly, glaring at his brother.

Alf cackled. “Aye, he is fat and lovely. He’ll make a fine Yule goat.” He patted his charge on a swollen flank affectionately.

“My good sir,” Loki began. “Much as I’d love to discuss husbandry until the small hours, my brother and I are weary.”

Something swelled in Thor’s chest to hear Loki refer to him as brother, but he schooled his face to look impassive.

“Oh yes of course,” Alf supplied quickly. “I’m afraid I’ve a bit of a full house. My wife’s kin are here, but I’m sure they wouldn’t mind sleeping here or in the stables—“

“Stables?” Thor frowned.

“Yes, your highness.” Alf wiped a sweaty brow, his hands trembling nervously. “It’s good enough for my mother in law, though my sister is with child—“

“Oh, no, good sir!” He waved the man off. “This barn is clean, dry and warm. A fine place to rest this eve.”

Loki gave him a look. A long one.

“If you’re certain…”

His brother opened his mouth and Thor grasped his shoulder giving him a squeeze hard enough to break bones. He was confident his conveyed his point.

“We are positive,” Loki said with a pained smile.

“You’ve done me a great boon, Princes.” Alf beamed. “I didn’t want to have to tell the missus I was putting her mother with barn animals.”

“No, far better to house princes,” Loki muttered, which earned him another squeeze.

The man laughed nervously and shuffled off, promising to bring a tankard of ale as a nightcap in a couple hours. He left them to their devices.

He was hardly out of earshot before Loki shoved Thor off his person with hiss.

“Of all the misguided, insufferable, kind things to do, offering to have us sleep in a barn has to be at the top, Thor.”

“We’ve slept in more uncomfortable lodgings,” he replied easily as he walked to retrieve their belongings from the wagon. “Do you recall that Inn, the Four Geese?”

“Yes,” Loki grumbled, following him. “I still have the sensation of fleas upon my person.”

“I still have scars from the wench—“
“Hildr,” Loki supplied with a grin. “Yes, I’d nearly forgotten about that. A most forward woman if I do say so myself.”

Indeed. Thor couldn’t sit comfortably for three days after.

“At least we can be certain that no fiends shall savage our arses tonight.” Thor grinned as he carried their packs and the obscenely large picnic basket Volstagg had prepared for them.

The corners of Loki’s lips curled and Thor tamped down something that might have been the shadow of desire.

Supper was a quiet cool affair. The barn was not suitable for fire so they wrapped themselves in woolen blankets and chewed in silence.

The day caught up with Thor and it wasn’t long before he felt loose, warm, and vaguely sleepy. Volstagg had done well in securing their food throughout the day, going so far as the label each meal in his fine script. For a complete dinner, he’d packed a dozen of his wife’s famous honey cakes.

Loki, who was known for his insatiable sweet tooth, perked up when he pulled the cakes from their dark home and moaned in appreciation.

“Bor’s balls, but I’ve missed her honey cakes,” he murmured as he unwrapped one and inhaled half in one bite. His eyes rolled back in his head, the noises he made were fit for the bed chamber, and Thor shifted uncomfortably and stuffed a whole cake in his mouth to prevent something rash from flying out.

The cakes were just as divine as ever; truly, Hilde was blessed in the culinary arts. The sticky sweet exploded on his palate, and when he swallowed he tasted and smelled a faint herb. Perhaps lavender. The good food, leftover wine from their skein, and quiet pooled into something companionable and loosened his tongue.

“Loki… thank you for accompanying me on this journey. I know you would have preferred to remain home.”

“You know nothing, Odinson,” Loki replied. “Besides, do you think I could have refused mother?”

Thor raised his eyebrows in a gesture to express his agreement. “She is formidable.”

“She is the best of all of us.”

He had nothing to say to this so he swallowed another hunk of the honey cake and washed it down with wine to occupy his flapping gums.

“Tell me something, Thor,” Loki began as he snuggled against Tanngnjóstr and regarded him with lidded eyes. “Do you think I am a monster for the deeds I have done since the coronation… or do you think I have done these deeds because I am a monster within?”

Thor regarded his not-brother, really looked upon him for several beats, trying desperately to collect his thoughts. He knew this was a test of sorts, the most Loki had spoken of the recent events ever—at long last, and he was determined to not fuck it up.

“I think…” He licked his lips and met Loki’s bright green gaze. “I think neither, Loki. You have done monstrous deeds, but you are no monster.”

His throat tightened with a well of emotion and he looked down at his dusty boots so he might not
behave as a woman and wrap his prickly brother in his arms, shake him, and then embrace him until
the man believed that he had his love and forgiveness if he might only take it.

“Heh,” Loki sighed. “If I am not a monster, then what am I?”

“You are Loki. That is more than enough to be worthy of forgiveness.”

His eyes cut him. “And what if I have no need or want for your forgiveness?”

Thor shrugged. Swallowed. “It is yours all the same. Always has been.”

His brother tore his eyes away, muttered something that sounded like ‘infantile sentiment’ and bit
into another of Hilde’s cakes.

“Oh, but I missed this.” He sighed again. “Although…” His eyes narrowed. “Has Hilde changed her
recipe? I detect a slight…aftertaste in these cakes.”

“Aye, I did as well. Perhaps she added lavender to the batter?”

“No…” Loki shook his head and moved to sit up with great difficulty. “Damn that wretch, these
cakes taste like…” He squinted. “These have been laced with hampr!”

Hampr? The common weed that Volstagg was known to smoke or chew on occasion?

“To what purpose would hampr serve us on the journey?”

“Because her husband is a meddling, dimwitted busy body, who is likely in league with mother in
some misguided quest to soften our mood so we might be on speaking terms with one another.
Instead we are—by the Norns the hay is winking at me!”

Thor cocked his head, and realized that the barn’s walls seemed to quiver. And then he realized
Tanngrisnir had been chewing on his hair long enough to have shorn off a few inches. He squished
the goat affectionately and smelled roses.

As this was impossible given the goat’s notorious flatulence, Thor knew Loki spoke the truth.

“—going to hang him from his entrails, I’m going to strip him naked in front of the entire court and
flay him within an inch—“

“Peace, Loki,” Thor rumbled as he shuffled closer to sooth his flailing arms. “We have but a few
hours of discomfiture and we shall be ourselves again.”

Loki stilled and looked up at him, conflicting emotions clear on his face. He looked as if he wanted
to embrace Thor, and possibly stab him.

Again.

“Until then, let us converse as we once did. Remember happier times.”

“The last time we took hampr you were found with your jewels dangling from a branch.” Loki
snorted.

“You should speak! If memory serves me correctly, you shared that same space and were equally
naked.”

The men recalled exactly why they were naked, and shifted away, but not quite apart from one
another at the same time.

Thor had taken Loki against a tree not far from the campsite of their hunting party. He clamped a large hand over his brother’s mouth and cast a warning glance at Loki to remain silent as he ravaged his neck and plundered his ass. Still, the little noises that escaped had shot straight to his cock, and stabbed at his petty little heart like so many daggers. After, he was prone to maudlin fits, and he’d wax poetic about how green his brother’s eyes were in the starlight. How fair his skin was. It was horrible.

It was also one of the last times they’d lain together, and just as before, they never discussed it.

Loki had grown hungry and wanted to pillage the nuts that were conveniently growing above them. They fell asleep not long after, too weak, sated, and full to move from the branches.

“Thor?”

Loki’s voice tore him from his memories and back to the visceral pain of their current status.

“Yes, brother?”

“I’m hungry.”

*

“Never in my long years have I been so shamed by my own kin!” Odin roared and lobbed another of the great tomes he kept on the shelves of the private study. “You were given a simple task, ONE TASK, and you return disgraced, after having offended one of the most respected goat herders in the realm!”

Loki swayed on his feet and a giggle escaped. “Surely father, a slight from a goat herder cannot be that much of an insult—“

Thor couldn’t help himself, the giggle escaped like trapped wind and he leaned on Loki’s shoulder as they snickered together.

“SILENCE! UNGRATEFUL WRETCHES!”

“Father, as it was a present in my honor, surely there is no insult in my enjoying it prematurely?”

“You have no idea the wrong you have done, do you?” Frigga accused, and that at least cut through the haze of Thor’s mind.

The last thing he recalled was Loki demanding food and finding there was none left save the last two cakes in the basket. He didn’t want sweets, he wanted meat. And ale.

Alf had not returned and Loki cursed him, his cellar, and his offspring for depriving a Prince of Asgard a proper meal. And then Thor had an Idea.

When they woke up they found that the goat they drew straws on to eat (who would resurrect himself from the leftover bones) was not Tanngrisnir or Tanngnjóstr.

They had eaten the prized goat. Loki was still clutching a bare, charred rib bone. He’d even sucked the marrow out. And Alf was… most displeased.

Though at least he finally delivered the ale. By pouring it on their heads and the smoldering fire they had risked.
“—thought you might learn to put aside the differences from the misdeeds on Midgard and before, but I can see that perhaps you are both too reckless, too puerile, to be left alone for even a day without wreaking havoc upon this kingdom. But know this; while you were disgracing yourselves, trouble has presented itself on the outer reaches.”

This sliced through the leftover fog of the hampr like a whet blade.

“What sort of trouble?” Thor asked.

“The sort of trouble the Mighty Thor was trained to subdue. More of that fiendish fire has been sighted, and I’ve dispatched a response. I would have you join them, Thor.”

Loki stepped forward. “Father, I would, if I may be allowed, like to join Thor—“

“No, Loki,” Odin sighed as he eased down into the only chair. “I fear this threat is too convenient, too much of a temptation for you, and as such there may be some trap fit just for your talents…and vulnerabilities.”

“Allfather, the witnesses report that this fire reeks of seiðr, why send warriors to do what a seiðmaðr is best suited for? Surely Thor could use my aid?”

His brother turned to him, eyes wide and more open than he’d seen in several moons and something twisted inside of Thor’s gut.

Unchecked Fear. The thought of how deep it ran, how craven he was in the face of losing Loki again, nearly buckled his knees.

Volstagg’s gambit had worked, and they enjoyed a tentative openness on the long trek home. Such a precious, fragile peace. So much so, that Loki had spoken more of this time in the void…and the accord he had come to with the Titan.

“Thanos shall see to it that I receive reckoning for my failure. It is not a matter of if, but when, brother.”

Thor thought of the unspeakable horrors the one known as Thanos could inflict upon his newly returned brother, and knew in his bones that this trickery, this seiðr, was precisely the trap Odin feared it was.

“Loki,” he began, and his brother made a disgusted noise and spun away from his outreached hand. “Think, Loki, there is merit to father’s concerns.”

“There is naught but distrust and suspicion masking as concern, just as there always has been,” Loki snarled and glowered. “You could never trust a Frost Giant to defend your borders, no matter that he’d been raised as Æsir, and even now that I’m chained like a dog and obedient to your sentence of servitude you keep me at arm’s length, lest I lash out like—“

“Peace, son,” Frigga interrupted gently. “Allfather, please, perhaps—“


And just like that, the delicate peace between then withered. Thor saw it in the set of his shoulders.

“Brother—“
“I am not your brother, Thor,” Loki spat as he snatched the great door to Odin’s study open. “I never have been.”

*

“You mustn’t brood so, Thor. It is unlike you,” Fandral complained as they rode through murky swampland.

“I am not brooding,” he rumbled, and stared blankly into the grey mists.

Under normal circumstances, Thor would have rushed to the aid of his men via Mjölnir but Odin had bade him to take reinforcements and first aid supplies, and once again he was part of a slow moving convoy. The air was damp and cold, he was saddle-sore, and there was a vague ache in the vicinity of his chest, under his ribcage.

He thought of Loki.

Odin sent him away immediately, but not before his mother gave him a sad disappointed look. He tried to find Loki before he departed, wanted to apologize but assure him he was merely looking out for his best interests, but it was a fool’s errand for a foolish man. Loki did not desire to be found, and when he could not delay any longer Thor left him to his solitude. The journey to the last known whereabouts of the men was a three day’s journey with hard riding, and they were, at long last, approaching the end of it. Thor could feel the prickle of some kind of seiðr in the air, and would on occasion smell the faintest whiff of brimstone.

But no one had seen the men or the beast.

It was dusk when they decided to make camp on a dryish patch of land between a circle of trees. They risked a fire as the temperature was dropping rapidly, and winter’s claws were already grasping far edges of Asgard. Tents were established; Thor assigned watch, and then retreated to his own tent for a much needed rest. He was weary, down to his bones, in a fashion that the fitful rest on their journey could not restore. His bedroll was as comfortable as the best featherbed back home after riding so hard and long, and after he inhaled a quick sup he wrapped himself in his roll and slept.

Slick twisting dreams plagued him, and he heard the sibilant whispers of an unknown voice. He spoke of treacherous things, babes snatched from their mother’s breast. Horses lamed, crops charred, and finally, finally described in vivid detail the intimate and thorough ways in which the voice would murder Loki, and Thor startled himself awake. He discovered the whispers were not a fragment of his fretful imagination, but a very real voice who was broadcasting though the entire camp somehow.

When he came out of his tent, hammer ready, the men were already drawing weapons and checking on the scouts.

They were missing.

The voice taunted them still. “Your friends have been murdered, just as you shall be, Æsir. I shall peel your skin back to expose the pulsing wet fruit within, and I shall feast on your bones as I squash your petty brains with my claws.”

“Silence beast, and show thyself,” Thor barked again. His men were brave, but like any Æsir they knew seiðr was a force not to be taken lightly, and this creature was rife with it.

The hidden beast gave him a dusty chuckle. “Odinson, methinks I shall savor you until the end.” Thor scanned the brush for signs of the sniveling thing, hoping a scale or some part of its flesh might glint in the cloudy moonlight and he might attack.
“—Slowly pluck out your entrails as I drag you back to your sniveling sire, and then I will destroy all that you love while you are helpless to intervene.”

“Thor.” Volstagg clasped his arm in warning. “This foul creature is trying to rile you.”

“He is succeeding,” Thor replied grimly.

“He hopes to lead you into the darkness, unprotected,” Fandral added.

“I do not fear the darkness.”

“Don’t you, Odinson?” the beast replied. “Your brother did. In the face of oppressive darkness he was craven, ergi, unfit to call himself a man. He begged for mercy, begged for the smallest glimmer of light to but carry him on a little longer. By the time he found it he was a ruined husk, a worthless shell. Still my master paid him a kindness and in return he failed him. My lord dislikes failure.”

“Your lord is craven for he sends others to do his work,” Thor snapped.

The hidden beast chortled.

“Your fire is entertaining. Your brother spoke of you in the darkness. Called for you.”

The words were as a physical blow to Thor, confirmation of every nightmare he had in the months that followed after Loki fell.

“And you were not there, were you? Unable to aid him, just as you shan’t be able to save him when he is mine.”

A red haze fogged the edges of the Thunderer’s vision, and he gripped Mjölnir’s handle so hard it creaked.

“A prince of Asgard deserves special treatment; his suffering shall be long, and messy. When he begs for something as kind as pain I will rip his beating heart out and shove it down your throat so you might at last—”

“ENOUGH!” Thor roared, as the blood rushed to his head and then across his chest like lightning. He raised his star forged weapon, called the heavy clouds that were above them, and lit the campsite up with a delicate but vicious net of lightening.

There was a hiss, a growl, and in the flickering light Thor saw it at last.

A magnificent dragon. In Asgard.

The beast was twice the size of Fenrir when Thor had last seen him, with a jagged crown of deadly looking horns. His eyes burned yellow, and he displayed an impressive row of sharp teeth the length of a broadsword. Thor was impressed as to how the great beast managed to hide so well with so little cover. But then he moved, his scales shifting in the weak light, reflecting the trees and shrubs around it, and he understood.

Somehow his scales cloaked him from detection.

Battle kicked into gear quickly and furiously. Though the beast was outnumbered he seemed unconcerned. With good reason. Their weapons seemed to have little impact on his diamond hard skin, whereas his fire melted through their best armor, and set their campsite ablaze. The stifling heat, the taunts of the enemy made Thor’s pulse race, and the haze of red nearly blinded him. His hands
shook, his limbs began to feel numb, and he lost himself. The beserker rage was upon him.

While his comrades hoped to find a chink on the dragon’s armor, Thor took a direct and dangerous route, charging the lizard and then allowing Mjölnir to pull him through the air like a ragdoll. He landed on the back of the beast, clinging to massive vertebrae as the dragon tried to buck him off. He righted himself and with a mighty roar, extended the heft of the hammer and smashed it down upon the bony protrusions.

The dragon shuddered, but was not slain, and his flexible neck twisted so his head might face him. There was a great intake of stinking air, and Thor narrowly avoided being blasted with the full force of the enchanted blue fire. One of his men was not so lucky, and all that remained was a pile of steaming flesh. Thor pressed on. The beast gnashed his teeth, a few grazed him, cutting through is armor like water, but Thor gave as good as he received, crushing each vertebrae as he moved. He was one with his hammer and his element, summoning lightening, Mjölnir singing, until they came upon the last of the Dragon’s spine.

Somewhere in his state he knew that the paralysis was starting to set in on the beast, but he pressed on. He would not be satisfied until the lizard was stilled for good.

The beast possessed but one last trick, and just as Thor was to smash its brains, the dragon twisted like a serpent, and Thor could not move away in time. The enchanted fire poured across his chest and arms, evaporating his armor, and penetrating his skin with liquid heat. Thor grunted, rolled, and as the dragon landed, winded from his last attack, he surged, jumped, and calling lightening, brought his hammer down onto the beast, right between his eyes. There was a shudder, and then nothing. Thor reached behind the beast’s bony crown and with a great pull, wrenched his head from his long neck with a pained grunt. The haze was receding, leaving a rising crest of unbearable pain. His vision swam and he was only half aware of his men holding him up.

“Thor, you must fly home now. Thor, can you hear me?” Fandral shook his head, and motioned for Thor to raise his hammer. He did as he was told, Fandral still holding onto his shoulders and making frantic noises, and in a rush they were flying across the fields, through the glens, back home to the palace.

People were tiny dots below him as the wind whipped his singed hair from his face, and he coughed, a funny metallic taste wet on his tongue. He realized it was blood.

Fandral was speaking to him, but all he heard was the ringing in his ear and the vibrations of the wind.

After what seemed like a pained eternity he saw the walls of the palace, and he tried to weakly direct them to a safe place to land. In the end his strength gave out over his mother’s favorite garden, and they plummeted to the ground, landing with the crunch of bones and the sounds of pain wrenched from their throats. Thor realized, perhaps, the pained noises were just from his throat, for Fandral jumped up almost immediately and looked to be screaming at someone. He tried to move to get up, but found he could not, there was a burn that seemed to have charred his every nerve ending. He hurt everywhere, and the fire seemed to originate within. It was nearly too much to keep his eyes open now that he knew they were home and safe.

“My men,” he slurred, and Fandral gave him a teary smile.

“Fear not, my prince. They will be well.”

Guards hefted him from the soft grasses, and he grunted. The slightest vibration was like a thousand hot swords, slaking him down to the bone.
“Tell mother I am sorry, Fandral,” Thor babbled, and then blacked out for a moment.

When he regained consciousness he heard the sound of his heart beating impossibly fast, and a pained hissing.

“I care not if it is the last one on all of the nine realms, Gerd. You retrieve it NOW!”

He cracked his eyes open and saw Loki looming over him, face pale as a sheet, and his hair a dark curtain alongside his jaw.

“Loki—“ he tried to choke out, but there was liquid in his throat, and hacking coughs tore through his body instead.

His brother shushed him, wetness falling on Thor’s face and encouraged him to spit into a bowl. All that came up was blood. He was eased back down on the table and then an apprentice rushed him with Gerd. Gerd carried a glass jar with a delicate white flower within. His mother was on their heels, and she made a choked noise when she saw him, and then spoke in low tones to Loki.

The apprentice looked tearful as she used a mortar and pestle to crush something sweet smelling, like the first flowers of summer. Loki wrenched the bowl from her trembling hands and gingerly placed the flower in the bowl. He turned his back to Thor, and through the white haze of pain, Thor gave the young girl an encouraging smile. He may die on this table, he started to realize. And it seems a shame that a girl should fret for him. He would have died a warrior’s death; he does not fear the golden halls of Valhalla.

The fire raged anew, and he choked in the back of the throat. He can admit he wished that the pain would go away. He felt numb on the edges of his perception and suspected they may have given him an elixir of poppy, but it didn’t seem to quell this fire. Darkness took him again, for a brief moment, and then icy fingers were on his face, soothing, pushing the fire back just a hair’s width, but it was a great mercy. He turned to the touch and saw Loki chewing on something rapidly. He did not sense anyone else in the room, though perhaps there was, and he watched through slit eyes as Loki put the contents of his mouth into the bowl, and after a few frantic crushes put the bowl down. Thor closed his eyes, and heard a delicate song full of longing like a haunted lullaby.

Golden light pierced through the paper thin skin of his eyelids and when he opened his eyes, Loki tilted his head back to pour a golden concoction down his raw throat.

“Easy Thor, please,” Loki pleaded as he choked a little. “Yes, that’s it.”

Fatigue, soul deep fatigue settled over him, and Thor sighed in between each pained gulp. He felt a deep sleep creeping upon him and wondered if it was to be his last. His brother grasped the sides of his face and leaned close. Thor could see colorless tracks of his tears and wished he had the strength to wipe them. His brother should not cry for him either.

“You fool,” Loki hissed. “It is not time for the fates to stop their spinning. I cannot believe the Norns would end you thus, not yet.”

He let the sleep claim him. The pain was fading; he could not feel his limbs, and his heart thudded in his chest in slower and slower increments. So slow he felt it might not beat again.

“Don’t leave me alone, brother,” he felt Loki whisper against his lips. “I—“

He knew no more.
Chapter 3: I love you as certain dark things are to be loved

Chapter Notes

Let me tell you that these 21 pages were a bear to write. The Loki muse was wroth with me. You have suspected booklegger to thank for the porny bits. She pushed me to add a little more. I was going to leave you dry. Sorry. Hope you enjoy! Next update might not be for 2 weeks as I’m juggling novel writing with school demands, and the whole family thing.

There was a time in Loki’s life when his world shifted out of focus except for one sharp point. Everything else was irrelevant in that moment, naught but the squalling babe between his legs mattered. It was both the happiest and most tragic moment of his life, and he loathed recalling it as a general rule. But as he watched his brother, his friend, and one time lover draw his last labored breaths, he couldn’t help but think of her, knowing that it was likely that she would watch the mighty Thor’s soul fly past her realm, to the shining halls of Valhalla. His consolation was in that at least there the two might be better acquainted in death than they were in life.

He silently prayed, despite himself, that when they considered his deeds that they both leaned on their forgiving nature, and understood that he only did what he must. What he believed was best. Even if it meant burning the remains his heart until it was a naught but cinders.

His bittersweet moment lingered as he silently and tearfully cleaned his brother. His body was still, but the light and fire within seemed to burn bright, taunting Loki. It was as if he was but sleeping. The others moved in silence behind him, removing the bloodied rags and bandages that had been used to soak up the life that poured out of him as he burned within. Loki washed Thor’s hair, still bitterly humming the song that was the incantation for the so called healing flower. He brushed soot and streaks from his face, and ran his fingers through the sweaty tangles. And then, when his brother looked like a pale approximation of the summer time boy that had been at his side for centuries countless, Loki waved his hand to shut the door to the healing room, curled up into a slim ball beside his brother, and held him, hoping to have just a little more time to breathe in his scent, feel the heat of his body, and tangle Thor’s thick fingers with his own, just as they sometimes did when they were children or after lovemaking.

He would not allow the tempest that raged in his chest to break like torrential rains upon his face. Instead, he thought of his next course of action, what plans he might make now that the crown Prince was...he would contemplate the manner of revenge he would enact even if it was the last thing he would do.

His mother found him lurking deep in his chambers a few hours later. He’d always been a liar, and he lied even to himself as he returned to the privacy of his rooms. It wasn’t long before the storm broke, and he found himself spewing every tear, choked gasp for mercy and relief from the poisonous anguish he’s suffered from for so long. He cried as he had done when he was still a baby in swaddling clothes, and then collapsed in a weary heap on his bed. And thus, Frigga found him, face still tear streaked, snot crusted on his nose, undignified pool of drool on the fine pillows. When he cracked his eyes she stroked the lank strands of hair back from his brow and gave him a teary smile.
She had come to grieve, he realized with jolt. And the wound was still too raw for him to do so. He struggled to think of a delicate way to send her off but was interrupted.

“You did it, son.” She whispered. “Your brother has awakened.”

Loki felt as if Mjölnir had struck him in the stomach.

“Impossible,” he had waited for more than an hour and his brother showed no signs of life. The incantation had failed.

“Have you so little faith in your own abilities? In yourself?” Frigga sniffled. “After all this time? Your seiðr was true, and your brother lives.”

He did not bother to feign composure, not in front of the woman who raised him. When the fresh sting of salt burned his eyes he held her and let the shock and sick relief wash over them.

* 

Loki resisted going to the healing rooms to confirm what his mother told him. By now, Thor would be awake and he might, The Norns forbid, remember the embarrassing display of sentiment. Likely his minions were crowding him, slathering with their unchecked glee that the Mighty Thor had not fallen. No, best to distract himself with other duties. Allow his brother to bask of the triumphant glory of his defeat of the enchanted dragon, his return, and healing.

Let the good people of Asgard forget that were it not for Loki’s seiðr and vast knowledge, it is likely that the Prince would have joined the others in Valhalla.

Loki hid from Thor and his recovery for as long as was seemly. He was still processing the near death, and his unflappable composure suffered. He had to best these…feelings lest he… Well. It was best to sort them out.

Dreams frayed his nerves when he caught snatches of sleep. He’d recall the swell of something enormous, bright-hot, and wrought from fire that was within. Hela. His only girl child. For the first week or so he skulked just as he was now, marveling at the pace of the...pregnancy. He knew that in this he’d gone too far, this was no wolf cub, or serpent pulled from firmament. This was the purest essence of Aesir life, meant to flourish, expand. Why wouldn’t she seek her own domain? Within two months she was ready to burst forth in a surge of pure life energy. He was so large he had to apply generous glamours to fool his companions on the rare occasion when the saw him. When the pains started he thought he’d die. A cold sweat took him, he was sick repeatedly, and then the tremors started. He felt his seiðr rise with the tide of pain, shifting, accommodating the force that was making her grand entrance. He lost his footing and could move no more. Somehow mother found him. Mother always found him. Sven didn’t even bat an eye as she held his legs and barked instructions. He didn’t look down, but felt organs shift, change, and grow within and out. He must have looked as panicked as a lame stallion for the crone took pity on him and gave him sweet herbs that dulled the pain and the edges of perception a bit. His only memory of the birth was the sensation of white hot fire, like the core of a star, sliding through him, leaving invisible scars in their wake.

There was a blinding orb of light between his legs, and when the light faded a baby was crying lustily. She was born with a head full of pale, near white hair and stormy eyes. Breathtakingly beautiful and right, and yet fouled and corrupted. Deformed, marked as other. And even before he knew of his heritage he knew that it was his fault.

These dreams haunted him first, and he took to every method of distraction. It was too much. For the first week he lurked in the libraries, catalogued his belongings and notes on seiðr again. Took full advantage of the state of dazed relief that all of Asgard basked in.
When he grew weary of libraries and his rooms, and the seldom used gardens, he made way to the spinning room. He’d not seen his mother since she came to tell him that his not-brother lived. In truth he had avoided her as much as Thor. He was too raw, and embarrassed now that she had seen just how shaken he had been. Odin had not summoned him in this time, perhaps because the reconstruction was halted thanks to Thor’s infirmit.

So he retreated to his mother’s rooms and the simplicity of spinning. He knew that it was likely that the spinning room would be empty when he decided to go. There was a feast to herald Thor’s rapid recovery and many were preparing for it. The Yule season was fast approaching as well, churning further excitement.

When he arrived he found the girl, Bryn, at her post spinning at a furious pace with a dazed look upon her eye. Loki felt the faint tingle of seiðr, and wondered if the young one possessed a bit of the Sight or even seíðr. Many women could See when they spun, perhaps because the action was in line with the threads of life, woven into the roots of the Great Tree, that the Norns tended to in the universe. But if Bryn was indeed a seer her trance did not last long. She focused and flashed a shy smile not long after he glanced at her.

Before tending to his post he peered at the quilt their mother was still working on. The threads seemed familiar, delicate woven patterns of gold, green, and red. The faintest outline of what may be figures was coming forth as well. But it was still too early to tell exactly to whom mother intended to give the quilt to. He nodded a curt greeting to the girl and sat down. It was not long after he began to spin that a familiar fog crept upon him. He was never much of a Seer, but, now and again, he’d have a trance with his scrying bowl. But this was much different. The fog was thick like honey and he struggled to stay conscious. His lids felt heavy and slid shut. Just then Sven arrived and, with a sharp rap on his knuckles, roused him from his haze.

“If you persist in spinning such a poor quality thread, all of our work will go to shit, Loki.”

_Such a delightful and charming lady_, Loki thought sarcastically, his face reinforcing this notion.

Sven gave him a gummy patronizing smile. “And Bryn? What are you doing, girl? You’re not supposed to be working here; your mother is beside herself with worry looking for you. Going on about fittings of some sort.”

“Oh—” Bryn gave her spinning a slightly confused look and cleaned up hastily. When she left Sven eyed Loki’s spindle and distaff.

Loki paused. “What?”

“Nothing you need trouble yourself with, whelp.” She sniffed, and then she shuffled out of the room.

Loki looked down at his spindle, then in the direction Sven and gone and shook his head. Curious. A feast was to be held that Thorsday in a fitting tradition to uphold Thor’s massive ego and offer a rousing excuse to get rip rollicking drunk and gorge on the finest vittles Asgard’s larder possessed. Frigga had accosted Loki the Odin’s day prior and warned that he would not lurk in his chambers or the library or some other fool’s errand. He would dress, he would arrive on time, and he was to pretend he enjoyed it.

Or else.

Thor was released that morning, two weeks from the time he was hauled into the healing rooms and, to Loki’s consternation, sought him out within the hour. Loki hid in shadow, watching his brother pound on the door to his chambers, demanding an audience with him. He’d lost a bit of weight
during his time in the healing ward, but he was every bit as luminescent and whole as he had been when he blundered off to the edges of the realm to defend it. Even his smell was fresh as a springtime tempest, peppered with spice. Loki’s mouth watered as his stomach churned in indignation. The pretty, gormless halfwit. Such a foolhardy mistake, taking on an enchanted dragon with seiðr he had little comprehension of. Just as it had occurred to him before, he warred with betrayal and anger toward his brother. Had Loki been there he would have been safe, whole, Loki would have found another way to penetrate the beast’s defenses. He could have returned home to glory. When his fellow Aesir bestowed their begrudging respect he would have relished throwing it back in their faces, for he needed not their fair weather praise.

Still, it was for naught now.

Thor lived to blunder headfirst into ruin another day. His brother had pried him from Valhalla’s siren song, and now he’d live to bask in the love and reverence of his people. And Loki was disgustingly relieved and thankful for this. These tender sentiments were precisely why he would avoid his brother until he reined them in and under his firm control. He would not and could not forget the wealth of slights, the countless time spent in his not-brother’s shadow. Little appreciated, taken for granted, cast out. Thor carried his love like a trinket, hardly noticed, and easily cast aside. He was not worthy, and Loki wondered, not for the first time, why the ashy husk of his heart couldn’t simply quit the notion and hate him properly. The resolution, especially if won through a brilliant act of trickery, would be the sweetest ecstasy.

It was some time before the Thunderer gave up his foolish request and sulked away, no doubt to preen over his beard, or have a maid brush his hair, or some such foolishness. When Thor arrived to the banquet halls later he was gleaming from head to toe. His armor blinded Loki when he broke with protocol and placed himself at his Brother’s right hand. Loki moved to protest but Frigga appeared seemingly out of thin air and gave him The Look. He swallowed his pettiness with a mouthful of boar.

“You have been most scarce brother-mine,” Thor rumbled as he daintily shred fresh baked bread nervously. His food was untouched and Loki vaguely wondered if the healers were certain of his full recovery. Thor normally ate like a Midgardian Oliphant. He could not tear his eyes away from watching Thor’s thick fingers twist each piece into clotted knots.

“I know this may be difficult for you to remember, Thor, but I have a duty to Asgard. Per the terms of my return.” He added with a hard edge to his voice. “I could not always be at your beck and call to read nursery stories and fetch you water.”

“I have not seen you since before—” Thor swallowed, and a haunted look flashed in his eyes. “They tell me I owe my life to you, and yet I could not bestow my thanks to you in person.”

“There is no need for thanks,” Loki replied quietly.

“I would still give it,” Thor snapped, and then, as if on cue, stood to smile at the first round of songs praising The Mighty Thor, Thor the valiant, who slew the cursed dragon.

Thrice did the warriors fill the halls with the chorus of their love for the Firstborn son. None laid bare the deeds of Loki the Lessor, the second born, false son, get of the enemy. The unwanted bastard that saved The Mighty Thor.

And despite the long experience with these slights, something rotten still churned within.

When the noise died down Thor shuffled to his feet again and raised his horn. “Friends, I bid you my sincerest thanks for this celebration, and the kind words. But in truth, I am no hero. The Norns were kind to me; Thor, who did not heed sound advice, and very nearly paid with my life. Nay, I declare
the honor of this feast ought to be to my brother.” He paused as the hall filled with hisses of surprise and disbelief, and fixed them with a stern, earnest look. “His vast knowledge and seiðr is the only reason I stand before you today.” He turned to Loki and bowed deeply. “Hail the Prince Loki Odinson!”

Someone chanted “Hear, hear!” There was a cresting rumble of approval, and then the bubble burst, and the men were back to casting him tense glances, and boasting of glory days gone by. The cheers, the oppressive thick air, scented with the tang of mead, ale, and bodies, made Loki’s head ache, and he remained only as long as was polite before begging leave. Frigga bade him to recite before he took leave, and the trickster composed a lovely poem regaling Thor’s victory over the dragon and death itself. He left with a swirl of his robes, the roaring cheers of the court fast on his heels. Loki Silvertongue, at his best.

He sought fresh air and enjoyed a short turn through one of the gardens, breathing the heady smell of jasmine and apple blossoms. The song of the crickets, the shimmering veil of starlight, and the gush of fountains soothed his frayed nerves, just as it had in youth, and it wasn’t long before he felt measurably improved. He was not weary enough for bed, and suspected sleep would only provide dreams of the child, or the new nightmares of what new twist of Thanos had in store since his ploy had failed. Thus he decided to visit his favorite corner in the palace libraries. Perhaps he’d revisit researching divination.

Loki’s prized collection of tomes was kept deep in the bowels of the library where the air was dry and cool year around. To access this corner of Valhalla one had to descend a flight of slick stone stairs. It was scarcely lit with hung torches but Loki was sure in his footing thanks to frequent visitations. As he approached the entrance, he thought he heard the faintest scrape of footfalls, but the person had taken their leave by the time he was close enough to investigate. It was of no matter; many scholars in Odin’s retinue had access to this library, and most kept late hours. He descended, quiet as fog rolling in, his mind already wandering the aisles, debating where to begin. Three steps from the end of the staircase he very nearly lost his footing as he stumbled into someone, sprawled at an unnatural angle.

It was Sven, the cantankerous crone who had harassed him since he was still on the tit. Her body was still warm; her neck twisted.

Loki cursed under his breath and then froze in place as he scanned the scene to unlock clues that might explain her demise. A book on spellcraft was tucked under her person. He’d have to move her to catch the title, but did not want to disturb her yet. He stepped over her and spied a nearby table, laden with even more tomes. He scanned the titles and found three on protective runes, two on curses. One book was a curious tome that detailed accounts dark magic: shape shifting, intellectual manipulation and possession.

What sort of trouble did Sven find herself in?

He took the last book and sent it to his chambers with a turn of his skilled hands. Just then he heard loud footfalls upon the stairs, and a familiar, albeit unwelcome voice called for him.

“Loki?” Sif, and from the smell of things Volstagg was in attendance. Good. Loki would have words with him regarding a certain incident involving hampr and goats.

“I am here, Lady Sif,” Loki drawled, the tone of voice at odds with the tangled pang of sadness that curled in his chest as he regarded Sven. He might have wished for any number of unpleasant ends to befall the woman in the centuries he’d known her, but he’d never truly meant it. Though she was mean as a viper, she had always been genuine with Loki, from the very start. And never unkind or unfair. That Loki suspected she’d always known of his true heritage made this all the more
meaningful. She’d regarded him as her equal, even when she knew he was but the unwanted get of the enemy.

He realized he was going to miss her. And then his desire to know who had done this multiplied considerably.

Sif and Volstagg bumbled their way down the steep staircase, and when the saw Sven both hissed in shock. Sif, predictably, cast Loki a dark look as she snarled, “What has transpired here?”

“I would love to know that as well,” he replied. “She was thus when I descended not 10 minutes ago.”

Volstagg knelt beside her and took her pulse, then clucked his tongue in disgust when he came to the same redundant conclusion that was self-evident. “She’s no longer with us. I would imagine she took a fall on these stairs late as it is, given her age.”

“Oh, I’d be surprised if someone did not shove her to her death. Feeble old bird. She had no business haunting these places at night when there was little light and no one to guide her.”

He would need to discover who was responsible for the footfalls he’d heard when he arrived. Sif and Volstagg were still staring.

“When I arrived I heard someone, but they departed before I could see.” Loki explained calmly. “She was…still warm when I found her. It follows to reason that the person who scurried away should, at the very least, know what happened.”

Sif grunted. “What did they sound like?”

“Soft,” Loki replied as he recalled the moment. “And light. Likely a woman or child. This was not a man’s gait.”

“Alright,” Volstagg rubbed his hands on his legs nervously. “Shall I fetch guards?”

“Please,” Loki replied as he crouched down, and scanned for more hints.

Her fingernails were ragged, and there was but a single strand of gossamer hair caught. This would not aide him, as fair hair was common for an Asgardian. He sniffed her, and caught a whiff of something sweet, almost baby-like. Powdery perhaps. This was no surprise, given her vocation of midwife. He examined her feet and noted that the hem of her skirt was coated in the woolen strands of fur that one acquired when weaving or spinning thread. He would visit the room before retiring.

The guards arrived not long after, The All-Father and Mother in tow. Odin took in the grim scene with a tired sigh, and gave his wife a gentle squeeze. She was too still, coiled as if ready to strike, and when she barked commands to the guards to canvass the area and see to Sven’s interment, her eyes flashed hot as coals. Loki bowed low as he begged leave, slipping his long fingers into hers to give a discreet squeeze.

He would not be the only one grieving the old goat tonight.

* 

He tried to follow Sven’s trail through the halls prior to the library. He accosted servants, but none were forthcoming with information related to what the crone had been up to moments before her
death. There was something sly and frightened in their faces when he harried them, and he was unsure if this was due to their fear of him, or fear of the person who had ended Sven. No matter, Loki Liesmith knew deception when he saw it, so he cursed them with clumsy hands and a rash tongue for a few days. When he found them again, they would no doubt suspect he had cursed them, and this was sure to encourage their tongues.

Loki’s meandering eventually led him back to Mother’s weaving room, and he tensed in the entrance as the place stank with foreign seiðr. His eyes scanned the room for the perpetrator, but all he found was Bryn, balled up in a corner crying. He eased into the room, fingers crackling with magic just in case and called out for the whelp softly.

She looked up at him, her face milky white in the moonlight, tear tracks gleaming. For a moment he thought he saw something dark squirm in her iris, but with a blink he saw nothing and suspected he was seeing shadows in darkened corners after the events of the day.

“What are you doing here, child?” He hissed as she unfolded herself and sniffled.

“I…Sven…” And more tears sprung forth.

Loki suppressed a sigh. Yes, he would imagine that the little ones would take her passing ill. He silently marveled at the speed in which news traveled in Asgard, and offered a silken green handkerchief to dry her eyes.

“There is no shame in tears, Bryn,” Loki admonished as he guided her from the room. He thought of his own need to sequester himself when he thought Thor dead and added, “And something to be said for tending to hurts in private.”

He placed long fingers around her shoulders and sighed. “Go to the kitchens and see what comfort they might offer you. It may not be safe for you to wander so this evening, at least until we discover who is behind all this.”

She faltered, and when he face flushed mottled pink he shooed her away. “Go on, I’ve my own affairs to tend do and I make a poor nursemaid.”

“Thank you, Majesty.” She rasped, and offered his handkerchief.

“Keep it.” He had no desire for the snot sodden thing now.

When he was confident her footfalls were far enough away he flicked his robe back, exposing his hands and with a cleansing inhale, let the seiðr flow from his hands, creeping like a vine in the hopes that he’d find some chink, some slight residue that might implicate who was behind the stink of magic he’d happened upon when he arrived. It was no great leap of faith to imagine that the culprit was likely who had spooked Sven, and further still, sent her to her death.

He found nothing he could pinpoint.

Frustrated he slunk back to his chambers where he indulged in a healthy dose of wine and his own blend of herbs to induce a dreamless sleep.

The shock of Sven’s death did not wear in the following weeks, but this had not succeed in eclipsing the relief and joy brought to the kingdom due to Thor’s triumphant return. Or so Loki had heard. He spent much of his time indoors, pouring over the books Sven had procured, studying in the hopes that he might link the pages she’d earmarked with a practitioner. The maids tittered that the Crown Prince was hale as ever, but speculated that perhaps the beast’s fire had dimmed something within,
for The Mighty Thor seemed nearly subdued since he emerged from the brink of death. He ate, fought, caroused with his shield mates as ever, but he seemed distracted. He might have wondered what the matter was, but he was avoiding his brother like the plague. Thor had not desisted in his attempts to have words with him, and Loki held steadfast in his refusal to grant him this audience.

They were at an impasse.

The only time Thor could see his brother was when they resumed work on the Bifrost, and they came together to practice seiðr together. Loki had intensely mixed feelings regarding these dealings, because, as with all things related to Thor, he both loathed, and longed for them. On one hand, the level of intimacy that Loki felt as his seiðr wrapped itself around all the secret tender parts of his brother was delicious. He had not felt so close and connected, all the senses transmitting at once in a breathless wave, since they were lovers centuries ago. He could taste rain and sunshine when he pulled the tendrils of his magic and essence from his not-brother, and nothing he imbibed after could wash it away.

On the other hand, the connection felt like ragged hooks straight into Loki’s cruel heart. Fleeting, childish reminders of a time impossible to recapture. The forced intimacy would do nothing to replace and repair countless hurts. He would still remain Odinson, first born, favorite, Crown Prince, valiant, brave, brash, golden, good, and positively stupid.

And Loki would hate him enough to wish him blighted from the universe, and love him enough to be too weak to follow through with the impulse for the length of his wretched existence.

Two weeks ere the night Sven had fallen and Loki had a lead. He transformed and heard chambermaid gossiping that there had been some sort of scandal in the apartments of one of the noble families. Their daughter had been plagued with nightmares, and in the last evening had soiled the bed in her sleep. Discretion was at the foremost of a maid’s duties, which is why he could always bank on their inevitable failure. He simply waited for enough clues to piece together which young noblewoman had taken ill, and from there, perhaps uncover the one responsible for Sven’s murder.

“Such a shame too, fine lass as she is, ripe for the plucking,” The elder maid, Nanna, clucked as they folded fine linens from what Loki assumed was the soiled bed. His mouse whiskers twitched as he sniffed to detect the faint tang of ammonia.

“Like as not her future husband shan’t ever know of this sickness.” Another hen replied. “Lady Ima is not likely to tell a soul, not even the healers, and you know we can’t utter a word.”

“Aye,” Nanna sniffed. “But these sorts of things out themselves on their own, you mark my words. This palace has eyes and ears where none seem apparent.”

Loki nearly gave a mousey little chuckle as he scurried off, through the worn cracks, and back out into the halls above, where he resumed his normal form. A pleased rush coursed through his veins. He had a quarry, and had discovered his shape shifting wasn’t as limited as he believed it to be. Perhaps The All-Father did not think he could do much damage as a rodent.

He really ought to know better.

Two days later he managed to corner Bryn, and as the maids had told, she looked worse for wear. Her lush skin had a sallow aspect, her hair dull and unkempt. She was staring intently at Loki’s spindle, which was in motion without a master. Loki called out to the foolish girl, but she continued in her path, her trembling hand outstretched. He leapt across the room in a fluid motion and pulled her back but she resisted with surprising strength. She groped, and grasped, hissing in her throat in her lust to touch the cursed spindle, and when Loki clasped his fist around her wrist, she looked to him with pleading eyes.
“It was me, Loki.” She choked. A cold sweat beaded on her brow. “I did it, and I can’t—

She shuddered, and then with a force more akin to a full grown man, she thrust Loki’s palm onto the whirling spike, pricking his flesh. Something cold and foul washed over him, and then seeped in his skin like icy water, and he dropped her as he reeled from the pain. The spindle’s pace quickened, rotating with a swiftness that was sure to spend it flying in a moment’s notice.

Bryn was on her hands and knees, panting like a dog. She looked over her shoulder at him, shivered, and then took on a new countenance. One he was all too familiar with.

The Other’s chuckle rasped dry as leaves as he pulled himself up. “And here I was led to believe you were the master trickster, craftsmen of chaos, and greatest intellect in this realm, Loki Laufeyson.”

Loki’s arm was numb, and when he called his seiðr he felt it blocked. He prayed it was but a temporary curse, even as he felt something rotten settle in the region of his chest and fan out.

“Think I have the time or inclination to concern myself with the affairs of those beneath me?” He replied, as he balled his fist. He hoped to drain any poison out with the flow of his blood. The tingling return of sensation confirmed this was a wise course of action. He kept his distance from the girl-Other, just out of striking distance.

“Folly upon folly,” Thanos’ henchman sighed with an amused expression clouding Bryn’s face. “No matter. I trust you have unraveled your mystery.”

“You killed Sven,” Loki confirmed. “With the girl. Possessed her somehow…”

“She was growing suspicious, hoped to spare you from this ill, though it was most unnecessary. Your not-father has graced you with his line’s protection, did you know that?”

Loki blanched as he did not.

“Communicating with you was barred to us…thus…She was a most willing host.” He rolled his shoulder as he sat at her station, and then picked up a ball of yarn to toy with her clumsy handiwork. “I but needed someone whose mind was most occupied with thoughts of you, and since Odinson is anointed with the same protections befitting his stature…”

Loki swallowed. “You have me now,” he held his palms up in a gesture of surrender. “Relinquish your hold on the child. We need not muddy these waters with more cowardice. I am here, and ready.”

“Are you?” The Other cocked a brow. “I think not, but I am most inclined to test your supposition.” He lunged with a snarl, pale hands outstretched to grasp, seize, and claw Loki, but he fell through his Shade and rolled.

“Games for children,” The Other growled as he righted himself. “They shan’t save you. My Lord shall have his reckoning, Asgardian. There is naught you can do.”

Loki wove seiðr, a thick net of words and Will, hoping to bait the Other to him again. If his timing was just so he could part the foul creature from Bryn. He had no plan beyond this, but felt at least he could spare the foolish child whose only sin was to care for a spiteful wretch. The Other attacked before the spell was fully formed, and Loki had to roll to dodge him. He bumped into his distaff and it wobbled and tumbled tripping Loki in the process. The Other was fast behind him, and when the Trickster fell back, the Other missed him, and impaled himself neatly on the moving spindle.
Black ooze dribbled from Bryn’s pale lips as Loki scrambled up from his sprawl and tried to right her. He saw the shade of The Other fade from her eyes, and silently prayed that his own spiteful misstep had cost him his life. It was thus for the girl. For she would not survive this wound, he could smell from the searing poison that not even Idunn’s apples could right her now. He wiped damp strands from her brow and tsked.

“Foolish child,” he growled at her as something painful writhed within. He was unsure if it was guilt or the effects of the curse. “Didn’t your mother ever warn you away from me?”

“Yes,” Bryn wheezed as she seemed to come back into herself. “But I would hardly be fit to fancy a trickster if I did as my mother told.” She gave him a grisly weak smile, and he watched the light dim in her eyes. She went still and was no more.

He brushed his lips across her temple and mouthed a silent invocation to the otherworld to treat her kindly, and then staggered to his feet. The room swayed, and spots winked in his vision. He had blood and the dark gore from The Other on his robes, and his hand burned like cruel fire. There was a disturbance and then Sif appeared with Hogun and a flank of guards. He might have been surprised to find them, but had known they were trailing him for weeks now. They put little stock in his word, and as such did not believe he’d been truthful when recalling how he found Sven.

He admired their tenacity, and it was wise to distrust him on general principal, but not in this instance. There was no better time to tell the truth but when everyone believed you to be false.

They took in the scene and stared at Loki for a long moment.

“Please,” he forced a laugh. “Do you think I’d deign to be caught had I been behind this?”

“Stranger things have been known to happen,” Sif replied darkly.

“Don’t flatter yourself to think you could decipher my intentions, woman.” Loki snapped. He’d little patience for her petty bias. Too much had been lost too soon. “Fetch this girl’s mother, we must notify her.”

“No need,” was a thick reply from the doorway. Bryn’s mother crept in, her fine robes whispering as she stared at her daughter’s prone form with tear rimmed eyes. “We…we’d known something was amiss but…”

She sank beside her daughter and cradled her head and let the tears come. A small secret part of Loki envied her liberty.

* *

He returned to his chambers to collect himself. It did not require a stroke of genius to deduce that there was something foul and wrong with the prick to his palm. He purged the immediate area of the poison that had crept up his arm to the elbow. His arm was clear of the poison but he suspected it would take some time for the numbness and pain to wear off. The creeping dread continued. Sour and thick like tar.

He ran more tests with his seiðr, his magic flared to full strength, which was a positive sign, but by the time he was finished with his examinations he was worn thin, as if he’d been working for days instead of the better part of an hour.

The fatigue remained, he felt as if his reserves could only but fill halfway. He consulted his books, crept back into the bowels of the library to research his symptoms. He found little to enlighten him, but he knew. He knew as sure as he knew when Sleipnir and Hela were coming, as sure as when his hand turned corpse blue on Jotunheim, as sure as he knew he’d given his Thundering brother the last
scrap of what was good in him. Thanos would have his reckoning, and this was likely a creeping ailment he would not recover from.

He stared at a pair of candles flickering on his desk. Dangled his fingers over the weak flame, and then, in a fit of pique, banished the light with a wave of his hand. He would rest now. As he strode across the room to his bed he caught his reflection in a mirror. His eyes shown with bare fear and he cracked the mirror with an uttered curse and slept.

* 

“You summoned me, All-Father?” Loki willed himself not to fidget with his good arm under his not-father’s one-eyed gaze. His left arm was weak as a newborn kitten, and his palm hurt still, but in the aftermath he’d not had the time to consult with the healers. His own remedies did little to ease the pain. He felt the heat of Thor’s gaze but did not look his way.

“I wish to hear your version of the events that transpired this eve,” Odin replied.

“Am I being accused of anything?” Loki fixed a poisonous gaze onto Sif. She tilted her chin forward.

“No,” Frigga interjected with a look to her husband. “I know my son, I know he has answers. I wish to fill gaps in Bryn’s mother’s account.”

So Loki told them. He recounted how he’d used the tomes Sven had with her when she perished. She suspected, he deduced, that someone had been cursed and Sven hoped to identify it and possibly administer a counter-curse.

“A foolish endeavor if I had ever heard of one,” Loki snorted derisively. “The old bat was a mediocre sorceress at best, she should have consulted with me—”

“She believed you were in danger, Loki.” Frigga replied gently. “She told me thus, but at that point she had but an instinct to go on. I should have pressed for more information,” She added quietly.

“Then she was thrice the fool I took her for,” Loki swallowed thickly. “For I would have appreciated knowing. After she perished, I hoped to find the root of this treachery. When my initial examination did not yield results, I took to research and waited. If there was indeed someone cursed, or administering curses, then the toll it would take on their body would be evident soon enough.”

“How might someone inflicting curses suffer for it?” Thor rumbled behind him. He rolled his eyes at his brother.

“Because magic is not merely conjuring. It is an act of balance, a give and take. What seiðr you put out, comes at a cost to your person. The more pure the intent of the seiðr, the gentler the toll. But dark magic, magic for ill will, of this nature and magnitude, would come at a high cost. I simply had to be patient. When I overheard chambermaids gossiping about a youngling who had been ill, I suspected I had found my enchantress. She fit the bill, as she was young, slight, and female.”

“Why did you suspect her?” Odin interrupted.

“I’d seen…Brynn in the days prior and she seemed haunted by something. I mistook her distress to be as a result of Sven’s passing.” He looked down at his hands and sighed. “I believe she might have tried to tell me that night. But I sent her off.”

“You had no way of knowing,” Frigga soothed.
Loki laughed humorlessly. “Didn’t I? I knew this was coming; I was foolish to believe it would end with Thor’s near demise. I hoped to find Bryn when she was alone, and chanced upon her in the weaving room. By that point The Other’s gambit was in full effect. He had me where he wanted, he simply needed to manipulate the situation to suit his will. And he did.” Loki flexed his left hand and suppressed a wince of pain. That did not stop Frigga and the All-Father from gazing at his palm anyway. “I confronted The Other. He confirmed that this was Thanos’ gambit, and then vowed to end me. We dueled, he had a misstep, and the child paid a dear and unnecessary price.”

In the hours that he’d slept he’d caught flashes of her pale face cold and still on the rushes. Her features melted into Hela’s and he woke with ice flooding his veins.

“It is as her mother said then. She hid her daughter’s condition for fear that it might ruin her chances when she came out this season. A prideful, foolish mistake, that cost her dearly and jeopardized the royal family.” Odin sighed wearily.

“You don’t mean to punish her, do you?” Loki’s eyes narrowed.

“Of course not,” Odin snapped. “Has she not been punished enough?”

Sif excused herself then, no doubt wanting to escape from the eminent confrontation between father and son. He ignored her thoroughly.

Odin rubbed his temple and continued. “She bears the weight of her kin’s death and your—“He cut himself off and fingers his ever present staff. “I wish to see the wound, Loki.”

He would brook no argument, and in truth Loki hoped the old man would deny his suspicions. So much had happened so close together he scarcely knew how to digest it himself. Loki opened his palm, and his adoptive parents peered at the angry welt that had already closed in his pale flesh. Frigga massaged the area, and then gave her son a stricken look.

“I have applied the usual remedies,” he said lightly, scaring at the small pink weal that indicated something far worse. “The poison the spindle was coated with came from the venom of a serpent of Midgard of all places. A powerful neurotoxin that induces paralysis. Temporary for a Frost Giant, thankfully.”

“Did you purge the wound?” Odin asked.

“Yes, that was how I deduced that there was more than mere poison on the spindle. My thought is that he had been enchanting it with a complex spell for weeks, and then it was masked. I had detected faint hints of seiðr but could not place it. I did not think Bryn was capable of such sorcery.”

A foolish, sentimental mistake. He knew better than to trust in the innocence of children.

“Whatever enchantment The Other utilized to fool me was thorough. Had I interrupted the progress well…” He shrugged.

Thor, who had crept closer when his hand had been put on display, gave his brother a sideways glance.

“What does this mean?”

“I am dying, Thor.”

The words fell like lead balls into a tense silence.

“How long, Loki?” Odin pressed.
“Provided I have a steady supply of apples, I believe I could…prolong the affliction for a year, maybe a bit longer. But that would be at great cost to my own constitution, and I am not sure how that in turn would alter the progress. As I grew weak from the use of my seiðr to prolong my life…I would hasten its inevitable end.”

“No.” Loki could smell ozone and feel the vacuum of heat around Thor as he frowned and grasped his brother by the shoulders. “Loki, this is madness, surely there is some way you could fight this?”

“I know not of one at the moment,” Loki could not bring himself to look at him.

“There is always a way.” Frigga soothed. When he gazed at her he saw the shine of tears pearl in the corners of her eyes and his gut ached. He would not tolerate their pity and premature mourning. This was not the clean end he’d hoped for, but at least he’d be free of Borson’s leash. Perhaps death would be a relief. Some said it was. At the very least he’d see his kin in the afterlife, for there was little chance he’d gain entry to Valhalla.

“What of the remedy you used to bring me back, Loki?” Thor’s voice trembled and the deep bass of a tremendous rolling thunder reverberated against the walls.

Loki was vaguely flattered.

“That flower was the last of its kind,” he shrugged. “Legend has it that others grown in the vicious wilds of Jotunheim, but it would be a fool’s errand. The Jotunns would not part with the only possible remedy to a bastard get that committed regicide, and to venture into their lands might set off another war. And there is no guarantee that the flower still grows.”

“We must be sure,” Thor insisted and gave his father a pointed look.

Odin tapped his fingers against this staff and sighed. “My son, as a father I cannot allow you to perish while hope still lingers that we might save you.”

Loki kept his own council regarding Odin’s role as a father, and rolled his eyes when Thor beamed.

“But I am a king first, and I cannot sit idly whilst you threaten the tenuous diplomatic relations we have with Jotunheim. We have done them a great wrong. I’d hoped to facilitate reconstruction in the spring; your discovery would most certainly prevent this. And countless innocents would suffer for it.”

Thor opened his mouth but Loki shushed him with a look. He understood all too well where his value fell according to Odin’s ledger.

“I understand, All-Father. Truly. I brought this upon myself as it is.”

Odin looked like he might say something trite and sentimental, so Loki hastened to quit this discourse and retire.

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He spent a week discreetly bringing his affairs in order. Though he had told his king that he would accept his fate gracefully he had no such intention. It was a simple plan, but bold. He would travel to Jotunheim alone save for his steed, and, if it still existed, retrieve the sacred flower. If he failed he hoped his kin would deliver a swift clean death an put a stop to his slow painful decline. If they refused him thus he carried a small vial of poison upon his person which he would use if the circumstances called for it.
By the time he had memorized the stable hands’ schedule, and sequestered enough food stuffs to see him through the long journey, it was high time for the Yule celebrations. With all the treachery and excitement that had transpired, it had nearly slipped Loki’s mind. But the dinner to honor Thor’s birthday was a fortuitous distraction. He would spend one last evening with his not-kin, and while they drowned themselves in spirits and rich food, he would quietly take his leave.

The festivities began at dusk, when fires were lit, musicians began their tunes, and the citizens of Asgard poured into the great banquet hall, glittering in their finest clothing, eager to pay tribute to their beloved prince. Gifts were piled high on several tables, children ran between the aisles giggling as they enjoyed treats Odin himself passed out at the start of the revelry. Loki wore his finest ceremonial armor, and the noise and excitement was nearly enough to distract him from the sinking hot pain.

Thor arrived with all the fanfare Loki expected, and the hall was in a pleased uproar. Even more spirits were flowing, food piled high enough to satisfy even Volstagg, and the man of the hour did his rounds, swapping stories, jests, and hearty back slaps with his people. Sometime around the eleventh course Frigga sidled up beside Loki and slid pieces of fruit onto his plate with a smile. He couldn’t help the grin that quirked his lips, as this was an old tradition dating back from when he was a younger, pickier eater.

“You should know that your father has adjusted some of the restrictions he placed upon you when you returned,” She plucked a grape from the vine and rolled it between her fingers.

“Ah,” Loki smiled wryly. “It wouldn’t do to treat his not-son like a prisoner now that a death sentence has been doled out.”

“Don’t say such things,” His mother snapped, and then her shoulders fell slightly. “I’m sorry. In truth, I should not admonish you; I am simply wroth that I cannot bear this burden for you.”

Loki swallowed a lump in his throat, well aware of the myriad of secrets she’d kept close to her chest for her youngest son, and then gave her slender hand a squeeze.

“My lady, I can honestly say that you have done more than I deserve.” He kissed her hand tenderly, and then, fighting a swell of unseemly emotion, took a hearty drink of his wine.

“That you think you deserve less is precisely why I did.” She kissed him and took her leave.

Loki lingered for another hour, the night was growing long and attendees had entered a subdued state of merriment when the food was settling in their stomachs, and the alcohol flowed freely in their veins. Loki knew he could depart now, take a detour to leave Thor’s present in his chambers, and then leave before first light.

Unfortunately the Norns had other plans, for his brother accosted him in the nearby gardens before he could make a clean exit.

“You have been avoiding me all night, brother.”

“I am not—oh it matters not, you’ll only ignore me.” He tried to sidestep the mountain of a man, but was blocked.

“It is my birthday,” Thor stated unnecessarily. Loki noted that his eyes were fever bright, as they often were when he’d attempted to drown himself in mead.

“I am aware, you buffoon,” he couldn’t even muster a hearty insult. He was leaving, and there was a good chance that if his plans failed he might never see him again. He was at peace with this in the
abstract, but the living breathing, smelly reality was another matter altogether. “Here, I was going to deposit this in your chambers but as you are here.”

He summoned the small box and presented it to his brother. “Many happy returns, Thor.”

Thor’s face lit up like a child’s as he peeled away the fine silken covering and then twisted the latch to an elaborate box. When he revealed when he opened the box was a ruby pendant the size of a woman’s palm. Finely wrought, and glittering even in the dim light.

His brother gaped, “Loki, this is too fine—“

“You are a prince of Asgard, and rightful heir,” he replied lightly. “You are also prone to trouble, and this, I suspect shall aide you. It is a protective amulet. Dwarf made, with a bit of design input from me.”

Thor turned the piece over, and examined the finely etched runes that swept across the back and around the border of the piece. Loki knew that he only recognized half of them, which was probably for the best.

He cleared this throat. “Yes, well. I have enchanted it with many functions, including a heating spell in the unfortunate event that you charge Jotunheim again and start another war. You need only touch it.”

So long as the brute waited until after Loki had quit his business there.

Thor swept Loki up in a tight embrace, and if both men trembled slightly then neither was going to comment on it.

“You have my thanks, Loki. This is a fine gift.”

Loki bowed, and then made to leave. He got as far as the last edge of the grass before Thor called him.

“Loki, wait.”

He closed his eyes and steeled himself for the risk of sentiment. “Yes, Thor?” He turned to face the Thunderer, and swallowed, for the skies above rumbled in warning as he did so. This did not bode well.

“I wanted to…” He pinched his face as he struggled to articulate. “I…”

Loki widened his eyes expectantly, and after a beat, patted his brother on the arm and gave a soft laugh. “You’re drunk, brother. Go to bed—“

Thor grabbed him with the hand he touched him with, and in a flash Loki was being herded backwards to the nearest wall and kissed. He felt like he’d been dreaming these long months in Asgard, and now, finally, he was lucid. He drank the long denied taste of his brother in, like the desert when it rains. Thor held him fast by one wrist, and Loki tangled his free (uninjured) hand in his hair, as their teeth and tongues became reacquainted with one another. Thor pressed his knee to Loki’s growing erection, and then two pairs of hands were clawing at breeches. Their hips rocked in frenzy, clothed cocks rubbing, heat and pleasure coursing until they hung on a precipice, and they paused for air only when both were on the verge of losing consciousness. When their foreheads touched, Loki startled as if he’d been slapped, the moment lost. He had to leave now. Thor’s eyes opened just in time to see the resigned look upon Loki’s face before he pulled Thor in for one last heated kiss, and disappeared into the shadows.
He expected his brother to give chase, but he remained, staring off in the direction he believed Loki had disappeared to for many long minutes. His fist gripped the ruby until his knuckles were white and he righted himself. Sif came for him, drawing him back to the hearth and the golden halls, and Loki turned away with a sick and satisfied feeling in his stomach.

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He waited until all the sounds of the household stilled before he departed. When the last stable hand made his rounds for the night Loki crept in the royal stables and made for his steed. As soon as he started to saddle the gelding there was a great annoyed whinny and Loki shook his head.

“Son, where I go you cannot follow, the journey is treacherous, and I would not have you perish for anyone, least of all me.”

Sleipnir snorted and pawed from his luxurious pen, and pushed his chest against the retaining gate threateningly. His overly intelligent eyes, an equine version of Loki’s own, pleaded back at him.

“Think of what the All-Father would do, child.” He tried again, but he could feel his will crumble. In truth, he hurt to leave his last child here in Asgard as he went to face certain death or restoration. But he would not ask the stallion to make that sacrifice for him.

He turned away from his son, already resigned, and removed the saddle. “Isak, perhaps another time then.”

The gelding looked at him with a look the suggested he highly doubted there would be another time. Loki appreciated his brevity.

“Sleipnir, you may join me only so far as I permit.” He held the horse’s face between his hands.

“Swear to me that you will obey my command to return home.”

His son hesitated for a few precious moments, and then acquiesced with a snort and nod of his head.

“Splendid.” He caressed his face again, and prepared his mount.

They rode in silence in the inky darkness. Loki took in the sights of the hamlets that flanked the palace, noting how the farmlands and thatch homes had changed in the time he was gone. He heard not another soul save for a few hounds and cats prowling the night. Three hours into his journey he heard the faintest sound of hoof beats behind him. He spurred Sleipnir harder, wanting to avoid any confrontation before he reached the secret place in the forest where the veil between the worlds was thin enough to manipulate. By the time he approached the location he desired he was confident that he’d lost any wayward travelers that evening. He was glad that thus far everything had gone smoothly. Even taking Sleipnir’s demand into account. He left quietly, and despite torturous… incident with Thor he found he might miss the banality of court life. He was even musing that he might even miss insulting Thor’s simpletons he called friends when he heard a twig snap.

He was surrounded before he could even drive Sleipnir on, and he wondered why his offspring had not alerted him. He had but a moment to wonder, for in the clearing Thor landed heavily, pulled by the will of his hammer. His friends crept out from the shadows, fresh steeds laden with supplies in tow.

Loki blanched, and then his temper flared. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I won’t let you go alone,” Thor rumbled without preamble. “I know what you plan, and I won’t allow it, not without me.”
Loki cut his eyes to The Warriors Three and Sif.

“We won’t allow you to cart him off to the wilds of Jotunheim alone.” Sif supplied as a way of explanation.

“You don’t trust me,” Loki said flatly.

“Not as far as I could throw a bilgesnipe.” Sif replied.

“Then there is at least some intelligence in your party.” He was more than a touch shocked that his normally transparent brother had managed to coordinate this without him catching on. And his stoicism must be failing because Volstagg grinned at him.

“We had Hogun arrange everything, once we realized what he was up to.”

Now that made sense. Hogun was one of the few people Loki found to be a bit of a challenge to read.

“We must leave now, before the household awakens and discovers our absence,” The man in question suggested.

“Wait,” Loki shook his head and exposed his hands. “You can’t possibly think I will allow this.”

“We will accompany you, Loki.” Thor stood in front of Sleipnir and placed a comforting hand on the stallion.

“And if you refuse, we shall return home post haste and inform Odin.” Sif added.

“I don’t think you’d fancy explaining to the All-Father exactly what you were up to.” Fandral smiled.

“He’ll likely inform Jotunheim as well,” Thor gently held onto the horse’s reigns. “Loki, please. Let us aide you.”

The wheels turned in his mind. He calculated exactly what would be necessary to subdue them, and then how much of a head start he could have before they could crawl home to Odin and squeal. The situation was complicated by the location the flower in question was believed to grow. The mountain was central to the realm, and dreadfully exposed. He cursed himself for not bartering something to borrow Freya’s raven cloak. Foolish, stupid, addled by sentimentality!

He stiffened and snatched the reigns back from Thor.

“It is your funeral.” He replied. “I shan’t be accountable for what should befall you on this journey. And I warn you: traversing the secret paths is not for the faint of heart. And I will not drain my energy to see to it that you remain intact.”

He generated a swell of seiðr around them, and with a surge of energy, parted the veil. “And keep up, or I will leave you.”

Sleipnir shook his head and lead the caravan of horses. The crooked path to Jotunheim sprawled before them, foreboding and barren.

“His gratitude is so endearing, isn’t it?” Volstagg grumbled as they followed him. He waited until the Ginger Giant was just within the boundaries before closing the veil so as to give him a scare.

His frightened yelp very nearly made up for Loki’s irritation. He’d have to recalibrate his plans, but luckily they had a long ride before they even brushed upon the borders of Jotunheim.
Chapter 4: In secret, between the shadow and the soul

Chapter Notes

A/N: It is done! I apologize for the delay. I have had a very rough week complete with family emergencies, hospitals, and serious worrying. But that is behind me now, so I offer this chapter for you. You must go and thank Suspectedbooklegger for staying up until dawn to beta this for me. <3 I hope you enjoy. In case you somehow forgot, this story is rated M for a reason, and this chapter starts to live up the rating.

Warnings for mentions of past (equine) mpreg.

The road between worlds was a dreary place painted in shades of grey. The terrain was a weak reflection of the land they had come from, a pale echo. They moved in silence, at Loki’s behest. He warned that their voices might attract unwelcome attention, and reminded them that he was in no mood to save them should they find themselves in some sort of otherworldly trouble. But Thor and his comrades were ill suited to slink in shadow and silence. After some time Volstagg called for a rest to refreshment. Loki sneered; his skin glistening with what Thor suspected was sweat but hoped was simply the ever present mists that choked the road. But the portly warrior would have none of his objections, and cheerfully told Loki thus as he produced one of his famous baskets laden with vittles.

Loki scanned the moving shadows some mile off, and then sighed. "As you wish, Lord Corpulent. But have a care to keep the noise to a minimum and make haste. I like not what shimmers on the horizon, and it seems closer than it was but an hour ago."

So they ate. Ale and flasks of wine were shared, fat loaves of bread and meat were devoured, and Volstagg settled against a hoary fallen log, preparing a pipe to "aid in digestion."

"I would hope for our sake that your pipe is not filled with hampyr, good friend." Thor smiled, though the memory of their last exploit with the herb was still bright and sore in his memory. "We all need our wits about us."

"No, please do imbibe and addle your brains, it allows for nature to run its course so much swifter," Loki grumbled as he paced the edges of their makeshift camp.

"And you wonder why many were so apt to discard your friendship when you showed your colors true," Sif said as she waved off Fandral's offer for another swig of the wine flask.

Loki rolled his eyes. "They showed their true colors. Sycophants who only tolerated my company so they might be closer to the Mighty Thor. I was glad to be rid of them."

That was not quite how Thor recalled it, and from the look of his comrades’ faces they shared his narrative, but none ventured to challenge him on this assertion. His brother’s memory of slights was long, convoluted, and faulty. But he was also the only guide through this foreign place and Thor had no desire to provoke him to spitefulness. As it was he was suspicious that his brother had consented to their company so easily.

Sif had given him a look he was now quite familiar with, the one that said, 'I told you--he is not to be trusted.' Ever was Loki Odinson a weaver of plans within plans. Webs of untruths, veiled truths, bold
truth, and deception so artfully constructed that it was impossible to untangle them. And now he was fighting for his life. There was nothing more dangerous than a cornered serpent that has been mortally wounded. Thor knew this intimately, and bore the scars from previous foolhardy exploits.

They cleaned up camp and Loki pressed on, while Thor stifled a rising tide of anger and crippling sense of failure. All the tenuous gains he made with Loki when they traveled together had turned to ash. Thanos had a gambit within a gambit, and his successful misdirection resulted in a child perishing, and very well may cost his brother his life. He blamed himself. Perhaps Loki should have come with him. He could have helped vanquish the beast, and better still; the move might have redirected the Other's interest from the child. Loki certainly would have prevented him from being injured, just as he had countless times before. They could have made the killing blow together, seiðr and Mjölnir amplifying and eradicating. Loki would have ridden high on the tide of victory. His return would have been triumphant; he might have even deigned to show one of his rare dazzling smiles. There would have been a feast in their honor. Thor would have regaled the attendees with stories of how Loki had been wise and powerful counsel. How they had smote their enemy together, and how Loki had saved him from grievous injury.

The spirits would have been flowing; Loki might have even allowed his tongue to loosen enough to admit he enjoyed their adventure together. And Thor would have known an opportunity when he saw one. He would have lured his brother someplace quiet, tried to pry his fingers into the chinks in Loki's iron clad reserve to see if the truths that longed to spill from his own mouth might be returned. Maybe they would have lain together again, as of old, using their bodies to say what both found so challenging otherwise. The thought made Thor's breeches constrict. The memory of Loki flush against his body was still so fresh he ached with want. How could something that was dormant and stifled reemerge so easily? He thought Loki's sweet taste, like spiced warm wine. The winter clean smell of the crook of his neck, the silken strands of his midnight hair. The throaty moan when Thor's teeth nipped the long curve of his neck--

"Are you listening to me?" The man in question looked like he was on the verge of a smirk.

"My mind wandered," Thor admitted. He was a vile person to allow his thoughts to linger on the pleasures of the flesh while on a mission to see to it that Loki's spirit didn't part with the body he was so fond of.

But he couldn't bring himself to consider a viable reality in which his brother would leave him. Loki Silvertongue was ever wily, as slippery as an eel, no one in the known universe could pin him down long enough for any serious censure to stick.

Until now.

"I said that we will be approaching patch of the road in which the trees will close in together. The shadow beings will hang heavy from branches, skitter across our path, and do all they can to lure us from the road. You must not touch them; you must not leave the road under any circumstances, understood?"

"What if you are taken?" Hogun fingered his leather belt idly.

"Then you turn tail and pray you make it back to the small tear I left behind," Loki replied. "You should not leave this road for anyone, least of all me."

"That won't be a problem," Sif promised cheerfully. "Now, shall we continue?"

"Aye," Thor gave his friend a warning look. "Let us see what sort of trickery this path before us
A half hour later they were indeed flanked by far reaching bare trees. The bark was ashy, their limbs drooped like an old woman's elbows, and now and again a stuffy breeze would disturb what straggling leaves remained. The brittle sound was uncommonly dreary, and Thor recalled conversations with ghosts that had been less frightening.

Loki steered Sleipnir by his side and raised fine eyebrows, interrupting Thor’s train of thought.

“You look ill at ease, brother.” He felt Loki’s eyes on him, but looked resolutely ahead.

“I do not like this place,” He sniffed and scanned the thick growth beyond the road. “The air is foul and a tension hangs heavy around us. Something is watching and waiting.”

Loki snorted delicately. "Surely you aren't suggesting that this road unmans you like that arachnid--"

"Surely not," Thor huffed. "I was merely reflecting on what a melancholy place this is. It could not have been good for your psyche to take these paths without someone to come along with you."

"Why?" His brother’s face sharpened with open hostility. "Is Loki not capable of fending for himself in the night?"

"No," Thor grasped his arm gently. "Because even the best of men, need friends to see them through the darkness."

There was a thick silence as Loki regarded him and then snorted derisively. "Please, spare me."

A half of an hour later, the thick press of trees was so much that what light could be had hardly trickled through the tangle of branches. With every step, Thor felt worse until he was sure he was likely to go mad. He was not alone in his misery. His comrades had stopped making conversation miles ago. Half looked as if they struggled to stay astride their saddle, one was comfort eating, and Hogun looked well…as grim as ever.

Then, the trees began to abruptly thin out, as wet grasses broke up the wall of forest. A patch of the weak light illuminated the clearing and Thor felt his heart soar. A squirrel scampered down a low hanging branch and chirped just in front of his face. So relieved was he to be free from the stuffy air and oppressive woods that he did not think of the eminent danger.

Loki paled. “Thor—“

The squirrel’s face melted, and behind the dull furry exterior a new nightmare emerged. Rows upon rows of razor sharp teeth gnashed, and the little head seemed completely dominated by an ever growing mouth. Thor jumped back but he was too late, and the monster lunged for his throat, teeth glistening, tearing frantically at his armor to reach the corded muscle beneath.

There were screams, but he could not focus on them, he was acting on instinct, on a drive that told him to pry the thing from his person NOW. His horse took a fright, he fell on his ass, and still the little beast persisted. He rolled and clawed, dodging the attacks from the shadow creature and Loki’s blasts of magic.

“You are trying to kill me!” He roared when an acid green blast razed half of his newly grown eyebrow off.

“Idiotic simpleton!” Loki snapped. “I told you to avoid the creatures and now—“
Something bigger than the mere squirrel must have been attracted to the commotion. Thor heard a low rumbling growl, and then a paw bigger than his face swiped at the pair of them. He rolled out of the way, but off the road and into the shadow. The change was immediate. The muted sounds of the forest were cut off, and in their place was stifling silence and slithering. Though he was but a few paces from the road, the will to move was so stifled, he might as well have been on the other side of the nine realms. Above him, the stars were blurred, the darkness of space seeming to weigh down heavily. The source of the sound emerged. He stood as high as Thor’s waist, and was well-muscled. Muted grey stripes mottled his fur, and teeth longer than daggers glistened when it growled.

Thor took advantage of the distraction to toss the not-squirrel off of him. The feline creature followed the movement and jumped as quick as lightening after it. Thor turned tail, struggling back to the unclear shapes he believed were his comrades. He felt and heard others fast on his heels. He was just to the edge of where the veil between the road and the shadows was thin when something large and sharp wrapped around his ankles and pulled him back from the light. He swung his hammer blindly, taking one down, but four more were upon him. They were lean wolves, who fought viciously. When he bashed one’s brains in and it fell to the packed earth, creeping shadows that resembled tar engulfed the carcass, leaving nothing behind. Thor was fairly certain that sludge would not refuse Aesir if given the opportunity.

He managed to get to his feet, frantically calling his element. The first wolf that attacked righted himself, and many lunged, just as the Thunderer called his lightening. A mighty play of light crackled across their skins, feline and canine alike, and they shuddered from the force of it. Thor smiled, and stepped back, only to find that his show of power had done little but slow them for a second. Their eyes lit up with the electric glow of his power, and when they took a step sparks flew. His attack had not harmed them. It seemed to have powered them.

He hardly had time to think of a curse before the pack, plus the overgrown feline, redoubled their attack. He fell like a ship under the crushing tide of their brutality, and panicked, not because he was facing his end—he would die honorably in battle, the Halls of Valhalla surely awaited him—but because he had failed to help his brother. Thor pushed himself once more, calling all reserves of his strength to fight back, and knocked a couple from him, only to be pushed down with two more.

One beast pinned him down with its great jaws, and another, the largest yet, landed onto his chest with a heavy blow. He was mighty, with teeth longer than Loki’s blades. Surely the alpha, and a king among wolves. His eyes shone bright, and he stank of death and the copper tang of blood.

“Odinson,” The wolf hissed. “I shall enjoy feasting on your entrails.”

He curled his lip back and moved to rip his throat out, but the blow never came. The shadows were filled with piercing green light, and the shapes upon him withered and disappeared. He tilted his head back and saw Loki above him. His skin shone silver with a blaze from within, and his eyes were pitch black, clean to the sclera, shining, and narrowed with pure fury.

The squirming darkness on the edges of Thor’s vision retreated as Loki wrapped his long fingers around his wrist and pulled with an almighty tug.

“I did not save you only to lose you again!” His voice as terrifying as gale winds, and creatures nearest them howled in pain, as if each word was a physical blow. His fingers branded Thor’s skin, so cold they were hot and the stink of his flesh sizzling filled his nose. They broke through the veil, back onto the road heavily. Compared to the darkness he’d just known, the road was as shining as the Bifrost.

Something slithered past the veil onto the road and Loki used a gleaming knife to strike it. There was a wail, and the tentacle shuddered, melting into stinking black ooze. Loki drew Thor away from the
puddle and then fell partly atop him, panting, and clearly exhausted. The maleficent sorcerer diminished.

Though Thor felt as if they had run miles, in truth they were no more than 20 feet from where he had first been attacked. His horse was still missing, but the others were safe and they gaped openly.

“Thank the Tree you have returned,” Sif was the first to overcome her shock, and she clutched his arm, smelling of lilac and metal.

“Please,” Loki rolled his eyes and pulled himself up, digging his elbow viciously in Thor’s thigh in the process. “Spare me this tender reunion. We cannot tarry here longer, our pace will be slower now, and I had no desire to remain in these lands after nightfall.” He began to unstrap packs from Sleipnir and added to the pack animal’s burden.

Thor felt a pang and recalled his steed. “Where—“

“He has fallen into the shadows,” Loki replied as he stroked his son’s face. “I do not think I need to elaborate on his fate.” He beckoned Thor with a gesture. “We must make haste. Consider this a close lesson learned. Heed my command now, you imbecile. Touch nothing, let nothing stray near you.”

Thor obliged, giving his equine nephew an apologetic smile before he mounted. Loki sat ramrod straight in the saddle, trying to defy gravity and force as much space between them as he could. It helped little. Thor was still unnerved by the lithe but solid weight rocking back against his torso and crotch. He was maddened by the smell of seiðr and Loki: a heady mix of ozone and frost. His saving grace was that as the thrill of battle cooled his veins, so too did fatigue settle heavy in his bones, calming him.

His mind wandered as he was desperate for a distraction from the haunting worry of the shadows beyond, the sting of Loki’s brand, and the illicit lust. Sleipnir was said to be the finest mount in all of Asgard, perhaps in all the Nine Realms, and as such the smooth ride encouraged Thor’s mind to wander. He thought of when his nephew was born. Loki had vanished for nearly a year after a debacle regarding the construction of a fortification wall. Thor missed much of it, off on a mission to prove his manhood, and when he returned, the court was whispering of Loki’s gaffe and suspicious disappearance. Mother moved through the halls with a drawn, worried look upon her face, and Father was tight lipped and tense as ever.

This was to be Loki’s first venture in court as a young adult, though in truth he was but on the cusp of manhood. He was little more than an overgrown child, all spindly limbs and earnestness with a round face and a voice that cracked when he spoke passionately.

Just before Thor left for his quest, he and Loki sat under the covers in his room, sharing stolen treats from the kitchens and boasting of the accomplishments they would both achieve over the summer months. Thor had swindled wine as well, and it wasn’t long before they were curled around one another, sleepily gazing at the stars as they spun overhead. Loki’s illusions had grown strong and to bedeck their ceiling as such could be done with little effort. He’d also taken up shape shifting, an advanced skill that seemed to come to him more easily than any other facet of seiðr. Father was particularly proud of this, and Loki shone under his sincere and hearty praise.

Thor was wondering exactly what sort of things his baby brother could turn into when said brother interrupted him with a furtive whisper. Thor shifted, resting on his hand and looked down at him.

“Come again?” He brushed a swath of hair from Loki’s eyes. He could see the faintest hint of the man his brother would grow into. Glittering green eyes, framed in long lashes, small pink mouth, high cheekbones, and snow white skin. Few in court were so fair of face, maid and warrior alike. “I
confess my mind wandered.”

Loki scowled up at him; his moods were increasingly mercurial since he’d entered adolescence. “And where pray, did your mind divert itself, hmm? Perhaps, to the bosom of a comely maiden?”

Thor blushed. “Not quite. I was reflecting on your ability to shape shift.” He poked him in the cheek, purely to annoy him, and was swatted promptly away. “You will be a great sorcerer when you are grown, brother.”

“Don’t remind me,” Loki grumbled. “Seiðr is hardly as appreciated as your brawn. I could conjure a dragon in the throne room and would be mucking stables for disturbing the peace, but should you bring the head of a dragon home from your quest, your praises will be sung for days—don’t laugh, I’m serious.”

Thor tried contain the grin, but failed, so he settled for petting his prickly kin. “Loki, I would appreciate the dragon, if no one else did. And likely you would be mucking stables because your display would include an assault on the assembled guests. You enjoy humiliating the lords and ladies overmuch.”

“Nay,” Loki sniffed as he burrowed closer to Thor’s shoulder, and placed his foot upon Thor’s calf. “I enjoy reminding them that when put to the test they are all just as craven and pedestrian as the next man. Few would actually rise to the occasion when faced with mortal danger and most that do won’t live long enough to hear their praises.”

Thor thought of his thirst to prove himself, of the recklessness his mother and Loki had scolded him for time and again. “Do you think I…think you I may do well with this task father gave me?”

“No,” Loki looked up at his with forest dark eyes catching Thor’s surprise. “I think you will do better than any would-be hero that came before you or shall come after. You were born to be loved, Thor.”

Pride and something new and frightening and wonderful swelled in his chest, and he could not resist the urge to squeeze Loki’s arm fondly. “And I know that you will show Asgard that seiðr is not a skill to belittle.”

His brother gave a sickle thin smile. Loki’s tricks often teetered on the edge of a knife, a hair’s breath away from cruel. It seemed the pranks he preferred best always revealed some ugly part of a man’s nature: his greed, cowardice, lust, or envy. He liked to bring a man low, and the ambiguity of his intent meant many were ever wary of Loki, even at such a tender age.

“I worry about this builder father had an audience with.” Loki broke the comfortable silence at length. “I do not trust him.”

“Likely father does not trust him either, for The All-Father is ever wise, Loki.”

“No,” Loki looked up at his with forest dark eyes catching Thor’s surprise. “I think you will do better than any would-be hero that came before you or shall come after. You were born to be loved, Thor.”

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“No one is infallible, Thor.” Loki yawned. “But I am no longer a child, I will aide him where I can.”

Later, it was his friends that wove the tale, telling him how his brother negotiated the building of the fortification wall and how the disguised Frost giant Thor had slain nearly outsmarted his clever brother. Days after Thor departed Loki advised the council to accept the foreigner’s proposal. He believed the terms of the deadline were such that the builder would never succeed provided his only aide would be one stallion.

Loki was wrong, and when the court knew that he’d made an error in judgment, censure rained down upon him. It was said Odin said nothing to reproach him, believing the weight of his mistake
to be punishment enough, but Thor knew Loki. What father did not say would burn more than anything.

Determined to prove the naysayers wrong, Loki lured the man’s workhorse from the work site by shifting into the form of a mare, and in doing so effectively remedied the situation. When the giant revealed himself and his murderous intentions, Thor arrived in time to end him.

But in the aftermath Loki was missing. Heimdall reported that he was blind to him, and this put the royal family on edge. Odin swarmed the realm with scouts, Frigga turned to her mystical arts in a vain hope to divine where he might be, but no one returned with news.

Thor felt like a core piece of him had wandered off. He sulked, raged, and stormed around for weeks until at length he announced to his father that he would use his newly acquired Mjölnir to seek Loki yet again. The king gave him leave. He searched every known hiding place that Loki would flee to when he was angry, and they were all abandoned.

Dejected, he spent a week in their favorite woods, hoping to catch some sign that his brother had been there too, and found nothing. The night before he would leave he went to a river near his campsite to clean himself before dinner. When he returned he found his camp had been disturbed by a wayward horse who was rifling though his supply pack. She was spectacular to behold. Her coat was gleaming midnight black, but her hair shone silver in the firelight. She was tall, nearly as big as a stallion, and she was clearly foaling.

He crept closer to her, hands up in a peaceful gesture, and watched her devour all but one of Idunn’s apples. When she finished she sniffed at the dried goods she’d scattered to the ground, and then sauntered away with grace that seemed unnatural. Thor did not need to be a sorcerer to know this beast was rife with seiðr.

“I trust you feel better now, hm?” Thor remarked lightly as he hunched down to put his catch onto the frying pan. “You may not know this but you have feasted on the finest apples in all the nine realms, my lady. By now you and your foal ought to feel the restorative properties of the Lady Idunn’s crop.”

He stood up and eased his way closer to her. She did not move, not even when he brushed his knuckles against her cheek. He took advantage of the closer proximity to check for injuries or some sign of mistreatment. He chanced looking in her eyes, and a tremor of shock rippled through him. He knew those eyes; he’d know them no matter what form they were in.

“Loki?”

The mare nickered, and rolled her eyes and Thor clung to her neck too stunned and relieved to say anything. He ran his hands down her back, checking her coat still for signs of any malady, before resting over the swell of her belly.

“It would seem you have been busy, brother.”

Loki the mare curved her neck and bit him soundly on the arm.

It took some convincing, but Thor managed to coax Loki to the edge of the palace grounds to wait until he could summon help. He sought his mother first, begging her to follow him with as little explanation as possible. When he told her it was regarding Loki, she dropped what she was doing immediately. He told her where to find Loki and made for his father’s study. Whatever seiðr had changed Loki would have to be powerful, but likely not beyond the skills of The All-Father. Like his mother, Odin did not hesitate to follow to the little grove not far from the palace. When he and Odin
arrived they found Frigga curled up with Loki on the ground. The great horse was on her side, her elegant head resting on their mother’s lap. Odin slowed when he beheld them, and then fell to his knees beside his son and placed a large palm over her belly.

“Ah, my son,” he murmured, as he carded his fingers in Loki’s mane.

Loki closed his eyes and loosed a weary sigh.

He spent the next five months in a country estate half a day’s ride from the palace. Thor refused to leave his side, and their parents returned with a story of how Thor believed he found a lead on Loki’s whereabouts and was hot in pursuit. In truth, Thor spent his days rambling to Loki to fill the silence, and his nights sleeping in the stables beside his brother. Sven and Frigga visited every other day along with Njord the horse master. Viðarr, a manservant of the utmost discretion, was also sent along to attend to Thor and see to it that he ate the food the All-Mother and her handmaidens produced for him.

Thor was painfully worried for his brother. He speculated as to what transpired to get his brother with the foal, his theories were sometimes playful, sometimes dark and angry. But the first time he actually suggested aloud that the stallion forced himself on his brother Loki threw him out of the stables and he slept alone in a bed he did not know.

He sent word for mother to bring a basket of Idunn’s apples and presented them as a peace offering the following day. Loki permitted him to brush his mane while he devoured them all. Eventually Thor worked the nerve to properly apologize.

“I spoke out of turn,” he mumbled against Loki’s strong neck. “In truth I am but angry with myself, brother. I am to protect you, and in this I failed.”

Loki simply stared at him with cool, overly-intelligent eyes. Thor looked away. “I killed him, Loki. Svaðilfari’s dishonorable master. It was his fault that you were missing so I took his life. I bashed his brains in with Mjölnir, did you know that? And when I did my blood sang, and I—“He swallowed thickly. “I killed three men on my quest, brother, and I did not enjoy the task; I did what was necessary to protect the realm. But I did not slay that man to protect Asgard; I murdered him to avenge you. And when he expired, I felt so satisfied.”

His confession fell quietly between them. Loki went very still for several long moments, and then tucked his head into his brother’s lap, sighed, and closed his eyes.

Sleipnir was born not long after, in the small hours of the night. Thor woke from a deep slumber and found Loki pacing and snorting restlessly. He summoned his mother and her midwives and Njord. The labor lasted well until after dawn, and Thor was coiled tight with worry. Loki was feral when he birthed, and did not want his brother’s company. So he fell back and watched. Sleipnir was breech, and that necessitated assistance and heightened the danger. Odin arrived just before the he was born, and father and son stood side by side and watched the youngest Odinson bring a life into the world. When the Sleipnir finally made his grand entrance, Njord hissed in open surprise as they regarded his eight legs.

“Never have I seen—“

“And never will you again,” Odin replied as he crouched in front of an exhausted Loki and aided in healing him. He had lost too much blood. Still he looked upon his foal with marked intensity. “My son, you have birthed a fine mount. He is lovely.”

Loki’s head lolled back onto the soft straw as the midwives cleaned the remarkable foal in stricken
silence. Njord and Odin had tense words in the shadows, no doubt regarding what story should be concocted to explain Loki and his son.

Thor held his brother’s head and watched Sleipnir nurse with bittersweet pride. “Your son is beautiful, Loki.”

His brother opened one eye and pointedly rolled it.

Loki remained a mare for three more weeks and then, one morning, Thor woke to find himself tangled with pale limbs, instead of the solid weight of the mare. The result was a wave of embarrassment and sudden raging desire. He tried to pull away as discreetly as possible, very cognizant of the bulge in his breeches, which had but moments ago been pressed firmly against his brother’s thigh. Loki had grown considerably in the year since he had last seen him in his Aesir form. He was nearly as tall as Thor, and the roundness of his face had melted into lean sharper features. His hair had grown, and fell over slim alabaster shoulders. He ached, and burned low in his belly at seeing his brother again. Even worn from the task of foaling, he was striking.

Loki must have felt Thor’s gaze for he slid his eyes open, gave Thor a sleepy grumble, and then rolled on his side. He was naked as the day he was born, and seemed to care little. Sleipnir nickered and ambled over to his dam, puffing hot air in their faces.

“You are not hungry yet, little one,” Loki murmured as he gently pulled the foal down to lie beside him. “Sleep now.”

Thor all but limped away, muttering about needing to pass water, but he did not turn toward their cottage and its water closet. Instead he tramped into the woods; far away from prying eyes, and sank against the trunk of a large tree, hands scrambling for the ties to his breeches. He hissed as soon as his fingers wrapped around his prick, sliding in hard dry strokes, and thumped his head back against the rough bark, as the first ripple of pleasure struck him. He did not see the glowing dawn pouring over the woods, only the sliver of green framed in black lashes, the curve of his brother’s shoulder, and his impossibly long, lean well-muscled legs. He thought of how Loki’s fingers tangled in Sleipnir’s mane, wondered what those long clever digits would feel like tugging his own unruly hair, and his whole body shuddered. This was a terrible taboo he was nursing, this lust for Loki. He had to quit it, and soon, lest he go mad, or worse still, bring shame to his father and kin. Even so, his hand worked, a nail swiping over the exposed head of his cock, and a groan that sounded suspiciously like “Brother” ripped from his throat as he spilled over his hands and onto his belly.

He washed away his shame in the icy riverbank, but did not return to his brother and the stable. He could not face him yet, so he went in search of Víðarr in the hopes that he might have something for him to do.

They would spend a few more months at the cottage; alone save for their manservant and visitors. Even without his lust, Thor was initially out of sorts with how to approach his brother now that Loki could answer, for he was changed. Thor could see his innocence had been lost, and wondered what sort of person had been left behind. Still, they would grow closer than ever and later he looked back on the time with a mixture of fondness and regret.

They shared their first kiss in the woods not far from the cottage while roughhousing in the nearby stream, days before their expected return to court. The sunlight kissed their bare shoulders, droplets clung to Loki’s raven hair, blinding pinpricks of light. His grin so open and shamelessly happy that Thor’s heart skipped beats.

So he nailed Sleipnir with a bucket of water to distract himself.
“Hey!” Loki huffed, jumping in front of Sleipnir, as the foal pranced around excitedly.

Though the horse seemed to enjoy the shower, Loki retaliated against Thor for dousing his baby, and they fell in the subsequent tussle. Their hips aligned just so, and Thor went stock still as he felt an unmistakable and corresponding hardness pressed against his own. His throat went dry as Loki gave him a small sly smile and then stared at his mouth.

Thor moved first, roused by the sheen of water on Loki’s lips, and the curve of his hair as it fell into his eyes. He palmed Loki’s neck, blunt fingers digging in slightly, and after a brief hesitation leaned forward and claimed his mouth. His lips were sweet as cherries, more so because this was forbidden, and when Loki gripped his shoulders and made a noise in the back of his throat, something snapped in Thor.

His fingers dug into Loki’s back as he rolled his hips slowly, breath hitching when the sparks flew from their sweet friction. Loki flicked his tongue against Thor’s bottom lip, and when he parted them; his reward was a gentle nip and mischief in his brother’s eyes. Thor took his neck in kind, grazing teeth over the unblemished skin, memorizing what spots made Loki tremble most. Red blossomed over Loki’s collar bone, and he nearly passed out as all the blood rushed straight to his cock with the surge of fresh arousal from the sight. He flipped, pinning Loki beneath him, and began to rut enthusiastically in the mud and water, their sloppy kisses swallowing up the sounds of their pleasure.

He was half way to climax when Sleipnir whinnied; the sound of underbrush crackling broke the spell. They flew apart, faces blazing, cocks straining, and when Njord found them they were fully dressed again (thanks to Loki’s magic) and coaxing Sleipnir from the cool waters.

Loki gave him a small promising smile as they returned to the cottage. He thought of the places they could sneak off to and finish what they started. They never had their opportunity. Frigga and her maids returned to check Loki one last time, and they ate luncheon together. And Njord prepared Sleipnir for his first journey; laying hay in the cart should the foal tire. Loki shifted to his mare form and walked with his son until they were within spying distance of the city. He and his foal rode through the streets of Asgard together. Word of his return spread, and soon the roads were choked with curious onlookers, eager to see how the young prince had changed in his absence, and stunned to behold the remarkable foal he’d found.

There was a feast, as ever, and many celebrated Loki’s safe return. Sleipnir was parted from his dam, now fully weaned, and Loki did poorly for the separation. He was more likely to be found in the stables than the library, and withdrew from the small circle of friends. They wondered what the foal and Loki had endured as companions together that made them so close. Loki never wanted to talk about it.

Thor visited Loki once in the late hours of the night. He was ever at his son’s side, curled up with him in the fresh hay, a far off look on his face. Thor figured these were the times when he was remembering the lonely days before he found him, but he never worked the nerve to ask.

He did not tear his eyes from the space and time his mind was occupied with when his brother arrived, but he addressed him all the same. “I come because it is peaceful here, Thor.”

He could see that. Their peers, the sons and daughters of the nobles and staff alike, were often seeking an audience with the prince. While he thrived under their attention, he still felt ungainly and dull when asked to regale them of tales of his acts of valor and might. He struggled daily with the suspicion that he would not live up to the reputation that preceded him.

“You need not hide in the stables if you crave solitude, Loki. And if you crave friendly company you
“And wade through the sea of gaping admirers that ever swarm you, brother?” Loki’s eyes landed on him with a cutting gaze.

He had to decency to flush under the veiled reproach. With the gnawing want for his brother, and his newfound celebrity fanning the flames of his ego, Thor dove into the sea of carnal lusts. Hoping in vain that each new bedmate might quell the longing. They did not.

The brothers had spent no time alone in the short weeks since their return, and as such nothing had been said to define what transpired on the riverbank.

Thor didn’t need a definition to know that he wanted more. He’d thought of little else when blessed with a private moment, and his wrists were going to require the attention of a healer if he couldn’t master his lusts soon. “I cannot choose who seeks my company. And they matter not; as theirs is not the company I am most desirous of.”

He shuffled his feet nervously and worked up the courage to—invite Loki to his chambers? Talk? Confess his rabid longing? He was not sure.

Regardless, Loki interrupted him. “Sometimes, I think of how simpler it would be to have stayed a mare, Thor. A horse’s wants are uncomplicated, their emotions true and devoid of artifice or subterfuge. Though they don’t love easily, they love with all that they can, and once earned, ‘tis a hard gift to return.” He looked down at his son, and something that might have been the start of a sad smile curled his lips. “Sometimes I want to change back, so I need not be bothered with living up to everyone’s expectation of disappointment.”

“What keeps you?” Thor ground out, hoping to stifle the panic he felt from leaking into his voice.

Loki too had more attention upon his return, but not all was the sort he wanted. The curiosity and scrutiny aimed at him was not well received, and so he withdrew. The dire consequences of his error in judgment, his use of seiðr, the unnaturally mature fashion in which he carried himself, only served to unnerve some. His brother hung in the shadows, shamed by his failure. Not even the mighty steed he’d ‘found in his travels,’ helped his standing with everyone. Vicious rumors spread, of a remarkable mare that had been seen fleeing from the palace grounds. Loki was a known shape shifter, and thus it wasn’t difficult to connect the dots. When confronted by detractors, Loki killed them with kindness or his vicious tongue. And what had been worse, Thor had neglected to reconcile his actions back at the cottage.

Loki gave him an inscrutable look, and then tore his eyes away. “I have my reasons.”

Looking back, he knows he failed Loki yet again. That time marked the start of the chasm that grew between them. He saw it opening, and he allowed it.

He had little desire to think on the subsequent years that followed, and the darkness that crept between them thereafter, so he shook himself mentally and paid attention to the road. Loki had kept a steady pace, but he did not push their steeds too far. Perhaps because he had a vested interest in seeing to it that the animals were well tended to. They made camp again at nightfall, about three hours ride from the borders into Jotunheim, according to his brother.

Loki was not willing to chance a fire this time, so they sat in a circle in the darkness, four of the five huddled close and laden with the warmest furs. Loki sat with his son ever at his side. His cloak was Sleipnir’s for the night. A gust of wind froze their cheeks and Fandral shivered and glowered.
“By the Tree, when we return I shan’t take my warm bed of furs for granted ever again,” he chattered as he rubbed his hands together.

Thor grunted in agreement as he passed the swollen flask of hard liquor to Volstagg.

“I should think it is a mighty presumption to assume that you shall return from the voyage at all,” Loki retorted mildly.

Sif scowled. “I am more inclined to favor his odds over yours, Laufeyson.”

“Sif,” Thor held his hand up to silence her.

“My lady you are inclined to favor Fandral in nearly all things except those areas which are nearest to his interests.” He showed a thin shining row of teeth, more threat than smile. And then slid his eyes purposefully onto Thor. “For that favor is reserved elsewhere. Ample seed tossed on barren ground.”

“Your area of expertise, is it not?” Sif shot back with a light smile which widened when she caught the flash of indignation cross Loki’s face. Thor resisted the urge to cringe.

Their age old squabble never failed to arouse discomfort in Thor. While he and Sif had a History, it was far, far, in the past, and was none of Loki’s concern.

“Peace, brother, sister.” He commanded, unwilling to have an already uncomfortable evening stray into unbearable.

“Oh no, allow Sif to continue, this is no quarrel, Thor. It is but a lively discussion between old friends and shield brothers.”

“Your understanding of fraternity is most unconventional, friend.” Volstagg chided.

“Clearly,” Sif muttered into the wineskin and shook her head. Loki glared, his fingers twitching. He wore the sort of expression that suggested he was contemplating setting fire to her hair. Which, given Loki’s past was not an unreasonable suspicion.

“Tell me, Thor. Do they have many warrior maidens on Midgard?” Loki asked lightly as he redirected the conversation. “I was under the impression that like here they are not unheard of, but a relatively new vocation.”

“Indeed,” Thor rumbled. “I have battled beside the Lady Natasha and others on their flying fortress. She is a formidable adversary on the battlefield.”

“Have mortal women changed much ere we last strayed for any length of time?” Hogun asked as he cleaned and sharpened his daggers.

“Aye,” he nodded. “For one thing they are literate now. Great intellect has been nurtured and flourished in the minds of women on Midgard.”

“Such as your lady friend?” Volstagg winked.

“The Lady Jane is a fine woman, and great mind, yes. She is an asset to the mortals.”

He flushed from a mix of shame and wistful longing as he thought of her. He had promised himself that he would find a way back to see her, and once again his familial obligations were in the way. Worst still, he had been so stung by the shock and paralyzing fear that his brother might not
overcome the curse, that the thought of visiting Midgard hadn’t even registered as a priority. Jane deserved better than this.

“Your understanding of a great mind is most limited, brother.”

“I should think not, Loki.” Thor gave him a wry smile. “I have spent millennia in the company of the wisest ass in all of the Nine Realms.”

His comrades chortled, and he might have been mistaken but he thought he saw Loki’s lip twitch with the start of a smile.

“Forgive me if I don’t find a mortal woman with half the intellect of a noble born Aesir to be remarkable.”

“I’d say this Jane must be a remarkable woman,” Sif mused.

“How so?” Loki narrowed his eyes.

“For she had but three days to change Thor for the better, a feat you could not achieve in a millennia. Perhaps this is because her compassion and manners are not artifice?”

Loki’s sat up coiled with irritation, disturbing Sleipnir. “You presume much. Who ever said I desired to—”

“Please, peace friends, I pray thee!” Thor put a hand on Loki’s arm gently. “I do not lie that the fair lady had a profound effect on me, but as wonderful as she is, she did not change me.” He swallowed, and stared at his hands, remembering how helpless and frustrated he felt upon being thrown to Midgard. “Her service to me was to thrust a looking glass in front of me, and the view was most unflattering. I saw for the first time how my pride, vanity, ego, and hot temper had nearly cost Asgard much, and hurt those I care for. I was bereft, no family, no powers, no titles, no home, and no friends.” He looked up at his companions and swallowed. “I had taken it all for granted, and now that I had an opportunity to start anew as a mortal, I dedicated myself to the service of others. I brought about the change within, just as I should have. This was the lesson father had for me. Ever does he have plans within plans, a trait which seems run in the family.” He cast his brother a sidelong glance.

Loki stared off at the horizon as the little group sat in reflective silence, and then excused himself. Sleipnir untangled his many legs and ambled after him.

As soon as his shape disappeared into the shadows, Sif huddled close to him and gave him a good shake. “This is a fool’s errand that we are on, Thor.”

“How so?”

“I fear that this is naught but an elaborate scheme and illusion. Your brother could lead us straight into danger and—“

“And what?” Thor pulled away from her, and gave his friends a questioning look. Their apprehension mirrored Sif’s. “He is dying; can you not see the weariness that grips him already? You did not see the horrors that lurk off this road. He saved me not hours ago! Truly you believe he would come all this way just to betray us?”

“He could know what you possess, Thor.” Volstagg hiss-whispered. “A source of power that immense must be a sore temptation here in these Nether lands—“
“Where it would be simple to disable and abandon us—“ Hogun added.

“Picking us off one by one in this chilly darkness—“ Fandral nodded.

“Enough!” Thor hopped to his feet, temper flared. “This is my brother you speak of, not some bogeyman from nursery stories. He is my kin, and unless you think his power is so great that he is capable of fooling the Allfather—”

“He is not your brother, Thor. He is a frost giant.”

The bogeyman he and Loki had grown up learning to fear and loathe.

“He has told you thus repeatedly. That must mean something.” Sif said gently, but Thor still stiffened as he’d been struck.

“We only mean to protect you, friend.” Volstagg soothed.

“I will hear no further accusation against Loki unless you have something more concrete than old rivalries and unsettled slights.” He tied his heavy cloak about his shoulders. “He is still an Odinson and a prince of Asgard. To do so again will incur the wrath of Thor, friend or no friend.”

He walked in the opposite direction from whence Loki had gone. With any luck his scandalmongering friends would soon be asleep, and he could curl up in his bedroll in peace. Free from their accusations and his brother’s saltiness. Perhaps they all were merely weary. The strain of the road, the drab light, the oppressive air was bound to wear on all of them. A good nights’ rest was what they needed and to be free of this false world. That at least, was on the horizon. He slowed his pace and took a cleansing breath. Soon. They would be gone soon. By morning they would be in enemy territory, out of one danger and headfirst into another. He only hoped the greater danger would not come from within, at the cost of their fellowship.
Chapter 5: I love you as the plant that never blooms

Chapter Notes

A/N: Well, it is finally here! I so apologize for the terrible delay, life caught up with me and then kid plague wiped us out. I will endeavor to not keep you waiting so long for the next chapter.

As ever, thank you to SuspectedBooklegger for the beta and the great pondering about monster genitalia. You'll understand after you read this.

The edges of the road between worlds thinned into mists as the beleaguered company clambered up a barren knoll to take in the journey ahead. A frozen valley sprawled before them, with no discernible road, or obvious signs of inhabitants. Far in the distance, they could see where the valley ended, and farther still, the jagged peaks of mountains. The lack of inhabitants and the expanse of exposed terrain did not ease Loki’s mind. Frost giants were known for their thorough acclimation to the wasteland, and were more than capable of executing an ambush. He would have to rely on other methods of perception than his eyesight if they were to get through the first leg of the journey. And that would mean depleting what was rapidly becoming a severely limited source of power from his seiðr within.

He turned toward his companions and stifled a sigh. “Let us continue.”

They led their steeds to a cluster of enormous boulders he had spied from the knoll. He had hoped to find shelter in the shadows cast by Jötunnheim’s moons while he did a bit of necessary reconnaissance. The tricky part would be to distract the brainless interlopers long enough to do his business without a host of unnecessary and grating questions. As the journey to their resting place had consumed several hours of the day, he was eager to discern a clear path settled before nightfall.

“Mind the horses, I shall return shortly,” He muttered as he walked to the boulder farthest from the small group.

“Where are you going?” Sif called after him.

“To pass water, my lady. Would you care to join me?” He sneered, and then ducked behind the rock.

He heard their indignant mutters and Thor’s shushing, but he pressed that to the edges of his mind, focusing instead on the change. He could adopt the form of a great land animal suited for the terrain, but it would take hours he did not have to see what the road ahead held. So, though it was a greater risk, he would take on the form of a bird, and pray none saw him. He felt his flesh ripple, bones quiver and then hollow out, and his skin, which was tight from the cold, shimmered, and sprouted oily black feathers. The transformation tugged at his reserves, and the air was biting and brutal to avian physiology, but he pressed on, flapping his wings to promote warmth and to shake away the tide of weariness that had come upon him. He hauled himself up, up into the bitter air, and circled high above his companions before heading in a direction he sensed was more or less north. He had studied certain landmarks of Jötunnheim prior to his departure, but the trouble with the hidden star paths is that there was never any surety of your destination once you arrived. You may intend to visit the westernmost portion of a planet, only to find you are southeast. The cool blue-gray expanse of land sprawled beneath him, but he saw no landmarks that could help to identify where he was. He
heard a sharp piercing cry, and saw, far in the distance, a great raptor with scaly wings. It fixed jewel
toned eyes onto him, and Loki’s heart leapt. He turned back toward the path he had been following,
squinting to see what he could make out before he made a retreat. There was some kind of dwelling,
large, crumbling, and likely abandoned, that was about three day’s march ahead. And far, far on the
horizon he saw the snow-capped peak he’d been searching for. This was a blessing and ill news, as
they were far from where he had intended to arrive, and it would take weeks to get there on foot.

And he wasn’t sure he had weeks.

He’d idled too long, and as such the creature he’d spied moments ago had gained on him. He shook
himself to attention, taking a daring nosedive, but his menace followed in kind. The raptor was well-
suited for the Jötunn climes, and he pierced through the cold as sure as a tempered blade through
flesh. But Loki, in his raven form, was no match, and every heaving gasp of air was like sharp
needles to his lungs. His wings were failing him. Before crashing into the frozen earth below, he
managed to pull up, and ahead of the beast. The raptor followed, so close Loki could feel the heat of
its breath. He was close enough to see his irksome companions, but too far for them to aide him, so
he cut figures in the air, trying to deflect the larger bird’s attacks. His muscles burned, his heart was
fit to burst in his chest, and his wings ached from the transferred toxins of Thanos’ curse. He feinted
to the right, but was just a moment too slow, and the raptor’s talons grasped and connected with his
leg. He cried out, little bird squawks loud in the glittering silence, and the others came running to
investigate.

He clapped eyes with his brother, who had his hammer in his hand but a breath later.

“Loki!”

One of the raptor’s talons sunk again into his injury, and the bird made to cart his prey away. But it
was not to be, for just then Mjölnir sang through the air, separating the top half of the foul creature
from the bottom. The raptor’s legs shuddered, and then Loki and the frozen carcass were free falling.
He tried to pump his wings so they might end up on a soft patch of snow, but missed, and every
bone clattered when he hit the ground. Thor and the others ran up to him, panting in the cold, and
Thor pulled the talons from Loki’s tiny thigh with delicate fingers.

Once free of the bird Loki willed his chest to cease its heaving, and after few long moments, was
calm enough to shift back to his original form. With the removal of the thick talon, the wound was
open, and his thigh was bleeding profusely. He was light-headed from the sudden blood loss, and he
suspected his wrist may have a small fracture from the fall.

“What were you thinking?” Sif screeched and her voice thundered and echoed between
the rocks.

“Mind the noise,” Loki hissed as he tried to sit up. Thor moved to help and he was too dizzy to
refuse. “Lest you desire to attract every predator in this land.”

“You assume you haven’t done so already,” Sif countered in a quieter pitch.

“Loki,” Thor tried to catch his gaze but he ignored his brother. He summoned his pack, silently
alarmed by how winded the simple act made him. “Loki, listen, what possessed you to take to the
air?”

Loki removed a healing stone, and unraveled clean bandages with trembling fingers. He crumbled
the stone over his wound, placed the bandages on the ice, and then dug for his healing salve. “I was
trying to see where we were,” he puffed out a gush of hot air as he spread the salve. It burned, and the healing stones had not fully closed the wound. He suspected this unusual reaction was due to the curse.

“Please, brother, allow me—”

“Taking to the air was a foolish and risky move,” Hogun frowned. “Someone could have seen you.”

“Someone did see me,” Loki grunted as he tied off the bandage. “That damned bird.” He was still bleeding, but he could not dwell on that for now. The blood would likely attract any number of dangers, the least of which was other Frost Giants. “We must move, now.” He allowed his brother to help him up. “The blood—”

A cacophony of noise rumbled through the valley. The winds had been blowing steadily since they descended into the valley, howling as it blew through crevices. But this was no wind that interrupted Loki. A series of grunts and howls filled the air, the horses reared in terror, and the deep bass from the lower wolf cries struck low in the belly.

“Damn.” Loki rushed to Sleipnir as fast as his injury could take him, the others followed suit. “The horses will not be an advantage,” Loki cried over the rising sounds.

“The hell they won’t,” Fandral scoffed. “We cannot hope to escape on foot.”

“We cannot hope to escape at all,” Loki snapped and then paused to listen. From the sounds there were 8 of them, enough to present a Problem when he wasn't injured twice over. “They will descend upon us in moments. These are Jötunn Dire wolves, the likes of which you should never hope to see again. They will easily outpace all but Sleipnir, and these beasts will perish.”

“What would you have us do?” Volstagg asked.

“Stash the horses and lead the pack away from them, and then return. My blood is what they seek, not horseflesh, and it will be easier to defend ourselves without the destructive thrashing of a terrified steed.”

They looked to Thor. Thor gripped his hammer tighter. “Loki—”

“Why do I bother offering my wisdom, since you are so apt to refuse it?” Loki growled, and then pulled Sleipnir away from the others. “Listen well, son.” He gave the stallion a nervous pat. “I care not if the others perish, but…you must hide where I tell you, yes? We will defend ourselves against this pack, and then I shall call you back.”

Sleipnir complained, harsh and panicked. Loki could see the whites of his eyes. “No, peace, son, peace. You are foolish to concern yourself—”

The pack was closer, so close he could hear their footfalls. He pulled at Sleip’s bridle but his offspring would not move. “I could force you,” Loki growled. He cast a hasty glance behind him and saw the others had repacked and were mounting their horses. Sleipnir stamped the ground nervously. Loki saw the glint of yellow eyes and the decision was made for him. “Damn.”

He pulled himself astride his son, gritting his teeth against the pain. Sleipnir easily caught up with the others, and soon was setting a hard pace through the ice and snow.

Sif, who was sharing a steed with Thor, peered behind them and gasped, “They are gaining!”

“As I told you they would—”
“Loki, not is not the time to say I TOLD YOU SO,” Thor roared, snapping the reins. “Make haste, damn you.” Thor growled. “Make haste or you shall be their next meal.”

The horses all cried out in terror, their coats already glinting in the moonlight from their sweat, but they pressed on. Ahead the ice plain disappeared, and they would have to veer left to evade falling over. Volstagg’s mount whinnied in pain and then reared. A wolf had caught up with them, and was trying to take the beast down by the flank. Loki loosed a dagger between the eyes. Another tried the same with Sleipnir and he bashed its brains in with a well-timed kick. The pause had cost them dearly, as the remaining 6 circled around them. They dismounted, guiding the spooked horses into the center of their half circle. Loki retrieved his dagger and grunted against the surge of pain that coursed through him.

The wolves were indeed sizable. The tallest was level with Sleipnir’s breast. Their claws were as long as Loki’s cruelest dagger. Steam poured from their matted fur. They stank of hunger and misery. Thor’s hammer sang as she connected with the closest wolf, but as soon as he did, three jumped onto him, their weight toppling him over. Mjölnir returned with a hum, knocking one off of her master. A rogue tried to lunge for Loki’s throat, passed through his shade, and fell over the cliff’s edge. Hogun and Fandral were keeping the remaining pack members off of the horses, and Sif and Volstagg seemed to enjoy taking on the two that remained. Thor’s hammer made short work of the pair that tried to get a grip in his flesh, and tossed them over the cliff’s edge with a triumphant laugh.

“Brother, you worry overmuch,” he panted with a grin.

“No,” Loki gave his thigh a squeeze. “You, as ever, see, but don’t observe.”

His brother frowned in confusion just as a fresh wave of distant howls rippled through the air.

Sif frowned and righted her sword. “I don’t understand—“

“These were just the scouts,” Loki sighed. “Unfortunately we did not silence them before they told the rest of the pack that meat had been found.”

Hogun cursed colorfully.

“Precisely,” Loki supplied. “We must not remain here. They will have a difficult time descending and that may buy us enough time to find a better position.”

So they scrambled down the rocky ledge at a painful and slow pace. The horses were spooked, nearly beyond reason, even Sleipnir was jumpy. The terrain was not kind to four (or eight) legged beasts, and it was a challenge to secure a foothold sufficient for their (or Volstagg’s) girth. By the time they had inched down the path they heard the echoes of too many footfalls to count. Snarls and the crunch of snow filled the air, and the horses made to bolt.

At the base of the cliff, the landscape sprawled into a valley, complete with a frozen stream bisecting the earth. There wasn't much for cover, and only a queerly shaped rock formation about a mile away.

“We should make for that boulder,” Loki gestured. “It shan't count for much, but…”

In silence they urged the animals on. The ground was just as treacherous and slippery as the cliff path, and the horses struggled. As they approached the rock site they came to see that it was enormous. So much so that scaling the rocks for cover might have been possible on their own, but with the horses it was near impossible. They were wholly exposed, and there was naught for shelter for miles.

“What do we do?” Fandral panted.
Thor looked around, eyes narrowing. “Brother, could we perhaps somehow move the horses—“

Irritation and fear chilled Loki’s voice. “We ought to have moved the horses to safety upwind when we first heard the damned scouts—“

“Yes, well that won’t aide us now, so help us to think!” Sif snapped.

“We are past the point of thinking—“

“Enough!” Hogun’s roar stunned them all. “We shan’t find cover here. Either we run or stand our ground and face the enemy. This petty bickering won’t aide us.”

Thor licked his lips and nodded solemnly. “I say we ride.”

“Thor,” Sif frowned. “The horses are already fatigued—“

“If we do not get them to safety they will be carrion.” He growled.

Loki eyed their mount; she suffered under the weight of the two of them. Loki suppressed a sigh. “One of you ride with me. You do her no favors with your combined bulk.”

There was a silent debate, and then Thor slid from the mount. “I will join you brother.”

Sleipnir gave his uncle a look that suggested he would have preferred to bear the woman, but he kept his equine peace. A moment later they were on the run, chasing Jötunheim’s setting moons, which were pale as the bones of long dead, but they cut a fair view as they ran for their lives.

They stopped twice to allow the horses to catch their breath and then they pressed on. Two hours later they had come upon a copse of trees and shrubbery. A jagged mountain range was within riding distance, but if they pressed the horses more they would not make it and their flight would be for naught. As such, they took an uneasy rest.

Loki’s leg was unbearably painful. They had not heard sounds of a pursuit for more than an hour, so he chanced more thorough attention on his wound and limped as far from the makeshift campsite as he felt was safe and fairly private. He dug out another one of a few precious healing stones and crumbled the glittering star-like ore into his flesh. The wound bubbled, frothy stinking blood was purged, and some of the inflammation receded, but it would not close. The nick in the artery had healed thanks to his salve and metabolism, but it would likely be weeks he did not have before the injury improved. He used magic to heal himself a little, but the strain after the hard ride and unending pain made his skin flicker dangerously, so he halted. Nothing save the touch of another Frost Giant and the bitter cold Truth from the Casket of Ancient Winters had broken the glamour the All Father had bestowed upon him. If he exerted any energy in maintaining it, then it was second nature, having been present all his known life. That something, the wound, or perhaps Thanos’ devilry, was so potent as to shake that from him, was a startling reality to face. He swallowed a few burning sips of spirits, chewed half his ration of bread and meats, and then tended to his son.

Sleipnir was weary, but not as worn as his cousins. Loki checked him over; slipped him his bread ration, coaxed him to drink a bit more water, and then sliced one of Idunn’s apples into (mostly) equal portions and dispersed it to all the horses. The restorative effects were immediate, but not enough to revive cramped shaking muscles and burning lungs. They needed a bit more time, and Loki knew, bone deep, that they had none.

He slumped against a tree, just on the outskirts of the ring of Thor and his fools, and stared at the most oppressive moon as she made her heavy arc across the sky. The reflection of her glow on the ice filled Loki’s eyes, the infinite ice crystals dancing in a slow peaceful glittering parade, and
somehow Loki slept.

He dreamed, as he had every time he chanced to close his eyes. The norm was nightmares, but this was far worse. It was memory.

When they were too young to recall, two dignitaries arrived at Asgard. They were siblings, Freya and Frey. Golden, lithe, and much removed from the concerns of Asgard’s princelings. As Loki and Thor grew they came to understand that the pair were mysterious cousins of their mother, come from her maiden homeland. Little was told of their history, even less of their future, and for a long while they were of no consequence to the lads.

But when Loki was on the cusp of adolescence, just before a fever struck and a fresh, raw power began to hum in immature veins, his perspective of the pair changed. Freya was to marry some old bore, Od. He was many, many, decades her senior, and in the months before the matrimony came to court hauling stinking beasts, and stolen glittering trophies from his exploits for his lady love. Freya received him with grace, humility, and a frozen distant smile. Even then, Loki found himself drawn to the suffering, those that were not quite a good fit for the fair halls of Asgard, so he tailed young Freya, curious to ken what she really felt about her overgrown hairy intended.

Stealth, mischief, and clever manipulation of the truth have been gifts developed in the crèche; it was not overly challenging to move soundlessly, even before he could alter his shape. Yet he found more than he’d bargained for.

She met her brother in a seldom used garden far from the festivities and dining. The air was heavy and sweet with the smell of jasmine and honeycomb, and bugs chirped in the bushes. Loki saw the young woman perched on a finely wrought stone bench, slim, milk pale hands folded in her lap. Her eyes were only for her brother, who was wearing a hole into the soft grass. Loki was too far to hear their conversation, but could gather that it was heated, given Frey’s wild gesticulating and flushed face. He stopped mid pace and grasped his sister about the shoulders, his face less than a hair’s breadth from hers. She carded her fingers through his pale hair, and he slumped into his knees, and wrapped his arms about her waist. After a moment’s hesitation, Freya slid her eyes closed and tangled her hands into his hair again. A strangled cry ripped through the air, and then Frey was on his feet again, hoisting his sister up into a bruising and very un-brotherly kiss. Loki recalled how his heart pounded, how he felt the faint stirring in his loins, and a sick indignant sense of betrayal.

They were brother and sister. That sort of thing was not unheard of but very uncommon, and Freya was betrothed to another. Why could she not marry her brother if it was plain that she loved him so? And why did she maintain the pretense with her intended?

He would have lingered to spy their lovemaking, but he heard scullery maids approaching and knew they would betray him should he be seen, so he returned to the dinner. It wasn’t long after that the twins returned, showing no sign of their tryst.

“You’re too quiet this evening, brother.” Thor had nudged him, and a piece of meat had fallen from his maw when he spoke.

“You are disgusting,” Loki shoved him away from stealing his food. “And I am quiet, because I am observing. We can’t all stuff our gullets and steal too many nips of ale.”

“Shh,” Thor sank low in his seat and punched his brother. “Always you hope to spoil my fun, Loki.”

“Always you made it too easy, Thor.”

They stared at one another for a moment in mock irritation. Thor was probably considering another
roasted leg, but Loki couldn't help but think on the twins and their secret lusts. Which led him to the
new unspoken something that stirred sometimes when he regarded his brother. How he felt when
Thor’s breath would tickle his neck when they slept together. The heat that would pool low in his
belly sometimes, when he smelled him on the bed linens. The rush and thrill when Thor’s sweaty
paw would grasp him and he would be carried off on some ill-advised adventure.

He loved his brother, whole and true.

Problem was, he was starting to consider the nature of that love. He began to suspect it wasn’t quite
normal or brotherly. And until he saw Freya, he was sure he was alone in this perversion. Now he
knew better, and he wasn't sure how he was supposed to process this new kernel of information.
From the looks of things, there was little hope, and only great scandal and hurt to be had in the
unlikely event that Thor could return his feelings.

Thor, was golden and perfect in all the ways that counted to the Aesir. Warrior-born, womanizer in
the making…, with a heart as good as was possible and a smile that could disarm all but the coldest
fish. Sometimes Loki wondered of his brother’s hands lingered a moment too long, but Thor never
seemed to acknowledge it, so he assumed it was the curse of the lovesick. And then stole Thor’s
nicked ale, because the realization that he was lovesick for a blundering troll such as Thor warranted
ale.

Late that night the brothers shared a bed as they had since they were babes and Loki braided Thor’s
hair as his brother recounted his exploits of the day. This ritual was a secret that only the lads and
their mother knew about, as she had indirectly started it. When Thor was just out of swaddling
clothes their father decided that his curls were to be cut. Thor, who was quite fond of his mane,
wailed for days and found numerous hiding places to avoid the deed. Finally his mother proposed a
compromise. She would personally tend to his hair, washing, combing, and braiding it so that it
would be neat and orderly in the morning. Loki, who was not yet out of swaddling clothes,
demanded his fair turn, and so, while their mother tended to Thor’s hair, Thor tended to Loki’s.
Several summers later Frigga begged off of the ritual, citing fatigue, and Loki volunteered to take her
place. He was young, but his mother’s secret smile did not escape his notice.

As ever, Thor only knew the most mundane and old news of court, but Loki humored him with
appropriate hums. When he finally ran out of breath Loki abandoned his beautification project and
shifted, allowing Thor to have his turn.

“Well, brother. I have offered my intelligence—“

“Scant as ever,” Loki snorted, and then winced when Thor gave his hair a warning tug.

“What news do you offer then?”

“Well, while some of us were hearing stories from goat herders and stealing kisses from milk maids, I
was following a real story.”

“Oh?” Loki could hear his smile. Thor’s fingertips brushed the side of his neck as he pulled more
hair to braid and he suppressed a shiver.

“Yes, but if I tell you this, brother, you must promise to not tell a soul.”

“I will!”

Loki turned his face within kissing distance from his brother. He met his eyes. “I mean it, Thor. You
cannot even tell your warriors and the woman. If word got out the consequences would be dire.”
Thor searched his eyes, seeking a falsehood, and after a moment swallowed and nodded. “I shan’t tell a soul, Loki. You have my word.”

Loki grunted and turned around. “Freya has a lover. He is not her intended. And when she marries Od, it will break their hearts.”

Thor’s hands stilled. “Why does her beloved not come forth then and ask for her hand?”

“The situation is delicate.” Loki chewed his lip. “Freya and Od’s marriage seems to be political, a resolution to some ancient conflict.” Loki was not certain of this, but was fairly sure this was true from the information he’d gathered from the gossiping women in the weaving room. “To refuse his hand might serve as the catalyst to disaster.”

“That is a travesty!”

“Yes,” Loki rested his chin against his bony knees. “I saw them, deep in the eastern gardens. They love one another very much, but will honor the arranged marriage.”

Thor was very quiet for several moments, and his deft fingers stilled. “I…I hope father does not arrange our marriages, Loki.”

Loki turned and gave his brother a sly grin. “Have you promised yourself to a particular milkmaid then?”

The pillow against his face was no less than he deserved, and soon the pair devolved into a fit of breathless laughter and the pulse racing joy one has from wrestling like puppies. They collapsed against the furs with rosy cheeks and a queer bittersweet ache spread in Loki’s chest. Likely Thor was saving himself for a milkmaid.

“Who is Freya’s lover?” Thor whispered into the moonlit silence.

Loki considered a lie, but offered truth. “Her brother.”

Thor made a choked noise and stiffened against him.

“Do you think that it is wrong?” Loki craned his neck and swallowed at the dark color of Thor’s eyes.

“Nay, tis unexpected is all.”

Silence stretched between them, thick like honey. Loki found himself fretting. The news was not just unexpected; it was taboo, just as he feared.

Thor fidgeted a moment, and then, “Mother says love is always a good thing, even when it comes from unlikely places, and she is the wisest person I know aside from father.”

Birds escaped from the confines of Loki’s rib cage and he lowered his lashes. Loki often suspected their mother was wiser than father. Sometimes the dimwit touched up something close to cleverness.

The following morning the royal family broke fast together in private. Odin regaled them with charming anecdotes about trade committees, exchanged harmless gossip with Frigga about her maids, and challenged the lads to game of hnefatafl.

“I think that with a hundred years’ practice you lot may even have a chance at besting me.”

Loki gave his father a mock glare, and Thor tossed a grape at the king, which earned an immediate
scolding from Frigga. Her admonishment might have held more weight were it not for the faces Odin made just beyond her sight. She caught him pulling a face and then all dissolved into laughter.

“I shall have to depart soon, boys.” The Queen announced as she suppressed a smile. “I promised Freya I would attend to her fabric selection for the wedding.”

“Let me once again state that I am infinitely glad that our roles are as they are, wife.” Odin shook his head. “For the matrimonial preparations are more involved than the logistics of war.”

“Hm, yes but the son of Bor would prefer war craft to weddings, wouldn’t he?” Frigga smirked as she wiped her mouth.

“Father, was Freya’s marriage arranged?” Thor asked.

“Of course, there are always negotiations when a person of noble birth is wed.” He replied.

“No,” Thor hesitated a moment. “I…did someone else chose her mate?”

Frigga and Odin exchanged a look. “Yes, their wedding has been years in the making, son. She is doing her duty in accordance with the responsibilities that accompany her rank.”

“Will I have an arranged marriage?”

Loki stared at his plate intently.

“Perhaps,” at his reply Thor’s head snapped up. “Oh, don’t look so frightened lad, you are young yet, and the possibility of marriage is a long way off.”

“I suppose,” Thor offered dubiously.

“Tell me this; if marrying someone could unite kingdoms, broker peace, or do some other general and great good for Asgard, would you do it?”

Thor swallowed. “Yes, I would not fail our people.”

Loki’s ears ran hot and he swallowed past the sick feeling in his guts.

“So long as I’m not betrothed to a frost giant.”

Their parents both sputtered into their drinks, even Loki had to chuckle, and Odin barked out a hearty laugh. “I can say with some certainty that I shan’t force you to marry a frost giant. Though your mother and I would not shun you, should you find yourself enamored with one.”

“Now that seems an unlikely turn of events,” Thor replied primly. Their father nodded, still amused.

“On this matter I am inclined to agree, son.” He gave Frigga a pointed look that would not make much sense for Loki until many years later.

Deep in the bowels of the palace, his not-father would shatter his very identity and forge it anew in the form of a people long held as undesirable monsters by the Aesir—his own brother would seem him as such. And the All-Father would patronize him by declaring Loki was his son, first and foremost.

Tremors roused him from his slumber and when he willed his eyes to open he was accosted with
Thor’s drawn face too close to his person. He shoved him back out of habit.

“What is it?”

“We must away, brother.” Thor gestured with his head. “The howling has returned.”

Loki blinked, his eyes burning and he realized why. The feeble Jötunn sun was breaking over the blanket of darkness, painting a dreary sky in silvery streaks of weak light.

“How long have I slept?” He cried as he gathered his belongings.

Thor had the decency to look guilty. “We…I had not the heart to wake you, you needed rest, your injuries—“

“You would have me heal only to perish but moments later when we were overrun? Foolish simpleton! We have tarried overlong!”

There was a flurry of movement as the small group left their small camp and made for the mountains. Loki turned back hoping to decipher how close the hunters were, and could see a shimmer of movement far in the distance. That he could see them meant they were too close. He urged Sleipnir on, hoping to put greater distance between them.

Hours later they were in the shadows of a mountain range. The crumbling monolith he had spied when they first arrived was also within an achievable distance, if they had several hours to rest and water their mounts. As it was, their best bet was to slink in the shadows of the mountains where the wolves were likely to have a more challenging time coordinating a proper attack. He told this to his companions.

“You say that with some trepidation, Loki.” Volstagg frowned. “What is the catch?”

“The mountains are not without their own inhabitants.” Loki eyed the mountain range and showed his palms as he shrugged. “Some may find us just as delectable as the wolves.”

“Odin’s beard,” Fandral muttered. “Is everything in this blasted wasteland savage, blood thirsty, and wicked?”

“Yes,” Loki replied coolly. “For their way of life and the game that once sustained them likely perished a thousand years ago when the All-Father took this realm’s heart as punishment for petty pillaging.”

The awkward silence sat between them all, foul as a pile of dung. Thor shook his head and waved the animosity away.

“Enough. We would do better with less chatter.”

“Your highness,” Loki taunted with a mocking bow. He spurred Sleipnir away from them.

The bitterest point of contention for Loki about this mess was how little of his plans had come to fruition properly since he embarked on this journey and how a large portion of the blame for this fell into his lap. Had he not destroyed the Bifrost likely they could have simply landed steps from the mountain, and this voyage would be little more than a high level scavenger hunt akin to that which they engaged in as children.

Now, because of his pride, his loss of control, and his foolish broken heart, he would have to walk a hard mile to get to the same place. He was determined to take it as a lesson against sentiment in the
They crawled along the ragged base of the mountains, sticking to shadows and speaking little, but it wasn’t long before the wolves found them. They sent scouts again, and though the group dispatched with them before they could so much as make a sound, more followed too soon for them to properly regroup. In what seemed like a blink of an eye the skies were raining enormous slathering wolves, which leapt from the craggy trails above them, down onto their horses and later, onto the travelers. Mjölnir sang as she ever did in the thick of battle. The others presented their favored weapons and despite the staggering force of assailants, they held their ground. But they suffered great losses. Sif’s mount, Volstagg’s, and the supply horse all perished. Sleipnir took a nasty injury in his neck that was worrying.

“If they are starving, why are there so many?” Sif panted, after they had pushed back another wave of a half dozen. Loki conjured a ring of fire to keep them at bay, but it was at the cost of his glamour. The pale Aesir flesh melted away, and the whorls and ridges of his heritage sprung forth, crisp against the deep blue of his skin.

“I don’t think they are all from the same pack,” Fandral declared. “See how they fight among themselves on the line?”

“Fandral is right,” Loki nodded. He drank from his water skein and sighed. “Likely the smell of blood and horseflesh called every predator within a day’s march toward us.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, ignoring the pinpricks of their curious gazes. None had seem him as such before. “A fine mess is all we’ve made of this ill-advised rescue mission.”

“There is no reason to despair,” Thor tested his grip on his weapon. “We still stand, do we not?”

The wolves made a whining noise and abruptly departed, and when a roar came down upon them, Loki silently cursed Thor’s perpetual optimism. He wondered what could possibly come to devour them now?

The answer was creature that was thrice the height of Thor, covered with a thick hide that looked as if it had weathered many battles. It loosely resembled a hybrid between a great reptile and a bear, but it was larger, and had an intelligence in his eyes that did not bode well. Deadly looking spikes stood proudly from his back, and when he dropped from his perch and on to his hind legs, silvery claws sank into the ice as if it was but soft well tilled earth.

With no experience with such a beast, the group began evasive measures, rolling across the ice to dodge his berserker lunges. Loki’s injury did him no favors and that the beast was immune to the deception of his shades did not help matters. Volstagg was tossed against a bolder with an alarming crack. Fandral was backhanded into Sif. Thor was pinned beneath the animal’s foot. Twice Loki managed to escape the swipe of his claws, but on the third attempt the beast won his prize and Loki found himself in his crushing grasp. Wild fear coursed through his veins, as the others screamed below. The grip increased around his middle and Loki was certain ribs cracked. He was too weak for magic, and could not reach his daggers. Acting on instinct, he called the ice to his hands and a long jagged point emerged. He sank his fist deep into the animal’s arm, groaning from the stink of its blood and the hot, juicy give of its flesh. The animal howled, Mjölnir flew through the air and connected with its shoulder, and Loki was dropped, once again, onto the unforgiving ice. He coughed and blood spattered onto the ground.

The beast lunged again, infuriated, and Loki drew both his of fists together, summoning more ice, and then sank them deep into the belly of the beast like a pike. He heard the hum of Mjölnir, a
sickening crack, and then the body shuddered and collapsed fully on top of him. The weight was oppressive and the stink of fresh blood made him gag. He tried to pull himself from under it but his legs were caught. He could hear a commotion beyond the bulk of the animal, the sounds of his companions shouting, and the crunch of heavy footfalls upon the ice.

Just as he allowed himself to succumb to the exhaustion and weight of his injuries, a large, warm, and decidedly blue hand, curled around his wrist and pulled him from the animal with ease. Loki got an upside down view of his savior, an enormous elderly frost giant. He gave Loki a sickle smile, revealing two rows of sharp gleaming teeth, and Loki noticed idly, that the man had hair, a feature he’d not seen on any of the giants before. The sounds of the wolf pack returned, no doubt hoping to put down the straggling group and feast on men and beast alike, and Loki forced himself onto his feet.

He cast a wary look at the still silent giant, uncertain if he should guard against him, and then spun defensively to face the pack. He saw the remaining members galloping across ice and snow, snarling and determined settle this. The last dregs of his seiðr flickered to life within, and then came forth from his hands, reestablishing the ring of fire. Then exhaustion took him, and the last thing he saw was a terrible and great lupine beast leaping over the fire and right for his brother’s throat.

When he woke he was covered in furs and a large rock was digging into his lower back. An enormous fire roared in front of him, the heat so thick it nearly burned his cheeks. He moved to sit up and found that every twitch of his muscle solicited terrible pain. Despite himself, he cried out. The noise drew attention, and in a moment’s notice, Thor was upon him making shushing noises.

“You mustn't over exert yourself,” Thor frowned and adjusted the furs on him.

“Where—what happened?” Loki croaked. Thor offered him a flask of spirits and he drank greedily from it.

“The elder giant who calls himself Skrýmir aided us,” Thor muttered as Loki surveyed their location. They were in fact, where Loki lost consciousness. A heaping pile of wolf carcasses burned on top of the pyre that was likely the remains of the unknown beast. “After you fainted from the sight and stench of that great beast’s stones—“

“I did not faint—“

“— he commanded the battlefield, and what wolves did not suffer under his great and competent hands, fled.”

Loki grunted. “What does he want? It is too fortunate that we would happen upon a friendly frost giant moments before we were to perish in a battle against our betters.”

“We would not have perished,” Thor grumbled stubbornly. “He claims he has no quarrel with us, and is on a journey to the palace of Utgard-Loki. It would seem he is some sort of lord and legend in these parts. Perhaps a distant cousin?” Thor added with a wan smile.

“Likely who I was named after, not that I would know. Wonderful,” Loki sighed. “So we are what? Political prisoners?”

“I thought so myself but Skrýmir claims this is not the case. He alleges that Utgard-Loki has no allegiance to Laufey’s descendant’s rule and throne. The elder says we might appeal to the lord for aide and supplies and be on our way, provided we are peaceful and humble.”

“You? Peaceful and humble?” Loki snorted. “Has he heard of you, Odinson?”
“Your jests are ill timed and unfounded, Loki.” Thor gave him a funny searching look and sighed. “I care not for the war-mongering I once enjoyed, and this trip is too grave to suffer more folly.”

“On this we are in agreement.” Loki pushed past Thor’s hold and sat up. “What shall we do then? Trust in this stranger and follow him to that mysterious stronghold ahead, or make our own way through the mountains?”

“We have little choice,” Thor replied. “Our supplies have been scattered or fouled from the battle, and what little we had we used to tend to wounds, the remaining horses, and, as a token of gratitude, offered the rest to our valiant stranger.”

Loki felt a surge of relief upon confirming that Sleipnir was whole and his wounds had been tended to. Then he glared at his brother and licked his lips. “Are you telling me, Thor, that you entrusted the last of our supplies to a stranger as a token of gratitude?”

Thor shrugged. “It seemed the fitting thing to do, upon discussing the matter of the other Loki. He is very persuasive when he presents his case. Like another Jötunn I know.”

Loki ignored Thor’s childish attempt at flattery and forced himself to his feet. “I care not that the old goat has a honeyed tongue, he cannot keep all the remaining food for the next day or so until we are led into what is likely a vicious trap.”

Loki limped across the camp to the hulking form of the older man, and held his finger up, prepared to give him a what for. But the elder giant turned a cool gaze upon him, and Loki’s tongue stilled. He felt like he was looking into a deep black well of countless history and truth. The crackle of deep seiðr rolled off of the giant and Loki knew they were not dealing with a simple wandering Jötunn. He closed his mouth and dipped into a low bow.

“I am told we owe our survival to you. I am in your debt, and I thank you.”

“Well met, Laufeyson.” Loki flinched. “But I daresay your life is not yet out of danger.” His eyes fell upon Loki’s hand and then back up to his face. “My master may have knowledge that shall aide you.”

“Indeed, but what might this master of yours require in exchange for this information?”

“There is always a price for knowledge had,” The giant shrugged. “But I don’t imagine you have much of a choice given the current situation, do you? Aye, you may have other plans within plans, but there is the delicate matter of timing, is there not?”

Loki swallowed, infuriated by his helpless position and the truth of the man’s statement, wondering how he knew so much. He bowed awkwardly. “I thank you again.”

“Rest now,” The giant commanded gently. Loki heard Volstagg’s mutinous muttering, wondering how they were expected to rest when they had all but scraps for sustenance in a full day after a battle. The giant did not deign to acknowledge the glutton. Loki returned to his bedroll, sickened by the realization that the walk across the small camp had exhausted him so. His hand throbbed, a new chorus among a chorale of pain and aching, and he ground his teeth to prevent crying out when he sank bank down.

He would follow this Skrýmir on what was likely a fool’s errand. Because the best trickster was a
man who sandwiched a truth between the lies. There was a strong chance his master may have
answers that would lead him to his potential cure, and his plans within plans were not yet beyond
reckoning any longer. For as long as he had a plan and a path ahead he would not yet yield on this
journey or to Thanos’ reckoning.
A/N: Okay, please forgive me for my disgraceful delay. I won't bore you with the details but suffice to say the last two months have been a doozy and it took weeks just to finish the second half of this beast.

And beast it is. My feeble compensation for the terrible delay. This one clocks in at 33 pages with a 12 point font single spaced. You're welcome. I hope. Thank you SO very much to SuspectedBookLegger for being so patient as you beta'd my fragmented pieces. <3

This chapter in particular steals willy nilly from Norse Mythology. That ain't how it's supposed to happen according to lore. There is a super healthy dose of angst and a side of melodrama. And I owe a great debt of inspiration to Red Ruin and the Breaking Up of Laws by Thehummingbirdmoth and Revelations by Astolat. Both handle the topic of mpreg very well.


Chapter 6: But carries in itself the light of hidden flowers

The summer before Thor entered adolescence a particular restlessness took him, and he and Loki spent half of their time atoning for some misdeed. He knew not what motivated Loki, but Thor had begun to feel a quivering in his veins, like his blood would boil if he sat still overlong. The call of the elements, which had always been a low pleasant hum, became a near deafening roar at times, and the slightest irritation would set him off into an almighty fit. Crops suffered that year because they were ill-suited for the barrage of flash floods his spontaneous storms caused.

Odin was fit to throttle him, and even Frigga looked weary, and the royal parents decided to occupy their eldest with menial tasks throughout the safe borders of Asgard. He was, in essence, a glorified lackey. Initially Thor resisted the requests to deliver a fine pelt, his mother’s embroidery, a droll missive and the like to shepherds, Thanes, and countless citizens in between. But, after a few trips, he came to enjoy the open road, basked in the attentions of curious rural Asgardians, and, most importantly, he cherished the time alone he spent with Loki. For Loki would not tolerate his brother leaving the citadel to go off on important errands without him.

The first trip Thor took to a small village was a day’s ride away, and when he returned, Frigga shoved a wrapped soft bundle and a red-faced Loki into his arms and pointed wordlessly for him to turn tail and immediately depart on another errand. On the ride, which was a long journey to jagged mountains, he pressed his little brother as to why their normally patient mother was so cross, and the trickster admitted that he might have pitched a fit upon discovering that Thor had been sent off without him. Loki’s seiðr had manifested early on, and even at such a young age the bursts of pure energy could inflict grievous injury. It would seem Loki had set fire to an adviser when he implied that Loki was too young to go off gallivanting on the open road alone with Thor. He swore that he did not intend to injure, but Thor saw little regret and much mirth dancing in his baby brother’s eyes.
Thus, the tradition of the Odinson excursions began.

For weeks the lads escaped the stifling heat, pomp, and decorum of the capital in favor of the informal atmosphere of adventuring. Little concern was had for their safety, as Odin and Heimdall were sure to keep watch their all-seeing gazes now and again, and only a fool would do harm to the princes. Perhaps this was what drove the pair to a spectacular brand of recklessness.

Their duty was to deliver sealed documents from the All-Father himself to a woodland settlement on the far borders of Asgard. It was not an honor, but a punishment for a rather embarrassing debacle involving the massive floating sacred monument to their elders in the capital. Boredom struck, one thing devolved into another, and somehow Loki was dared to try to change their rotation. When his seiðr was not strong enough to do the job from a distance, Thor was helpful enough to hoist him up and toss him to a handhold on the lowest one. The details thereafter are best left to imagination. The lads were lucky that they and the sculptures could be fished from the sea below unscathed, and, as their father was the preeminent mage in all the realms, could set everything to rights again.

After weeks of mucking stables, a trip to the wilds with a petty little package was as welcome as entrance to Valhalla. Thor was weary of all the disappointed looks from his mother, and a little concerned by the twitch Odin had developed in his remaining eye whenever he regarded his sons.

The actual delivery was uneventful. They enjoyed a room in the local tavern, delighted with the access to unchecked mead and ale, and stuffed themselves with thick soup, fresh bread, and all the sweets they could demand.

That night they had a shared hot bath, scrubbed until they were pink, and then settled on a soft bed clad in clean nightshirts. The fire crackled merrily, casting a soothing glow on everything, and Thor found himself mesmerized by the long shadow Loki’s lashes cast on his round cheeks.

“Thor,” Loki murmured, his feet twisted underneath the furs nervously. “Do you think we shall always be this way?”

Thor turned and frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I…do you think we will always set off on adventures together, exploring new places? Just you and me?”

Thor grinned, swiped his brother’s overgrown bangs back and planted a wet kiss on his brow. “Always, Loki. I shall always desire your company whenever I depart to face the great unknown.”

“Good,” Loki grunted, and then turned on his side, sleep weighing his eyelids down. “For you would be hopeless without me.”

Thor snorted, Loki’s lips curled, and then they both giggled, until soft laughs turned to yawns, and yawns settled into the feather light whisper of sleep.

The following morning they found oppressive mists had coated the streets and alleys, and visibility was at a premium. The tavern owner had advised that they remain until the fog cleared, as the woods were not free from wily predators such that would love to strike them while they were blind. And for some hours Thor heeded their advice. But impatience and a cresting indignant streak forced his hand. After luncheon, he declared that they would fare well in the woods, despite the mists, and were desirous to return home on schedule. Loki looked dubious when Thor waved off their host’s worries, but held his tongue. Their packs were loaded with food, and they offered a piercing horn for them to use should they encounter danger.
Thor left the village cocksure and unafraid. He had little inclination to believe that they would need the horn. The start of the journey was peaceful, if eerily quiet. Little could be heard through the dense moisture save the soft thud of their horse’s footfalls, and their breathing. Days before the forest paths had been speckled with sunshine, and the brothers enjoyed spying the teeming wildlife that scampered through the woods. Nervous hares, graceful deer, and slinking wildcats. Wildflowers stretched for the sunlight, bees and other insects cut lazy circles around them, and the air was thick with the honeyed smell of pollen and the rich earthy tang of moss and soil.

Now, naught was in the air but the damp smell of bark, and only a few brave midges had come to feast on them until Loki succeeded in casting a solid repelling spell. The clear paths were no more, and Thor found it difficult to consistently see them. Instinct, which pulled him to his home like a lodestone, as well as Loki’s sensible compass, filled in the blanks left by the fog, but it was a slow going thanks to the overgrown roots and soft earth. By nightfall they reasoned that they couldn’t have traveled far, and after a brief pause to rest, water, eat, and piss, they mounted their sturdy mare and decided to push through the night. They had heard birds scatter and a distant howling during their dinner, prompting them to extinguish their merry little fire. Unease settled on their shoulders now, and the cold mists began to creep underneath cloaks and woolen tunics, giving them a chill. Thor began to fret, but put on a brave face in front of his younger brother. His recklessness had endangered the younger boy, and his father would have his hide.

“Mind your brother,” Odin had commanded him, when he told him of their next journey. “You are his elder and he admires you. I fear he would sprint into the maw of a dragon if you asked it of him, against his better judgment. Stay on the paths, do not travel in the wood after dark, and do not stray from your task. Keep him safe.”

And now, Thor started to fret that he had failed his father and his brother. He had no inkling of their location, except that they were roughly a few rôst from the village. With good weather and a fresh horse, given their slight weight, they could have easily doubled that distance by now.

They ventured ever deeper into the ancient wood, and the creeping chill. When Thor felt Loki’s rail thin frame shiver behind him, he halted for a moment and made Loki rest in front of him and under his larger cloak. It is amusing, looking back, that Loki seemed to take a chill then, but perhaps that was because of the nature of the glamor Odin had cast on the Frost Giant. He not only appeared as an Aesir, he felt like an Aesir. Likely it was simply fear of the dark, the cold, and the wilds that caused him to tremble. In the silence Loki started to sink back into the warmth of his brother, and Thor pressed a kiss to the dark crown of silk atop his head. He wanted to assure his brother that there was honor in admitting fear, just as their father and his combat masters had told him, but his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth with shame. If Loki was scared it was because Thor had failed to keep him safe, and when the danger was evident, failed to assure him that he would master any challenge that came upon them. It would be dishonorable to offer comfort now, as it would be but a pretty lie that he was telling Loki and himself. Instead he started to hum a favorite tune their mother would croon to them while she tended to the scrapes and hurts that often befall little boys. He thought of the clean floral smell of her rosewater, the impossibly soft slide of her long fingers in his often sweaty, dirty palms, and warmth spread through his chest. They would leave these woods, and the gloom would dissipate in the fresh air of the open road.

“Sing for us, little brother,” Thor murmured, a smile playing on his lips as he thought eagerly of the end of this road. “I dislike the quiet.”

“Silence may save our hides, Thor. I heard howling earlier.”

“Silence shall drive us to madness, and what a fine meal we shall be when we bolt from the saddle into the darkness.” He poked Loki’s side.
Loki craned his neck to look back and up at his brother, and rolled his eyes at Thor’s charming smile. “Very well, brother. But should we indeed attract a beast that would feast on us for dinner; I shall trip you and run, so that the brute might have you first.”

“You jest.”

“Try me.”

Laughter bubbled up between them, and after a friendly sock in the arm and a jagged elbow in the thigh, the dispute was settled and Loki began to sing. Even at such a tender age Loki’s wit and clever tongue were known. He possessed an uncanny ability to wile anyone into doing just about anything. But he was just as known for his sweet voice, if you could coax him to share it. There was something fetching and beguiling about the boy with raven hair and moonlight skin who could croon like a songbird with a high clear voice. But that night Loki did not entertain with sultry accounts of Asgard’s glory, or a soppy story of love. He opened his little mouth and began a rousing rendition of a bawdy tavern song he most certainly was not supposed to know. The lyrics were properly scandalous, and the absurdity of it all ripped a deep laugh from Thor’s throat before he could muster enough indignation to scold him. Loki maintained his song for a few moments more, but Thor’s giggles were infectious, and the pair pushed back the gloom and darkness with the singing bells of their youthful laughter.

That is until the howling started again.

Earlier the howls had been muffled, and sounded far in the distance. And there was light enough that the threat seemed less. But now, in the thick darkness and fog of the night, the howls seemed to be but an arm’s length away, and fear curdled in Thor’s belly. He did not stop to consider much but the primal instinct to run, and he urged their mare on. She obeyed his command, but the path was treacherous and more difficult in the night. She nearly lost her footing twice, and on the third occasion Thor reluctantly dismounted and guided her. Their pace was crawling, and the howling had ceased. But this was worse than when they could hear the pack. Loki’s lips had set into a razor thin line, and he pulled his cloak about him to ward off the damp.

Another hour stretched on as they marched silently, and they came upon a ring of trees where the fog was thin enough to make out streaks of the night sky above. The moon shone her pale face down upon them now and again, and vivid stars shimmered high. The sight comforted them somewhat, enough for them to water the horse and take another hasty meal. Fatigue settled deep in their young limbs, so they took shelter in a hallowed out trunk, settling atop moss and pine needles. They tied off their mare beside them, fed her an apple, and hoped to catch a patch of sleep and start anew in the morning, when, hopefully the fog would have lifted.

“Rest and I will take the watch.” Thor had instructed Loki. He opened his mouth to protest, but a yawn interjected, and Thor pulled a face and gently pressed his brother’s head down beside him. Thor bent his leg at the knee and carved aimless runes and pictures into a small hunk of soft wood he found in the hollow. Loki was a frail weight beside him, still cooler to the touch than he would have preferred. The boy sighed in his slumber, and Thor looked down at him, drinking in the sweep of his eyelashes against high cheekbones, the faintest kiss of freckles across his fine nose, and the glistening plump of his lips. Something ached inside Thor, warm and comfortable. But a small, smoky, and curled feeling low in his belly had been growing like an illicit monster lately, tangling with the fraternal sentiment. He tore his gaze away from the fair face and back onto his idle task. Whatever this perversion was that had sunk claws into him, it would not prevail. Loki was his younger brother, nearly a babe fresh from swaddling clothes, and he would not allow these new impulses to take anything away from the perfect closeness between them. Navigating the changes his father assured him were but the early calls of manhood was awkward enough. On occasion, a faceless lithe figure
in his dreams would move him until he woke feeling as if his skin was stretched too tight, his small
clothes clinging to his thighs, prick tender and aching. Twice he’d found himself in such a state
mornings after falling into bed with Loki, and he’d slink into the bath, red faced and shamed. Their
time together should be filled with fireflies and the scent of grass, and wind and sunshine and the
crisp taste of stardust. Whatever murky longing had gripped him was sure to ruin everything. The
embarrassment was nearly enough for Thor to put an end to their late nighttime bonding and bed
sharing.

Almost.

He knew that soon that would be the case, his mother and father had hinted at such, but until that
moment came he would do what was necessary to prolong things just as they were.

Sleep settled over them, despite Thor’s determination to keep a proper watch, and hours later
something aroused Thor from his slumber. He sat with a jolt, blinking past the haze in his vision and
awareness, and realized that the mare was missing. The young branch he had secured her too was
wrenched from the tree, and a deep groove had been carved into the soil, likely from her dragging it
as she bolted. He went to pull himself from the trunk when he saw it, a subtle shift in the darkness,
and then he heard the soft pads of great paws on the earth. He could remain in shadow, praying that
the predator might not see them and be on his way, but then the yellow lupine gaze settled on him,
and he knew they would have to flee. Wordlessly he grasped Loki by his gracile wrist and pulled
them from the hasty shelter. They pressed back to back, and Thor balled his hands into fists, silently
cursing his ill luck. The lone sword he’d been given for protection as a precaution had been secured
on the pack and it looked as if said pack was pulled along with their frightened mare. They were
defenseless.

Two shaggy wolves loped into the clearing, tendrils of fog swirling at their great paws. Thor saw the
gleam of two more pairs of eyes behind them, and swallowed bile. The largest wolf came closer, his
lips curled as a low growl tore from his throat. Thor threw his hands up into fists.

“B-back beast,” His voice trembled. “The princes of Asgard shan’t be slain by such a cur.”

The wolf snapped at them and lunged, and Thor rolled to the left, pulling his brother along with him.
He landed on a thick branch and swept it up. By the time he’d spun on his heel, still tucking Loki
behind him with the other hand, the wolf had lunged again. Thor swung his branch, and it connected
solidly with their assailant, who fell to the ground with a pained yelp. Another wolf leapt from the
shadowy fog, catching Thor unaware, but Loki flipped the lupine with a wail. Thor swung at
another, satisfied with the crack, but in his distraction a smaller wolf had pounced on Loki, holding
his frail arm in a toothy grip. His screams made Thor’s stomach flip flop, and he tackled the beast
with little care for his safety. Loki cried openly, the force of the impact only causing him more pain,
and Thor tried to pry the jaws apart. The animal would not budge, and then he was yanked back by
his cloak. One wolf was fit to strangle him, the other had a hold of his boot, and out of the corner of
his eye he saw Loki fall down under the weight of his attacker’s paws on his chest.

“No!” He cried, still striking blindly, but it was no use. They would perish in these murky woods,
and it was his fault. His father had burdened him with one task, and his arrogance saw to it that they
paid dearly. He inhaled sharply as he frantically pried the clasp of his cloak open, and he felt his
veins start to crinkle and sing, lured by the heavy ozone that had been in the air all day. His
relationship with the skies, rain, thunder, and lightning had manifested very early, but he was far
from mastering the art of focusing that impulse in a meaningful fashion, so he rarely submitted to the
call of the storms as a line of defense. For when he did indulge, scorched earth and a terrible hair
style was typically his prize.
But that night was different. Pure instinct was driving him, blind panic and the stink of mortal fear. His little brother was bleeding, soon to be a feast to these villains, and his life was forfeit too.

A wolf settled atop his chest, and he held the snapping jaws back with trembling hands. The hairs on his arms stood on end, and the winds began to swirl in the clearing, whipping the fog up into a dense swirl. Hot pressure made his head pound, his eyes rolled back in his head and he tasted metal. The pressure swirled ever faster, until it condensed deep in the core of his chest and then sprayed outward from his limbs, in a blinding flash of nebulous light. His vision was blurred and hazy, tinged with silver, but he heard a half dozen animal cries, and then smelled the char of fur and skin. The brute that had taken residence atop him was still, and as his vision cleared he realized that all but the blackened skull had fallen aside in a heap of stinking flesh. He gasped from the relief that surged when he released the energy, and wiped at dampness that trickled over his lip. His shaking fingers came back crimson, and he realized that his nose was bleeding. Deafening thunder ripped through the air, and after a pregnant pause the skies poured icy rain, making his hair cling to his brow. He stumbled over to where his brother laid, limbs akimbo, half scorched wolf still attached to his poor forearm.

“Loki,” he choked, and then tore the jaws apart, smattering gore and brains on his fingers and Loki’s drenched tunic. Loki whimpered as fresh blood began to ooze from his dark sleeves, and Thor scooped him into his still shaking arms and rocked.

“I am so sorry brother,” he choked around the lump in his throat. Unshed tears blurred his vision. “So very sorry.”

“Tis but a scratch,” Loki breathed, and then pulled his gaze from the heap of his dead assailant up onto Thor’s face. He gasped, and pressed a small finger on Thor’s earlobe. “Brother, you are bleeding.”

Thor swiped at his ear and found even more blood than was coming from his nose. “So I am.” He shrugged. Whatever harm he might have done himself with his display was a small price to pay to be able to hold his kin and best friend safe in his arms.

The circle of trees had not fared much better than Thor or the wolves, and it was a boon that the rains had followed his lightening. Loki tried his hand and directing the buckets of water strategically, and when they were both satisfied that an enormous forest fire would not raze the ancient wood they hobbled as far away from the scene as was possible. They found a little cave, with a stash of hard bread and a jar of wine that was coated with dust. Likely a woodsmen’s. They took their fill, tucked as far back into the darkness as they could, and re-sealed the entrance with a dead log. Thor held his brother so tight it was likely uncomfortable, and tried to think of anything to distract his mind from the images of slathering teeth and yellow eyes and Loki’s blood on the ground. The brothers fell asleep long after, trembling even when they were unconscious.

The following morning the mists cleared, and fate favored them; their mare was found not far from their resting place, calmly feasting on soft grasses. Wounds were treated, so as not to alarm their parents. Before they descended upon the citadel they changed their clothes, burying the scorched bloodied shredded travel clothes deep in their packs. Their parents commended them for their expedient delivery, and Thor tried his best not to fidget under his father’s unnerving gaze.

“I trust your journey was uneventful then, son?” The All-Father asked.

Thor was not a talented liar, and felt the shameful truth bubbling up. He opened his mouth, only to be interrupted by his brother.

“Yes, father.” The younger lad said brightly. “It was so droll that we took to making up games as we
rode along, and when those were tiresome cut a path through the countryside singing nursery songs.”

Frigga laughed, and Odin’s lips quirked into a little smile.

“You could do worse,” he nodded, his gaze still heavy on Thor. “Thor, you kept your brother safe as I asked you.” He gave them a little nod and they were dismissed.

Years later, when Thor was deemed worthy to wield Mjölnir, Odin announced that he’d seen what had transpired in the woods years prior. Heimdall had watched it unfold, and alerted him long before Thor and Loki even were aware they were in danger.

Odin told Thor how he wrestled with divergent impulses as he watched them wander into the jaws of danger. The father wanted to arrive and subdue the beasts, protect his children from the danger Thor’s arrogance had launched them into. The king knew he would have to watch, and wait, and believe that his son would do the right thing when pressed enough.

“And I am glad you rose to the occasion, Thor.” Odin finished with a tired sigh. “For had those wolves done serious injury to either of you, your mother would have skinned me alive, made a fine pair of breeches from my hide, mounted my head on the end of Gungnir, strung my stones as a necklace and ruled alone for eternity.”

Thor blanched. “It seems unlikely that mother would be prone to such violence, father.”

“Oh I know she is,” Odin replied. “For she said as such as we watched as the drama unfolded.”

There were many lessons to be had both from his folly and his father’s account, but the most important in his humble opinion, was that it would be unwise to trifle with Frigga for her brand of violence tended to be downright macabre.

* Icy wind cut through the protection of his cloak, eliciting a full body shiver and Thor silently cursed the cold as he was pulled back to the present. Guilt had driven Thor to volunteer the first watch. Guilt, for once again their situation had been exacerbated by arrogance and his inability to have faith in his troubled brother. Twice now Loki had offered aide and sound advice, and Thor had ceded to his doubt and the suspicions of his comrades. And as a result they all suffered. Beasts had been slain, supplies torn asunder, and though his brother would deny it, all could see the battle had winded Loki far more than it ought to have.

So the guilt settled in, like an old friend, hanging from his shoulders as he paced the borders of the camp. Loki and the others slept the deep sleep that one only has when they have faced a great and wearing battle. Though they were all hungry, the bite in their stomachs was no match for the crippling exhaustion. With his friends and brother sleeping, the silence stretched across the camp, and the rush of battle left his limbs, leaving him weak under the weight of his remorse. He wished he could curl up with his pack and capture just a few moments of rest, but it was not only shame that had kept him awake.

Though he was indebted to the Skrýmir for coming to their aid, he was just as wary of his motivations as his brother. It seemed too fortuitous that a mighty warrior would appear in such an hour of need. And if he learned one thing from his brother, it was to distrust coincidence. What fools believed was coincidence was often clever machinations.

So Thor paced, sometimes watching the husks of the carcasses give way to ash, checking the stars to gauge where in the known realms that they were. But mostly he peered at his sleeping brother and
worried. Loki’s sleep was deep and yet fitful, for his skin was glossy with a sheen of sweat, and when he moved small pained noises escaped from his chapped lips. His slender fingers were balled into his furs, and lines etched his face along with his Jötunn markings. Thor had been raised to fear and detest Frost Giants; they were the monsters nannies told young children about so they would mind them and go to bed. And after countless centuries of partaking in off color jokes he would discover that his closest kin, friend and lover was one. Though he had to concede warmly, that even in this, in revealing his true heritage, Loki was grander, fairer, than any other Frost Giant he’d ever seen. His skin was the same shade of blue as the sky just before a winter’s dawn, and his hair lost none of its comely luster in the firelight. The same elegant jawline and nose, small wicked mouth, shapely cheekbones, high brow, everything about his face was just as fair. And decidedly Loki.

A small part of him wondered how the raised marking would feel beneath the pads of his fingertips. Would the touch make Loki shiver as he had countless times before when Thor mapped his bare flesh? How would they taste? Salty and a little sharp like herbs and smoke as usual? Colder and cleaner perhaps, like fresh snow? He was a rake of the worst sort to think upon his brother in such a fashion, and yet he could not deny it. When Loki sauntered away with Thor’s heart in his clutches, he saw to it that Thor would be drawn and bound to him, no matter what form he took. For Loki was always Loki, no matter if he was a fish, a serpent, or a fowl.

And now, Thor could hardly believe someone had outwitted his brother so thoroughly it would cost him his life. He could not fathom that this invisible sickness was going to rot his resilient brother from the inside out, and that soon, if they failed, Loki Odinson would fall to the ground and never rise again. The very fear that had kept him from bringing Loki with him to face the threat of the dragon had been responsible for the curse being successful after all. There was a bitter irony there that he had to appreciate. And just as they had been countless times in their youth, they were in unfamiliar terrain with a grand mission on hand, blundering along until luck shined down upon them and saved their hides one last time.

He forced himself to tear his eyes from Loki’s face, ignoring the burn from the Frost Giant’s gaze as he looked at the path before them, the long road to the crumbling palace of Útgarða-Loki. It was a solid day’s march from where they were now, and provided they did not encounter any more unpleasant surprises. He sighed and nodded at his companion.

“The road will be safe from here;” The giant promised, as if he’d been privy to Thor’s thoughts.

“One can hope,” Thor sighed. “I fear our party shall not fare well if we encounter much more of the adventure Jotunheim has to offer.”

“Oh, I am willing to wager you would fare well, Odinson. You are from better stock than to allow a few setbacks in battle crush your spirit.”

Thor’s gaze fell onto Loki despite himself. “Some of us have grave injuries.”

The giant nodded in concession and they spent their time together in silence. A few hours before dawn Thor reluctantly roused Hogun and Sif for the next watch and fell immediately into a deep sleep. He woke to the sounds of the campsite being dismantled, and some bickering among his comrades. It would seem that Volstagg and Fandral could not be roused with their shift, and Sif and Hogun would not stand by and allow the Giant to bear the burden alone.

Which is to say that they did not trust him either.

Loki woke up not long after the row began, and when he realized they had spared him from the task of keeping watch his legendary fury joined the fray.
“—not some slathering invalid that you can coddle and fret over! I can keep watch—it is not likely that you can do more harm to my person than this dreadful journey and Thanos has done already.”

Thor rubbed his temple. “Loki, we simply wanted you to rest—“

“I shall have rest enough for ten when I’m cold in the ground should we fail in this mission. I have nothing to lose by skipping a nap!”

The Thunderer felt as if he’d been slapped. “Always you were a master of words, deadly sharp brother.” Thor swallowed. “With little regard for who fell beneath the dagger’s blade.”

He rose, pulling his bedroll with him. He could not bring himself to look at Loki, and did not want to remain long enough to hear his cutting reply.

“Thor—“Sif tried to catch his gaze, but he averted, blinking past the sting.

“We depart at once,” he grunted, brushing past Loki roughly. His brother stumbled, and for a moment he feared he would fall, but then the sorcerer righted himself, still nimble as a feline. He strode away from the dwindling fires to the remaining horses, stuffing his equipment into his pack and then set off, hoping the serene crunch of snow beneath his boots and the frigid winds would cool the burn in his chest.

Thanks to his stature, Skrýmir matched his pace mere minutes after his departure, and for an hour they strode in silence. Thor was grateful for the relative peace, and glad the elder did not censure him for his tantrum. But, as is often the case with elders, as soon as he gave silent thanks for this, the giant clucked his tongue and cast a sidelong glance.

“You wear your heart on your sleeve, Odinson.”

Thor ground his teeth and raised his chin. “I may have been told thus before.”

“It is a folly to allow your emotions to get the better of you,” the giant sighed. “One need not be acquainted with you long to know your soft spots, and a man that knows where you are weakest will not hesitate to bury a knife there. When you are king, you would do well to check these volatile impulses.”

“If, I am king, sir. My father is hale and far wiser than I. I am in no hurry to ascend to the throne.”

“Mmm,” The giant nodded. “And how do you envision your place on that throne?”

Thor frowned. “I dislike thinking about it. In light of recent developments I find the proposition even more troubling. I would not be king lest my father stepped down or perished. And I do not desire to be king if I cannot have my brother at my side as adviser and friend.”

Shame burned his face, for he seldom divulged his feelings on the matter, least of all to a stranger. He gave his companion a hard look, wondering if he’d used some form of subtle seiðr to pull the truth from his tongue.

“As a friend, hm?” The giant cocked an eyebrow. “A very noble supposition. But, should your brother perish? What then? Or, if your Loki would not deign to spend his lifetime at your side as a second?”

Thor looked back at Loki, and then squinted down at the slick ground beneath his boots. “My brother been ill-used,” he admitted. “I…it has been long ere he was indispensable that I grew careless. I always assumed we’d be side by side forever. It was only when the threads of our
childhood were unraveled by hard truths and Loki sank into madness that I began to suspect that in my arrogance I’d taken him for granted.”

He licked his lips and shrugged at the Giant. “It would seem such arrogance is a habit I struggle to break still.”

“Indeed,” the elder chortled softly. “But I would caution you against such folly in the company of Útgarða-Loki, Thor. He suffers no fools, and enjoys having them as a delicacy before supper.”

Thor stopped walking, his hand already gripping Mjölnir’s handle.

“I jest,” The elder waved a massive hand. “Well, about the eating. He does loathe arrogant fools, I’m afraid. You would be better served to reflect on humility. And,” he looked back at the lone figure his brother cut against a backdrop of falling snow. “I suspect that in this, he and the younger Loki are one in the same.”

Thor looked back too, and the twin stares aroused Loki’s curiosity. He lifted his chin and met their gazes with a question in his eyes. Thor thought of the plethora of memories and experiences they shared, and tried to imagine life without him, and just couldn’t. He sighed.

“I would gladly suffer the wrath of either Loki,” Thor said quietly. “If I could but have a warm bed and a full belly before.” He gave the elder a pointed gaze.

“Ah, well, I can at least offer some comfort for the belly,” The frost giant presented what was left of the food bag to Thor. The parcel wasn’t much bigger than his black fingernails.

“Well met, sir.” Thor grinned, and then jogged back to his companions to offer them a share.

“Thank the Norns,” Volstagg cried when he saw the parcel in Thor’s hand.

“Likely there is not much left,” Thor shrugged. “But we shall share.”

He tried to untie the leather cord from the bag and found that he could not. It was as if the suede was frozen together. With a frown, he tried again, and the bag still would not budge.

“Sorcery?” Hogun supplied, and they cast Loki a glance.

He narrowed his eyes and stepped closer. “If may be seiðr,” he conceded. “But the air is so thick with it I can hardly discern where it starts and ends. Here, allow me—“

Soft words were muttered and his hands took on a delicate red glow, and then tried to open the bag. The tie held fast. Loki tried again, his arms shaking from the exertion, to no avail.

“Give it to me,” Volstagg huffed, and then snatched the bag from Loki’s grasp. “I cannot fathom that this cursed bag is but frozen or some sort—“He grunted and groaned as he struggled with the bag, spinning in circles like an over-large rotund canine chasing his tail. When he resorted to using this teeth Thor suppressed a laugh and patted him on the shoulder.

“Come, good friend,” he interrupted Volstagg’s curses. “If we make haste we can be at the gates of this fabled hall by nightfall. And if the Norns are kind to us then this elder’s assertion that the table of Útgarða-Loki is long and generous will ring true.”

Volstagg paused, eyed the stronghold, which was closer, but still several hours away, and growled. He fell into a reluctant step, still trying valiantly to subdue the tricky bag.
Hours passed in relative silence, save for the occasional muttering of Volstagg and later Fandral, who seemed to take the bag’s disobedience personally. The two tugged on opposite ends of the purse, with so much force their necks strained, but the bag held fast. While Thor could admit a great simmering irritation rumbled in his belly, the mirth of seeing his comrades spin out of control and land arse over tit into a snow bank was nearly enough compensation for the hurts of his empty stomach.

When they had exhausted every weapon in their perusal Volstagg slumped onto the frozen ground and wept like a child. Sif pulled him along by his beard, clucking about the unfathomable silliness of men.

Just as Thor hoped, they did reach the stronghold by nightfall. The skies cleared, revealing a blanket of indigo dotted with stars and Jotunheim’s green moon. The moonlight cast an ethereal glow over the stronghold, and with it the glamour of crumbling towers was removed, revealing a well-kept stronghold whose buildings were so enormous the party had to crane their necks back to see where the end of the towers. The palace was situated in what likely passed as a gentle valley, with a formidable layer of a solid ice wall tinged green and black. Behind the castle flinty mountains jut from the earth like jagged teeth, and high overhead Thor heard a lusty cry not unlike the foul beast that injured Loki.

The sheer scale of everything was so large, that Thor was once again reminded of the sharp size differences between the Aesir and Jötunn people. When he’d come as a storm bringer ages ago, hungry for war and revenge, he’d seen their size as a personal challenge, a better path to glory. Now, as he and his companions slunk through the frozen shadows he could think less on bloodshed and more on the remarkable craftsmanship that was wrought into the subtle adornments of the palace courtyard by such large hands. The Elder led them to the main entrance of a grand hall, and clapped Thor on the shoulder.

“I must take my leave now, good sir. The master of the house will have and audience with you shortly, and your hurts and hunger and thirst will be relived post haste.”

He strode off, rounding the corner in a matter of steps, their mounts trailing him like puppies. Sleipnir hesitated but for a moment, giving his mother a worried look, but decided to have a bit of faith in their mysterious guide.

“He claims that we shall have refreshment,” Volstagg said in a raspy voice. His throat likely still raw from the tears. “But I cannot see a single attendant.”

In this he was right. The courtyard was beautiful, adorned with an array of delicate ice sculptures that were approximations of trees, fauna, and flora one might see in a garden of Asgard. Detailed and formidable statues also graced the area, showing the proud faces of the Jötunn ancestors. But there was no sign of the beings that had to maintain all of this.

“Perhaps we should knock?” Sif licked her lips, and tentatively rapped her hand against a tall wooden door.

Thick silence stretched between them as they waited for a response. Then the great door fell open with a deafening groan, and warmth, light, and the smells of good food curled around them. Volstagg took one step into the threshold, moaned in delight, and then promptly fainted away. As soon as he landed onto gleaming floors a squat hairy creature, not much taller than Thor’s navel, scurried up to them all, and threw small stout arms in the air as a sign of exasperation.

The creature made a chattering noise, and then four more little hairballs appeared. They curled claws into Volstagg’s raiment and counted off in a tongue the All-Speech could not decipher, and then
gave a great tug. But his girth was too much for them, and they fell onto the stones in a chorus of pained groans. The first creature, who seemed to be a leader of some kind, whistled thrice sharply, and twenty more appeared out of thin air, all grumbling and chattering like their brothers (or sisters?). They surrounded Volstagg; the leader counted off again, and then, after a couple false starts, hefted Volstagg indoors.

Thor and his friends stared a long moment. Then Sif breathed, “What are those?”

“House wights,” Loki replied, a touch of awe in bleeding into his voice. Then he let the light and heat envelop him as he stepped inside.

The others were fast on his heels.

Dozens more of the wights materialized in front of the company. Volstagg was missing, but Thor was able to decipher through some clever hand gestures that he’d been taken somewhere to repose. The senior wight lead them in the direction they’d been told Volstagg had gone, and showed them individual quarters along a spacious hallway with gleaming floors and warm torchlight. It was too… comfortable and civilized for what Thor imagined Frost Giants called home. And this admission was not without self-conscious shame. The quarters he’d been given were fine, not hewn from ice and hard rock, but from a dark species of wood he did not recognize, with touches of gleaming marble. His bed was ornately carved from wood with faces of slathering wolves, keen eyed birds of prey, and twined fish. And it was massive, so large it would certainly dwarf the Prince when he slept that night. There were no windows, and the glow from the supernatural fires tinged everything a strange but warm green. He found a basin filled with warm water and a clean smelling bar of soap and took the hint, washing off what grime and sweat from travel and battle he could without taking a bath. He raked thick fingers though his tangles, and then he left his rooms, eager to clap eyes on the master of the fine abode.

He was led to a sweeping foyer that was articulated with four marble staircases, and more green light flickered on the posts at the end of each of them. High above some stout wax candles rested in a chandelier made from the antlers of some unknown but sizable beast. The wights bowed and took their leave, and moments later his companions descended from their quarters, looking as refreshed as he did. Even Volstagg had been roused.

“I confess I am surprised that you have recovered so soon, my friend.” Thor chided with a smirk. “You were away with the faeries, were you not?”

“Hush,” Volstagg grumbled.

“Yes, well, Útgarða-Loki’s men knew how to rouse him.” Fandral smiled. “Bribed him with a stout tankard of ale and cheese, as it were.”

Thor laughed, noticing then the faint foam that clung to his beard bristles.

“I am pleased to hear that my friends have been so efficient and kind to you,” A sonorous voice replied from at the top of the central staircase. All heads whirled in his direction, and Thor only just managed to contain his shock. For there stood a giant that dwarfed even the elder who had aided them. He was fair, more pleasing to the eye than any Jötunn Thor had seen save Loki. He also had hair like Loki, long, thick black curls that had been braided in an elaborate fashion and then punctuated with shimmering gems. His loincloth clung to his hips, revealing muscular legs and long flat feet with black toenails.

Thor remembered his manners and bowed low, and his friends followed suit. “Well met, sir. I am T ___”
“You need not bother with such introductions, stripling. For I know who you and your companions are.” The Giant’s eyes glinted with mirth.

Thor raised his brows, and then bowed. “You have our deepest gratitude for your hospitality and aide.”

“Do I?” Útgarða-Loki cocked his head, dark eyes fixed on them with such intensity that Volstagg squirmed. “Yes, well I confess my interests in aiding you are not purely altruistic. For I have not seen an Aesir in an age and curiosity compelled me, perhaps. But that is a chat best had after bellies have been filled, yes? Come,” he snapped his fingers and then reappeared before them half the size he was before. “Allow me to escort you to my dining hall.”

The hall was larger than three of the dining halls back in Asgard combined, and as the reduced Giant strode over sweet smelling rushes, his footfalls resonated so much so that the wights that ran underfoot toppled over. The sons of Odin and their companions were not much better; even graceful Loki staggered a bit from the vibrations and landed on Thor’s strong arm. He pulled away quick as a flash and kept his distance.

“Tis a fine abode, sir,” Volstagg declared as they took in the finely wrought sconces, gleaming tables, and sculpture that was littered through the room. While the furnishings were just as nice as their quarters, perhaps more so, the tables were bare, and a hollow sense of longing seemed to prick the air around them now and again.

“You are kind, young one.” Útgarða-Loki replied. “But it has been overlong ere these halls were filled with the boisterous merriment of women, warriors, and younglings. I’ve little taste to dine in solitude in such a large space so I frequently take my sup in my quarters, when I’m not away.”

“Where is everyone?” Loki ventured to ask as Útgarða-Loki gestured for them to sit.

“Dead or wandering.” The giant lord replied, and then made to sit down, nearly crushing at least twenty wights in one go. “Ugh, blasted little nuisances. Go on, go on, the seat is clean enough, come now.” He shooed them with hands so large the breeze from the disturbed air tousled their hair.

Loki waited until the Lord was settled before pressing his questions again. “Dead? What sort of altercation took such a toll as this?”

The wights began to serve the first course, cauldrons of piping hot soup, hot buttery loaves of bread, and nuts and they all tore into the spread eagerly.

“You are far too well versed in Histories to play coy, Laufeyson.” Útgarða-Loki rumbled with a smile on his face. “From the time Odin Bölverkr took up arms with his brothers and slew Ymir an age of violence has rained down upon the Jötunn peoples. Our elders have suffered much loss, so much loss at the hands of Glapsviðr before he would settle into the beloved All Father. And there are some losses not even mighty Gods can reclaim.”

The table fell into an awkward silence. Often Thor had been so proud of his father and Uncles’ exploits in their youth. Only now, after being partly responsible for the near total destruction of Jotunheim, did he realize why his father was so burdened with guilt and anger at his exploits. It was little more than history repeating itself.

“My children and the children of my kin, many are long gone, lost to the howling winds of this half dead planet, or the call of the frozen earth. To their descendants I and my kin are both myths. Half-forgotten nursery stories muttered in the darkness of long winters to get squirming children to sleep. The casket lost disconnected Jotunheim from more than just her people.”
“The people were thus disconnected from her protectors.” Thor swallowed heavily, but kept his eyes lowered in deference. “For that is what you are, no?” The weight of the lord’s gaze forced him to look up.

“In a manner of speaking, yes.” Útgarða-Loki replied, and then took a sip from his chalice. “My power dwindles, greatly reduced from the damage of the Bifrost. Still, so long as Jotunheim is alive, so too shall I be.”

“I would offer what retribution I could offer, sir. For what damage this place has sustained is because of my own folly and arrogance.”

“You would believe that, wouldn’t you?” Loki snorted. “For nothing significant is possible without the influence or aid of the Mighty Thor.”

He bristled. “Loki, I did not mean to suggest that, only that it was my own brash actions that led us here—“

“And it was the feeble grasp of my emotions upon discovering that my life was a lie that drove me to the madness that turned the power of the Bifrost onto this place.” Loki snapped in reply.

“You are both right,” Útgarða-Loki replied in a tone that shut their quarrel down. “And I would have you offer penance for your trouble, but I fear that now is an inopportune time. For both of us. I have other matters to tend to; there are greater threats than Odinsons, with their eye fixed upon this location. It is in my best interest to obscure their vision and that requires more of my energy and attention than your petty endeavors.”

But that did not sit well with the Thunderer. He would not take his leave without some effort to express his shame and gratitude.

“Sir,” Thor licked his lips. His belly was near full and the wine was potent and heady. “With your leave, I would beg that you suggest some task we might complete for you as a token of good will and retribution.”

“I have a few…challenges I would be amused to see you attempt.” Útgarða-Loki smiled.

Thor returned the grin. “Then we shan’t fail to rise to the occasion.”

Booming laughter filled the hall, so loud their ears hurt. “Ah, but you would not be Thor Sönnungr if you did not so firmly believe so. We shall rest tonight. Tomorrow I will set up tasks for you and your men to complete. If you satisfy me then I shall reward you. Regardless, you may take your leave in three days hence.”

“Three days?” Loki looked paler than usual.

“Well, that shall be three days, then,” Útgarða-Loki said firmly. “Now, I shall retire. I trust even the portly one is satiated?” He smiled at Volstagg who was in such a state of well-fed bliss that he didn’t seem to care for the conversation. “Loki, if you will? There is a delicate matter of some urgency I would discuss with you.”

Everyone, even Loki seemed surprised by this turn, but his brother recovered quickly.

“Yes, of course.”

He followed the Giant as they departed from the opposite end of the great Hall. Loki looked like a child toddling behind their father. He had to take two steps for every one of the Lord’s. Thor looked
after them until they passed through heavy carved doors, which seemed to close on their own behind them. His heart warned against Loki being left alone with this being, no matter that he’d thus far only showed them kindness and hospitality. His head worried that the Lord might conspire with Loki to do something wicked to them. Hardly enough time had passed since the terrible events in Midgard and Loki had shown little remorse for his actions there, surely he could not have fully purged the resentment that drove him to madness? And his stomach soured, for the whisperings of his heart, so sure that Loki would never truly hurt him clashed with sound reasoning, and the toxic bile was tough to bear.

“Are you coming?” Sif nudged him from his reverie gently.

He gave her a small smile. “Of course.”

*

As soon as they were on the wing of their quarters Thor feigned fatigue and shut himself in his rooms. Not much time had passed since the two Loki had gone off, if he made haste he might be able to follow in their footsteps and…what? Eavesdrop? No, of course not, but perhaps he could utilize their isolation to try to talk to his brother without the prying eyes and ears of their friends. He found a house wight and with more complicated pantomimes was able to decipher where his brother and their host was. He was guided through several winding hallways, past countless bare rooms, two massive libraries, until the wight stopped, bowed deeply, and scurried away.

He’d deposited Thor in front of two doors, just as heavy and oversized as the others, but these had been left slightly ajar. Like a child Thor peered into the green glow. The wight had led him to a library even more impressive than the first two. Shelves teeming with scrolls and tomes stacked to a ceiling thrice the height of their library back home. He heard soft voices within, but was too far away to decipher what they were saying. But the crack was only wide enough for someone with a slight figure to squeeze through. Just as he cursed his luck a new wight appeared bearing a covered tray. He (she?) did not pause to give Thor a second glance as he opened the door wider to accommodate the tray’s dimensions. He knew an opportunity when he saw one, so once the Wight shuffled through he peered inside, and when the moment was opportune, he rolled into the room and tucked behind a table laden with stacks upon stacks of dusty tomes.

“—the extent that is beyond my abilities.” Thor overheard The Giant sigh. “And such a waste, too.” Thor peered over the books and to his shock found that his brother was wearing naught but his small clothes and had resumed his Aesir form. A green eyed raging bull took up residence in Thor’s chest. He watched as the Giant’s paw ghosted over Loki’s shoulder and then shook his head. “My reparations are temporary, but very restorative. I shall have my men deliver these draughts thrice daily while you were sheltered here but if you do not retrieve that flower…”

“I know.” Loki looked down and Thor clapped a hand over his mouth as he took in the sight of his brother’s thigh injury fully exposed. The nasty looking gash was freshly sewn shut, but the flesh around it was angry and fluids still oozed from within. As Thor took in the rest of his brother’s person his heart sank as he realized what a toll the journey had already taken on him. He was always lithe, but now his ribs protruded sharply, and a network of purple and deep red bruises littered the pale flesh. It was worrying that his regenerative abilities hadn’t done more to heal Loki by now.

“Drink your tea,” Útgarða-Loki commanded. “It will help with some of your hurts.” The giant poured a second cup and then rose into a stretch.

“Why did you pour another cup?” Loki took a sip, pulled a face, and then tried again. “I will be lucky if I can finish this one.”
“That one isn’t for you,” The Giant replied as he strode away from his brother, toward a door that Thor swore wasn’t there moments before. “It is for your brother. Good night, Odinsons.”

Thor started at the mention of him, and then stood to his full height, a sheepish smile on his face. “I did not intend any harm or invasion of privacy, brother.”

“Didn’t you?” Loki said coolly as he tried to cover the wince that twisted his face as he dressed. “I trust you are thoroughly satisfied now that I will not betray you and your company with some clever scheme with the big bad Frost Giant?”

Thor swallowed as shame lit up his face. “I trusted you before, brother.”

“Oh? Even if I hadn’t countless examples to belie this, including your stunning performance when your pets called my honor into question, I would have to say that your following us tends to suggest otherwise.”

“I was worried, there is a difference.”

“You were worried about your own hide.” Loki muttered as he struggled to tie the laces to his breeches and shirt. “This damned tea.” He frowned, and tried the laces again, but his limbs looked heavy and uncoordinated.

“The Giant warned you,” Thor chuckled. A sliver of fear that the Giant had, in fact, poisoned Loki, fluttered though his mind but he tamped it down. “Allow me.”

Loki made a sleepy noise of protest, but fell silent and still when Thor moved into his space and corrected the laces. His hands brushed over the dip over his sternum, down to the taunt skin of his abdomen, and hot want pooled in his groin. A feather light touch landed on his bare shoulder and he didn’t bother to suppress a shiver.

“You always were so adept at dressing quickly,” Loki’s breath ghosted across his throat and face. “Perhaps because you had so much more practice.”

“You benefited most from this practice.” Thor retorted as he finished. His fingers slid down another patch of skin unnecessarily.

“That is debatable.” Loki snorted, then stilled again as Thor sank to his knees, still looking up at him.

“Anything I’ve ever done to better myself as a lover, I have done so I might be more worthy of you.” He said thickly, as he lifted his brother’s foot, thus coaxing the younger man to sit down. His loose tongue surprised him, but he suspected the wine was to blame.

“Pretty words for a dreadful romantic and liar,” Loki’s head lulled back as he snorted. Thor used one hand to rub firm circles in the ball of his brother’s slender foot while the other hand fished for his socks. “For no matter what you may say, your actions ever declared the contrary. Had I been satisfying to you, you would not have required so many other lovers.”

“I was a child, and foolish.” Thor admitted as he pulled one woolen sock on. “But had you been more available to me I might not have sought the company of others. For you never hesitated to keep me at arm’s length.”

“With good reason,” Loki looked down at his brother as Thor worked the second foot. He could see the unbridled desire in his eyes and could hardly restrain himself from taking him to his quarters. “For you were as careless with my affections as you were with all your playthings. And when I was no longer safe, pliant, and useful you did not hesitate to find a cheap replacement in the arms of that
mortal woman, did you?”

Thunder rumbled far in the distance as Thor’s mood took a sharp sour turn. “I did not lie with Jane. I...we...there was deep affection, yes, but—“

“Spare me,” Loki pulled his foot away and finished with his boots himself. “You do not owe me any explanations; you made no promises to me. And I’ve had to endure the sordid details of your dalliances with various women for centuries. It is of no consequence to me.” He rose, too swiftly, and swayed. Thor was quick to steady him.

“Let me go,” Loki whispered thickly. His fingers dug into the hot flesh of Thor’s forearm and the prick of sharp nettles burned from Loki’s seiðr.

Thor slid his fingers beneath the waist of Loki’s breeches and tugged gently until the brothers were touching. “I won’t.”

“I want you to,” Loki retorted softly, even as his eyes landed on Thor’s mouth. “Liar.” Thor leaned closer, and his lips brushed against the shell of his ear. When Loki shivered and the burning receded, his heart leapt with victory.

“You must,” Loki said, sadly now, as his hands wove themselves in Thor’s hair. Their foreheads touched. “I need you to.”

“Never,” he choked in reply, and then relinquished restraint as his lips grazed his brother’s jaw, neck, and temple. He took Loki’s palm and licked the angry weal that was left from the curse and encouraged by his brother’s soft noises, nipped at the tender pale skin of his wrist.

Loki pulled at Thor’s hair waringly and the Thunderer smirked, as he wrapped an arm around his brother and pulled him into a hungry kiss. Their near tryst before the start of the journey, perhaps even the first forbidden encounter in the woods paled in comparison to the relief, longing, and frustration that simmered together in between the spaces of slick tongues, sharp teeth, and pliant lips. He was unhurried wanting to savor the moment. Perhaps too much so, for Loki curled his arms around him in a tight embrace, sucked enthusiastically on his bottom lip, and then planted his face into the crook of Thor’s neck and fell still.

He was unsure if the pause was due to hesitation on his brother’s part so he froze for a few moments before running his hand down Loki’s back. “Brother?” He whispered and then nuzzled Loki’s cheek. “Loki?”

His brother’s reply was a soft snore. Thor shook his head, took a calming breath, and then carried the exhausted Loki the long walk to his quarters. Loki stirred and woke up for but a moment when he placed him on the bed and Thor smiled down at him before quietly departing.

Once in his own room he called for a bath. His breeches were just as tight as they had been when he’d had hands on Loki in the library, and he hoped a bath might slough off the grime and calm his nerves.

He was wrong. The hot water did ease tense muscles, but his desire wasn’t going to be so easily dissuaded. He tried to think on the exchange he’d had with Loki. Of the old hurts that had been dredged up and the truths of what his brother had said. He had been as lusty as Fandral in his youth, taking many in his bed as his brother watched on and the secret between them festered unnecessarily. But Loki was hardly virginal in his own time. He’d had a long dalliance with Sigyn that managed to attract the attention of Mother and excite her so much so that she began to speak of marriage. But
Loki dissolved that hope nearly immediately, and whatever had been shared between them when their relationship ended was permanent enough that the young woman had not shown any desire to renew. In truth Thor had been distracted as ever during that time, for he’d decided to try his hand at a serious relationship in a misguided effort to quit his longing for Loki.

It was a failed endeavor that nearly cost him Sif’s friendship and cracked a divide between him and Loki so wide he despaired that they could ever fix it. And while the relationship progressed from furtive fumbles to open affection, Loki’s mood soured and his once close relationship with Sif withered to something strained. Sif confided that she was hurt at first by his behavior, not privy to the details of his and Loki’s secret encounters.

“I thought he would be happy for us, Thor.” She’d explained one drizzly April afternoon. “Instead he is stomping around like a slighted lover.” She chewed her lip. “Do you…do you suppose his queer behavior is because he fancies me?”

Thor let loose a laugh that startled her, and she punched him soundly. “Am I such a low prize that you find it absurd that your brother might find me fair as well?”

“Nay,” Thor sobered up a bit, realizing he could not in good faith tell her why her assumption was so absurd. “Tis only that Loki has always regarded you as a sister. Well, so it seems.”

She seemed satisfied with this explanation. “I worry about him. He could do for more time spent out of his study with those strange pets of his creation. And that woman was an ill influence on him.”

Loki’s children: Fenrir the wolf pup and Jörmungandr the great serpent who was ever curled around his feet. Experiments with dark magic learned from a master he was even more secretive of. All Thor knew of her was that she was some kind of nomadic witch that was not welcome at Odin’s table. She was a tall solid woman many seasons older than Loki, but the rumor was that it was a glamor to disguise her hideous true form. How Loki found her and convinced her to teach him was a mystery, but when Odin found out he punished Loki and banished the witch named Angrboða. It was not long after that Fenrir grew overlarge and feral and bit off Tyr’s hand. Fear for the citizens of Asgard whipped the court in frenzy and Odin was hard pressed to present a sound reason why his canine grandson should be allowed to roam free.

Loki was inconsolable when his “son” was bound beneath a newly minted set of chains. The resentment colored his countenance and every word spilled henceforth was angry and bitter. Thor watched his brother struggle, weathered the storms of his changing moods, but was inept at offering any aide.

Then things between him and Sif changed, perhaps, in hindsight, Thor can admit she was a safe escape. She was a desirable match for the royal parents, for they knew she could tolerate Thor’s brash tendencies and she came from a well-connected noble family in her own right. The only person not enthused about the potential matrimony was Loki.

The brothers fought with increasing frequency and intensity. They hardly were in each other's company but when they were it was often marked with shouting and sometimes well placed blows. Their mother and Sif’s mother seemed engrossed in talks of marriage and babies and then something pushed Loki over the edge. He shattered every glass window in the north wing in his rage, and when Thor tried to calm him it came to blows that destroyed the remaining furniture.

Their punishment was to embark on a road trip across Asgard delivering missives, just as they had done as boys. The journey was sullen, so tense the air crackled between them. But peaceful. When they returned a feast was thrown, and Sif’s father, who had been in his cups, toasted the future son in law. Sif blushed prettily, something tangled and anxious bloomed in Thor’s chest, as he watched his
brother storm from the hall amidst cheers.

He waited ten minutes before he followed Loki, knowing somehow that he’d have retired to their favorite gardens to find peace. When Loki spied him his face contorted with more emotions than should fit in such a slight frame before settling on one of open want and pain. It was a heady mix for Thor, who followed when his brother departed without hesitation.

His body coiled and hummed with anticipation and anger and grief and confusion as he pushed Loki through the door of his quarters and then slammed it shut with his boot. He twined thick fingers in the hair at the base of Loki’s skull and kissed him so hard their teeth clicked and he tasted salt.

“I hate you,” Loki hissed even as his hands were scrambling to deconstruct the elaborate dress armor Thor was wearing.

“No,” Thor bit into the side of Loki’s neck hard, marking him just as he’d done a season ago when they first lain together.

“I do,” his brother promised again, as their hands and arms tangled in the clumsy dance to get undressed. Twin hisses filled the room when corresponding hands found leaking cocks. Thor yanked so hard that the seams of Loki’s breeches ripped noisily but neither seemed to care. His armor was next, falling behind him to join the pile of Loki’s as they staggered, still connected by skin and mouth contact, in the general direction of the bed.

When Thor’s skin was bare Loki pounced, clawing, biting, licking, and kissing his favorite parts. This was no slow tender union; it was a blood streaked battle for dominance. A necessary purge of anger and frustration and bottled up want.

Much later, when the candles were low and the moonlight washed over them, Thor pulled his brother as close as he could and let the full weight of the feelings and words unsaid settle over him. He’d betrayed Sif, and he’d hurt Loki, and worst still, he could not bring himself to regret their lovemaking—he was happy, truly content and happy for the first time in what felt like an age.

Loki looked up at his brother, the corners of his lips quirked somewhere between a grimace and a smile. “You’re going to get sentimental and maudlin, aren’t you? I’d heard rumor but—“

Thor silenced him with an achingly tender kiss. “Shut up.”

Limbs felt heavy, heartbeats slowed, but the heat between them was not extinguished. Thor’s hands wandered and when he found his brother responding to his touch he pulled his hand away with a smile and cradled his brother’s face. Something in the way he felt in his arms, the ever present sharp glint in his eye and the set of his mouth made the butterflies that had been caged in his heart escape.

“I love you, Loki.”

Loki stiffened, his eyes narrowed, he shrugged, trying to feign indifference. “It is unnecessary to speak of platitudes that you do not mean.” The tremor in his voice made Thor ache. This was the closest to vulnerable Loki had been in his presence in a very long time.

“This is not falsehood, brother. I love you. I…I have for so very long—”

“Do not lie to me,” Loki said again, harsher as he fist Thor’s hair. “Not in this, Thor. I would not hate you.”

“You won’t.” he replied firmly, and then kissed him once, soundly.
“I would,” Loki promised, even as his legs parted for him. The gesture was maddening and flamed long dormant desires to claim possess and worship. “The hate would curl up nicely beside this damned love for you that I cannot rid myself of—”

Thor settled atop his brother and pressed one wrist down firmly. “Would that you never stop, Loki. For I won’t.”

“Won’t you?” Loki rolled his hips and their cocks met with sweet hot friction. “I am no maiden, Odinson. No matter your affections for me the entire court and our parents are slathering with delight over your impending nuptials to Sif. Have you even asked for her hand?” He sneered and his nails pricked the skin at the base of Thor’s spine. “Think of the parties. Think of the pretty babies you would get on her in but a short time.”

Thor shook his head and bit Loki’s lip harder than was necessary. “No. I—I cannot.”

“You will, one day. There will come a time when your duty calls for heirs.” Loki threw his head back, breathless from their increasing pace.

“There are other ways. I could name an heir.” Thor licked the sweat from his brother’s lip and set his jaw. For a wild moment he sincerely wished he could get Loki with child, and end this ungainly dance of secrecy and hurt. The trickster looked up at him through heavy lids and the want to see Loki swollen with his child compounded and bloomed. He tucked his hands under Loki’s knees and raised his legs to expose his entrance, which was still slick and loose from their first round.

“You will not always get what you want, brother—ah.” Loki clawed his back as Thor slid home in one firm thrust.

“Aye,” Thor puffed, as their bodies began to move together. “The Norns often send us not our hearts desire, but that which our heart needs.” Loki’s hand slid down to touch himself and he batted the hand away. “And I need you, Loki. I always have.”

Loki’s eyes fluttered shut as another cry ripped from his throat making Thor’s cock swell even more. His brother said nothing, only soft and slick noises of bodies connected filled the air. This was bliss. The sort of homecoming more tender and right than any feast, than any tender caress found in the arms of another. This was where he belonged. This was who Thor needed. Damn the court, damn his family, and damn him for he knew then, he’d never untangle himself from this man. He tucked his face into the crook of Loki’s neck, inhaled the smells of sweat, sex, skin, and him.

“I love you too, brother.” Loki finally breathed softly against his skin. Surprise cut the reigns of his trembling control and he came in intense waves deep inside his brother. The shock waves made him dizzy but he was not so overwhelmed that he didn’t finish tending to Loki’s end, and a few moments later Loki arched sharply and the stickiness from his release poured hot between them. Thor’s breath hitched as he tried to collect himself. He wanted to hold onto this moment, when Loki was open, pliant, and satiated. He was unsure he’d have another opportunity. Tomorrow, likely the cycle would renew, and he’d bottle up his desire and pain and dive into training and warm bodies to cope, praying he would not let his brother’s name slip from his lips while balls deep in another.

“You have ruined me,” Thor admitted, the tired rumble disturbing the quiet. “And I hope I have ruined you.”

Loki’s hands carded through Thor’s sweaty tangles. “You have, brother mine. You have.”

*
His relationship with Sif ended not long after. Thor was no liar, and Sif was no fool. She did not know the particulars but knew from the love bites and bruises that he had been unfaithful, and that was enough. And no less than he deserved.

Loki became even more secretive than before, taking less and less meals in the public hall. He was even more mercurial than before, when he could be seen, and shunned his affections thoroughly. Thor took his hurt and anger out on his friends until the pain was reduced to a dull ache.

His relationship with Sif mended slowly, and the seasons passed. In the dead of winter Thor had a dream. He saw the witch, Angrboða offering a sliver of some form of organ meat to Loki, who took it reluctantly. He looked young and fragile. Then he saw Loki turn a corner, looking just as furtive as he had not the day prior, only this time the wind shifted Loki’s cloak, revealing an unmistakable swell. A shift and then Loki was in a birthing room, face pale and gaunt. The midwives lifted up not a babe but a quivering black mess and Thor woke to the sounds of Loki’s anguished screams. He woke to the sounds of Loki actually screaming, and he flew from his room half dressed, heart pounding. It was the dead of night, so the halls were silent and as such he heard the soft footfalls and swirl of skirts. They were heading for the bowels of the palace, a place Thor suspected Loki utilized for his more macabre experiments with said. He caught sight of a pale skirt just before they descended hurriedly. He hesitated for a moment, and the sound of another pained cry from Loki urged him forward.

Down the winding steps he followed them slowly, his stomach churning as the sounds of women including his mother echoed through the space alongside Loki’s screams. When he finally reached the end of the staircase he hung back, half afraid to see what manner of suffering called for their intervention. An almighty cry surged from Loki, and Thor’s heart hammered, then soared when a moment later the sound of a new piercing wail filled the room. The women cooed, he heard the sounds of his mother weeping, and ventured to peer around the wall. Loki’s back was to him, thank the Norns, but he did not evade detection from his mother. Awe stopped him from a hasty retreat, for he looked down to take in the impossibly small person being swaddled between Loki’s legs. What was exposed was pink, and delicate balled fists cut through the air erratically. Though he was silent, Thor could discern that Loki also wept by the set of his shoulders and the subtle tremble. Though his mind flooded with questions, concern, and if he was honest, hope, for the unlikely, he longed to reach out, perhaps even congratulate. But fear and confusion tripped his steps when Loki pulled the cloth covering part of her head back, revealing a tiny face partially marred by a dense glow as bright as the sun’s rays. Her skin looked to be burning from within, and as she flailed he realized this power had eroded her left side completely. She was naught but shriveled skin stretched over bone.

Bile crept up his throat, driven by horror, and, to his shame, he ran from the room and the stench of blood and the baby’s cries, haunted by the sound of his mother’s firm voice commanding Loki not to despair for his daughter was beautiful.

He hid from Loki, though he would later find this was an unnecessary precaution. Frigga and his brother were to take a sudden holiday in search of a rare herb that grew only in the dead of winter. And she would require the aid of her women. As this wasn’t terribly out of the ordinary for the pair, the court paid little heed. And if Odin was privy to the real cause for this excursion he wasn’t sharing with Thor. Indeed, he hardly regarded Thor, and when he did it was only to offer deeply disappointed and sometimes violently angry looks.

Thor sought refuge in the company of his friends. His partnership with Sif renewed, and the tensions from the past slowly melted away. He could not bring himself to share this enormous secret with her, though. Nor could he confide in Fandral or Hogun. But, to his surprise, he found himself spilling secrets to poor Volstagg one drunken evening, after weeks of horrid nightmares about skeletal babies and the tang of blood disturbing his sleep. While Thor was not known for his intellect, he was not
half the fool many believed him to be. He was well versed with how babies were made, due in part to scandals he narrowly avoided when he first took maids to bed. And half of the torment of his time apart from Loki and his mother was wondering who sired his brother’s child. She had not enough hair, or distinction of features to form a solid opinion at the time, so he relied on old court gossip to put the pieces together. The list was short, but he visited the two rakes, looming, making vague threats about their duty to uphold honor and provide for what was theirs. Their bewildered reactions he chalked up to plausible deniability. When one spoke out of turn in a most forward manner regarding Loki, the fellow found himself short a few teeth and nursing a cracked rib. And as a result of his still raw memories for their lovemaking but a few months prior and the loaded implications, Thor found himself unloading his tangle of worry and want onto a far too sober Volstagg. After the full account had been presented (save gory details at the behest of the man) Volstagg pat him on the back and gave him a wry smile.

“So I’m to be an Uncle then?”

The shock was so sudden and sharp that Thor sobered up quickly.

“I do not understand you, friend.”

“Come, sir. You are not half as dense as you seem. You have known Loki all of your life. Do you truly believe he would deign to lie down and be bred by those swine after he’d ensnared your heart?”

Thor scowled and stared into the dregs of his ale. “You make it sound so devious, Volstagg.”

“How can it not be when we are speaking of Loki Odinson?”

Thor’s heart sank. How foolish of him to presume that Loki may have been sincere in his confessions that night. Not when he’d been so cold, and in truth, the strain of their disagreement pushed them so far apart he was not sure he even knew his brother anymore.

“Listen,” Volstagg slung an arm around him. “Your brother has hurts he seems to need filling, and it is clear that serpents, pups, canaries, hags and the like aren’t doing the job. But what if he found that if he couldn’t have you, he could carry off with a piece of you, forever?”

He thought of curve of the baby’s lips, and the gnarled gaunt limbs, and rested his head on his arms. “I do not even know if she is mine.”

“If she is, how would the change the matter?”

Thor looked up angrily. “It would change everything!”

Volstagg cocked a brushy eyebrow. “Even if she is a monster—part monster?”

“Monster, fish, buzzard, or snail, if she is mine, then I would claim her. Know her. Love her, and challenge who would say otherwise! For she is my child, Volstagg. The flesh of my blood, deformity or no!”

“Then congratulations,” Volstagg smiled.

His shoulders slumped. “I do not even know her name. Do not know for certain that she is mine.”

“Then claim the answers you seek.” Volstagg hauled him up gently, swaying at bit as the drink rushed to his head when he stood. “Find your slippery kin and demand answers. Oh, and give the little darling a kiss from her Uncle Volstagg. How the children will rejoice to have a new royal playmate a few years hence.”
But there would be no rejoicing. Loki and Frigg returned in the dead of night that evening, and to his shame, Thor slept through the commotion thanks to the drink. When he rose the following afternoon Loki was retired to his chambers and would allow none save the King and Queen. Thor hung back, dejected, and then angry. Loki would have to leave the rooms eventually, and when he did, they would have words.

The words did not come until three months later. When Thor wasn’t eating or sparring, he held vigil in the hall, far enough away for what he hoped passed as discretion. But it was a failed endeavor. All of the attendants including Loki’s valet knew he was there, and infuriatingly, often passed sad glances his way. That they knew certainly meant Loki knew, and was ignoring him.

Still, his patience was rewarded one cool spring morning when the doors of his sealed chambers parted and a figure swathed in dark robes emerged. At first Thor believed it to be a servant, but when the person hefted a little bundled person he started, for his brother was so frail he scarcely recognized him. Loki scanned the hall for anyone; Thor hid behind a column, and listened to the soft tender murmuring that was loud in the silence of the early dawn. Then Loki took off in the opposite direction, quick as a flash and silent. Thor gave chase as quietly as he was capable of, but his brother had too much of a head start, and turned a corner before he could catch him. But not before the bundle that was hiked upon one shoulder would pull her hood back and wave a chubby hand in his direction. Thor’s heart ached, for he would be a fool not to know that she was his. Gossamer hair was a wild mess on the healthy side of her round face, and thin as cobwebs on the other. But her thriving half was the spitting image of paintings of Thor when he was a babe, save for a fine thin nose like Loki. Glittering grey eyes crinkled with mirth, she flashed a tender yet grisly gapped-toothed smile, and was gone.

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The fireplace popped abruptly, pulling Thor from his anguished reverie. His lusts had cooled to ash, and regret moved in its place. He had failed Hela as a father, and the Uncle status Loki forced upon him when he finally caught up to him. Thor had not the heart to quarrel with Loki in front of the babe, and Loki refused to divulge the details of her arrival, save that she was here and member of the royal family and would be treated as such. Why did he fail to defy Loki’s suggestions, defy the looks his father and mother gave him, and claim the child? He failed because he was a coward. He failed because he was ashamed that something had turned so foul betwixt him and Loki that it manifested in their daughter. Because he was viciously angry that Loki had dismissed his choices and feelings on the matter from the time of her conception to the day it was revealed that even as she lived and grew faster than any Aesir, she was dying, had been dying since birth, and only exile to the land of the dead would save her.

“She is a pretty candle, being burnt from both ends, Thor.” Loki had choked sadly on the one and only occasion his mask would slip and the grief poured out. “Her creation—there is always a price to pay when one uses seiðr, and that price is especially highest when it concerns will and the laws of nature.”

The rage bubbled over, and Thor shook his brother roughly. “You knew this, didn’t you? You knew the price she and everyone who cared for her would pay in exchange for her conception?”

“No,” Loki’s face crumpled. “I knew the risks, but never in my meticulous calculations did I fathom the price would be so great—Angrboða warned me. But I was too wrapped up with despair and anger to think—“ He shoved Thor off, and raked his hands through his hair. “A bitter lesson learned. I shall carry this grief, as treasured as an old love letter, for the rest of my days, Thor. No self-righteous censure you may offer will compare, so you needn’t bother.”
The scales of guilt tipped, for he knew his part in Loki’s spiral was great, and the raw pain was enough to root him in his place and let the man leave. He wept openly when he bid her farewell, and could not bear to look upon his brother for some months after. But, as was perhaps his fate, he could not bear to untangle his brother from the briars around his heart. They danced again, a fumbled reconciliation and mess of more things unsaid, until the fateful day Frost Giants disrupted his coronation and he arrogantly vowed to storm Jotunheim and demand justice. Were it not for him, perhaps none of this would have happened, and Loki might not be barreling toward his place beside their daughter. For he had little doubt that even if his death secured his place, the second Prince of Asgard would refuse the invitation to the fine table in Valhalla so that he might spend his time with his kin until Ragnarok come. A sense of panic and near crippling sadness overtook him, so he forced himself from the bath. The draught Útgarða-Loki had prepared was beside his bed, and he drank it greedily, glad for any chance of dreamless respite from the cold and lonely road he walked in waking.

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