Distortions In Time

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/778651.

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Rape/Non-Con, Underage
Category: Gen, F/M, Other, M/M
Fandom: The Avengers (2012), Thor (Movies), Marvel Cinematic Universe, Marvel
Relationship: Pepper Potts/Tony Stark, Clint Barton/Natasha Romanov, Jane Foster/Thor, Frigga/Odin, Fárbauti/Laufey
Character: Loki, Loki (Marvel), Farbauti, Laufey, Helblindi, Byleistr, Frigga, Odin (Marvel), Thor (Marvel), Jane Foster (Marvel), Clint Barton, Natasha Romanov, Tony Stark, Pepper Potts, Darcy Lewis, Bruce Banner, Steve Rogers, Nick Fury, Thanos, The Other (Marvel), Chitauri
Additional Tags: Loki Feels, Kid Loki, Jötunn Loki, Loki Angst, Loki Needs a Hug, Avenger Loki, Poor Loki, Loki Has Issues, BAMF Loki, Odin's Good Parenting, he's not so bad in this one, thor is still a dick for a bit, laufey is a dick, Abortion, Sort Of, Angst, Loki-whump, Language, Violence, Child Abuse, Child Abandonment, feral child, Sexual Abuse, Sexual Assault, also of a minor, dub con, Substance Abuse, Slavery, Prostitution, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, The Author Regrets Everything, The Author Regrets Nothing, OriginalMaleCharacter/Loki for short periods, hang onto your hats, dark times ahead, Bullying, size-based racism, Ableism, mild references to Norse Myth, very mild, blink and you'll miss them
Series: Part 2 of Distortions In Time 'Verse

Distortions In Time

by scarecrowslady

Summary

Thanks to a horrible twist of Fate, Loki was not discovered by Odin after the final Battle of Utgard. Growing up on Jotunheim, he lived as an outcast due to his small stature - until unfortunate events took him outward to the stars. Familiar lands and peoples play their parts in this different story, this distorted tale. BAMF! Jotun!Loki AU. Set pre-/during-/after Thor/Avengers Assemble. MCU-verse only. Read the warnings please. Angst.

Notes
Warnings: ANGST! Loki-whump! Language, adult situations, violence, child abuse, dub-con, sexual assault (also of a minor), substance abuse, one abortion scene (sort of).

Comments: This is not a slash fic. Sorry. It's Loki-centric, although I definitely show the rest of the Avengers and etc. Please review! Constructive criticism welcome.

Disclaimer: I do not own Avengers. Marvel owns it. I do not get paid for this piece of work. Sadly, but understandably. LOL.

This is an AU I thought up – based off the bajillion other Loki is a Jotun AUs out there – except, I hope that you can see my unique take on it. This will take place before, during and after Thor and Avengers Assemble. Set in MCU-verse only!

BE WARNED! READ THE WARNINGS ABOVE CAREFULLY! They are not applicable to each chapter – but they will come around in time!

MASSIVE LOKI FEELS! In tortured prose...

Also, for more sensitive readers, message me/review the story and I'll let you know the general ending of the story. For the worriers (like me) out there. :)

Please let me know what you think! I appreciate reviews muchly!

*Glossary at the bottom as well.

See the end of the work for more notes
In The Beginning

Chapter Notes

OK. Here it is. The chapters are short... yes... (sigh) But that's just the way of this fic, I think... but there'll be a lot of chapters! (52 chapters planned) 'Twill be updated weekly or twice a week. Depending on the muse. XD

And how excited I am for this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 1
In The Beginning

[The skies are empty on Jotunheim...]

Silence reigns here with an iron grip. It pervades the frosty land, the icy wastelands of the inimitable race so known as the Frost Giants. There is nothing here, they say, but ice and snow and eternal night. And silence.

[... so wrong...]

[... there is life even here...]

You can see life struggle onward under the hard light of the stars – and hear it in the voices of the win. The wind has arrived on this side of the Realm, the most populated area, holding the cities of Utgard, Griotunagardar and Gastropnir. Flying unhindered from the Kaldrfjall mountains in the far east, it has travelled a long way to reach the Eybjarg, the Chasms of Forever, extending from the west. Griotunagardar, situated on the edge of the eternally frozen dark ice of the lake known as Gnottvatn, hunkers down under the wind's roar, stalwart against the initial blasts – and then, the gales of snow move onward to encroach on the westward city, Gastropnir, which huddles beneath the protection of the Grarffjall mountains. Here, snow falls aplenty, but softly, muffling the quiet activity of the small trading centre.

[... and beyond...]

And beyond – beyond lies Utgard in the utter east, close on the edges of the world, the Eybjarg. It is a dark citadel standing as a sentinel at the chasm's edge.

Here, too, is silence.

It is the deep calm before the storm.

-0-0-0-

A long time ago, it was said the skies had been filled with exotic flying things – creatures who had long since died or fled, their names lost to time itself. On the land, there had been wide forests of
jarnvithr, fields of tungblom and plains of the harsh blakkrgras – now long depleted thanks to the vagaries of war. And there had been other creatures, great and small, now threatened extinction, endangered by what threatens the entire universe - war.

For the land is at war, and has been so, for too long of a time.

-0-0-0-

As fortune smiled on the Jotunn, their grip of ice expanded outward and spread to other realms. A powerful King in his own right, King Laufey, used the power of the Realm itself – the Casket of Ancient Winters indiscriminately. Carrying it with him, he stood tall and proud, a striking figure among his own people, at the front of his legions – feet spread apart as he gazed over the empty land of Midgard. It was cool here, but not cold enough. The Casket felt right between his hands – felt powerful – strong and untameable as a wild stallion left too long to its own devices. It's chaotic swirls of power burst from his hand and covered the greenery in darkness and ice.

That had been the height of the Jotunn empire, such as it was, and could not remain so in the eyes of the other Realms whose duty it was to protect the old alliances. Thus, fortune turned its back on the tall, hard-bitten ice folk.

Asgard joined battle with Odin in the lead bearing Gungnir and stern expression. Within a day, the war was renewed between the Aesir and the Jotunn, and since then, it carried on with battle after battle.

It was an epic struggle and many mortals, Jotunn and Aesir joined the halls of Helheim, Niflheim and Valhalla. Laufey himself was fatigued, though not wounded – and Odin was more than equal to the task.

War raged on for years and decades and centuries... For what seemed like eons, the battle swelled, lingered, smouldered – only to renew again like a fire that could not be put out.

[... and the land of Jotunheim fell silent...]

-0-0-0-

Yet even then, life was not lost and hope was not entirely smothered, for the cycles and seasons of Time wait for no one and each Realm's heart beats deep and strong. During one summer campaign (for the Asgardians), Odin was forced to leave the front lines of battle in order to support his wife during the time of childbirth – the time of something for which he had waited so long – the birth of a son. Signs, portents of Dooms and prophecies had pointed to the coming of a male heir, the like of which Asgard had never seen – and would never see again. And Odin, who had long since learned to pay attention to the words of his far-seeing wife, took the joyful news to heart.

When he held the squalling, hairless child in his hands and glimpsed the future power behind its sky-blue eyes, Odin knew then that here was indeed the future King of Asgard. Bells rang forth and the Aesir rejoiced – and the Jotunn grumbled.

It was a few years later, by the flow of Asgard's calendar, that the long-term effects of war appeared to have reached even Laufey-King. During a squirmish which had moved forward into the Aesir camp, Laufey stumbled.

-0-0-0-

"A slight dizziness," he protested as the Royal Healers and Sages forced him to lay back onto the ice bed spread out for him. "It has already passed – a mere light-headedness, nothing more. No doubt
something in the food I had eaten or –

He tried to rise again, pulling at the leathers which had been laid aside from his strong, blue thighs.

"Lie back, my King" Farbauti said roughly in a voice which brooked no disagreement or disobedience. His red eyes glared down at his Royal King and Husband – the one he had called friend and lover and husband and wife for so many centuries. "Considering that you have felt unusually fatigued lately, I fear it is something far better, and yet, far worse."

Red eyes met over the Jotnar sovereign and for a moment there was nothing but shuffling feet, whispering cloth, guttering flame and an indistinct mumble as a sage outside the tent cast runes upon his well-stretched drum skin's hide, stretched across a square rock between his feet. Stones clattered and bones rattled.

"Not a child," Laufey gasped then, laying back and glaring up at the plain ceiling far above him. "We were so careful."

"We have needed a Sathr Erfingi for too long a time," his lover replied quietly. "Someone to carry on the Casket and the War if you were to return to the snows of your grandfather." A pause. The humming chant outside had ended. Then, the King's Consort added, "Maybe the spirits of the For-Eldra and the Heimrsal decided."

Farbauti warily eyed the ancient weapon – the Kero Fornvetr, or to the Asgardians, The Casket of Ancient Winters – which had not left Laufey's side since the beginning of the Lengi Ofrithr. Even now, it sat by the bed in a place of honour. And whispered.

"Maybe it decided it was time."
"Old tales of witless giants," snorted Laufey, as the healers finished their careful ministrations and examinations and congregated a little way away, in the far corner of the large healing room Laufey had been brought into. "Foolishness."
"Foolish... I would not say that so quickly," Farbauti shook his head slowly, "but not something to be ignored entirely. If it – if she – if..."
"Farbauti," Laufey sighed. "Enough of these tales and superstitious nonsense. This is no time for stories and witless tales. Neither is it a time for children, heir or no."
"Odin All-Father –"
"Odin All-Father birthed his get on his woman – an easy enough matter. And it is not as if the Royal Family has no Princes – Farbauti, mine, you have done your duty –"
"'Twas not duty –"
"Perhaps not," agreed Laufey with a chuckle. "A gift, then. Two handsome children any father would be proud of."
"But Helblindi and Byleister are not True Heirs – and neither are they of age to be considered for rule either. Laufey-King –"
"My mind is set."
"But, Laufey-King, think – can you not sense it – this time, it could be different –"
"If I am with child, it will be removed."
"No – Laufey, my love – please –"

Silence.

"Well, let us see what they say," Laufey waved a hand dismissively, sitting up and pulling on his battle leathers and carved bone gear. Farbauti's eyes wandered over his King and Husband's chest, cataloguing the fast-healing scars and mild bruising.
"My Lord," the head healer approached slowly, bowed and also tipped his head in recognition of Farbauti. "Your esteemed Highness. Great news. His Highness bears for us an heir. The runes have
spoken – and Kaldro speaks: a King for our people, the like of which we have never seen – "
"Remove it," Laufey cut the healer off.
"Laufey, love –" whispered Farbauti, placing one hand on his King’s.
"This is a time of war. A time when anything could affect us," Laufey replied evenly, his voice
rougther than usual with exhaustion. "A weak King will not lead this kingdom to victory."
"A hollow victory if there is no future," Farbauti replied bitterly.
"There will be other children," Laufey reminded his Consort, trying to lighten his beloved's dour
mien. Farbauti looked stricken nonetheless.

Pause. Then, a sigh.

"But we can, perhaps, afford to wait a while. Just a little longer."

And so it was said Laufey suffered a mild stomach ailment and the matter was not spoken of again.

-0-0-0-

The spirits of the realms, the Heimrsal as named by the Jotun, speak many tongues if you would
listen. Within the babbling brooks, the cry of the hawk and the eagle, the music of the spheres... and
on Jotunheim, the powerful wind which crosses the plains. It is a harsh melody, a song which few
can decipher or even begin to understand.

[... can you hear it?]

[... it is even here... in the silence...]

Chapter End Notes

Aldinn Stathr – Ancient Place
Atfirth – energies
blakkrbjorr – black beer
Blakkrbjorn – black bear
blakkrgras – black grass
blargras – blue grass
Dagaheim
dvegr – dwarf
dyrspeki – zoologist
Eybjarg (Chasms of Forever)
fauld – a part of armour around the lower midsection
Flara River – Treacherous River
For-Eldra – Ancestors
Forn Vegr – Old Ways
Gastropnir
Gnottvatn (Lake of Abundance)
Gothahus – temple
Grarfjall – Grey Mountains
grarulfr – grey wolves
Griotunagardar

hafnathr – sea serpents
heillgriot – healing stones
Heimsrsal – Soul of the Realm
Holdra River – Hero's River
holkimurtr – small flat fish
Holkn Vollr – Flat Plains
holmganga – a method of ending feuds/disagreements
hvaeta – wheat

jarnkotr – iron cat (beast which Laufey released in Thor)
jarnvithr – iron wood

Kaldrfjall (Cold Mountains)
Kero Fornvetr – Casket of Ancient Winters
kostrboth – a method of proving virility for the purpose of marriage

lagreinn – small one (epithet)
Lengi Ofri thr – Long War

manisilfr – moonsilver
Myrkr Skogr – shadow forest

Nattura – spirits
Northri Stjarna – North Star

silvrfiskr – silver fish
Sithr Efingi – True Heir
Skalldi
skordyr – Jotunheim goat
Storrholl – Great Hall

thurbblakulfr – giant black wolves
tunglbom (moonflower)

Utgard

vaetki – nothing
ventrmellin – winter melon
Virtha Aevi – Coming of Age
Vollrvvatn – Lake of the Plains
Thanks to miravisu and Crazy_Cat_Lady for commenting! And for all the kudos!

So encouraging to me! Please let me know what you think! It helps me tweak things - and plus I just love reading Loki rants. (If that's all you wanna do in the review box, go ahead and rant!) Especially if you have good things to rant about... say... the epic hair of the Thor 2 trailer. Is anyone else excited for epic hair Loki?

C'mon guys. Be honest!

OKAY. Onward. For this chapter, specifically, the warning is... ABORTION! (Sort of. Yes. Ish.)

I don't think this has been tried before in Loki fic... so let's see how this bitter pill goes down... (shifty eyes) (ahem) Yes. Tried to keep my personal opinion from being blatantly shown. Here's to hoping.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 2
The Least of These

Asgardians believe – many still believe – the Jotunn race are birthed out of the snow. This observation came after decades of sporadic contact with said race and even less frequent thought... Particularly concerning the obvious lack of women among the Jotunn traders they had haggled with, and then, during the Long War, the prisoners they had captured (and killed). However, a few learned Aesir academics – old mages and adept women healers – came to the conclusion that if they had dissected the Jotunn corpses at their disposal correctly, the Jotunn were neither male nor female in the conventional Asgardian sense of the word.

That was all they figured out about Jotunn biological reproduction. The rest of Asgardian accounts relied on rumours and old wife's tales – babes birthed into drifts of snow, incubating in the ice, the size of the giant babes and the staple of fish blood upon which they suckled.

They could not imagine the burden of carrying a child for a creature of neither gender – a heaviness in the body, the perpetual imbalance in motion and the drain on one's life force. Laufey-King, returning to the front lines, made light of it – with difficulty. Despite the fact he held unlimited power in his grasp, the King of Jotunheim continually struggled with physical exhaustion and magical depletion.

Not only was it a battle to harness the wild chaotic force of Jotunheim's spirit, but the babe was hungry for its power and drained magic from Laufey at alarming speeds. Nestled in his belly behind Laufey's long bone fauld, the babe was shielded from lance and sword – but lay ever closer to the Casket.
It drank deeply – and Laufey knew then that Kaldro may have spoken truer than he would like to admit. *This child could be a being of great power,* Laufey thought one evening, stretched out on a bed of ice and snow within his personal dome room. He laid a hand on his still flat belly. *Yet, the child seems to grow so little. A small thing. Perhaps if I had more energy to give it and sustenance, it would be more ready for the harsh world...*

And so Laufey's long pregnancy continued unhindered – and Farbauti gained hope.

-0-0-0-

[... then... silence fell...]

The Frost Giants lost their foothold in Midgard.

Fell back to Griotunagardar.

And Odin All-Father and Asgard followed hard, unrelentingly, unwilling to lose their advantage.

[... and the land descended into darkness...]

-0-0-0-

Fleeing Griotunagardar as it roared in the uncontrolled flames of nightmare (fire), Laufey, doubled over in pain and assisted by Farbauti and several of his medics, cursed Odin and Asgard and the entire Nine Realms – but not as darkly as he cursed himself and sentiment and the child within. When at last, the lagging vanguard of fleeing Jotunns arrived at the stronghold of Utgard a week later, Laufey then allowed himself to be escorted to his personal Healing Room and examined. He wanted it out of him before night fell.

"It is still small for its age –"
"Get it out," Laufey barked, between gritted teeth as Farbauti bound up a nasty shoulder wound. "I am wounded already thanks to that blasted Aesir Bowman – and between the child and the exhaustion and the wounds, I cannot carry on so –"
"But to remove the little one –" Farbauti's voice cracked. "He is still too young – too small – even for an early birth, he will not survive –"
"The rate of growth is indeed worrying," one of the healers shook their heads. "It is, perhaps, deformed in some way..."
"Deformed in body," another one added, "and possibly in mind as well."
"Even more reason to be rid of it," Laufey cursed. "It is nothing but a tiny parasite as it is – I would be rid of it – NOW!" He ended on a roar and Farbauti stepped back with a wince and nodded stiffly.

Without any further delay, the healers brought forward potions for Laufey-King and began to lay out well-cleaned knives of bone and steel, bought from the finest Vanir traders and the Dark Elves on Svartalfheim. Farbauti kept his eyes on Laufey's red ones instead and waited with him for sleep to come.

"We will prepare," he said and then added softly. "Perhaps," Farbauti hesitated then. "Perhaps he will survive – if he is anything like his father."
"It is nothing but a burden, Farbauti, forget it. Do not hold onto it so. Call it for what it is."
"He is alive and I can feel him moving – this is –"
"Necessary, if we wish to save Jotunheim," Laufey cut into Farbauti's protest. "And –"

Just then, a messenger entered the room, face dark with worry. At Laufey's peremptory wave, the Jotun approached and knelt before the King bringing the troubling news – Odin's men had only
paused momentarily and were even now arming themselves for the long march to Utgard. Scouts had returned with news that Odin All-Father had given a speech to his men and promised to burn Utgard to the ground within the week. Even worse, more reinforcements had come through the Bifrost just outside the gates of Utgard - a larger force better equipped with provisions and tents. Although they did not seem to be doing more than entrenching themselves within the rock and the snow by the edge of the Eybjarg, they were a massive threat. Damn the Gatekeeper to Helheim.

"Farbauti," Laufey grasped his Consort and dragged him closer urgently. "I need you – I need you to go for me with the rested troops and take a stand by Gastropnir. Delay them for at least a few days, that I may find some rest – and then, return to – return to me, beloved, on the high road. It is there I will join you and together, with our backs to the Eybjarg, we will face our strongest fears."
"Laufey -" Farbauti began, but Laufey closed his eyes.
"I am so... so... tired..."
"Sleep," Farbauti breathed gently, squeezed Laufey's hand and rose.

He did not look behind him.

The realms are full of wonders - science and magic intermingle in an eternal seamless dance, organic in ways that many may wonder at. With some, it comes as natural as breathing air – and the healers on Jotunheim were no different. Well-versed in their craft, they cut open the womb with a neat incision, removed the fetus and carefully laying heillgrjot on the opened flesh, fusing the cuts together until there was only black lines were there had been blood and a small wound.

Laufey slept.

The entire procedure was completed in silence with potions administered and rough creams ground from heillgrjot and tunglblom applied to ease any lingering pain when the King awoke. Lifting the tiny creature from King's womb had been disturbingly easy. Ordinarily, by this time, the child would have been almost ready to live on its own even if birthed this unnaturally early. As it was, the medics could see from the size of the babe and the anatomy that it was, if not deformed, then at least bizarrely small. A runt. To the lower classes, an abomination.

Under the clinical eye of the master medic, it stirred – little red eyes opening as it lay in the palm of the medic who held the child. It began to weakly bleat.

"Take it away and dispose of it," murmured the head healer with a shrug. "It will die soon enough."

With a nod, the master medic and another summoned mage disappeared with it and the King was covered again after a variety of medicants were set out for his consumption upon waking. Healers and sages bustled about, carrying out their equipment, and then, excepting one who stayed behind to watch the King as well as two guards, they left the King to rest in peace. For a day, the King slept – and when he rose, he did not ask for the child, merely returning to his rooms to bathe and then sleep for a short time. When he rose, Laufey was happy to discover that while his full strength had not returned, he was feeling better than he had had for some time now. Without pause and ignoring the words of his healers, Laufey strode to the armoury to don his battle gear, Casket in hand.

It was only half a day's journey from Utgard when he met Farbauti's fleeing company. After several hours argument, Laufey won and Farbauti was sent on to Utgard to take his two sons up through the north passes through the Myrkr Skogr. Myrkr Skogr was a shadowy forest perfect to flee within – upward and onward to the certain safety of Skalldi and Dagaheim. Odin's force, Laufey knew, would hit Utgard hard – and if he stopped Odin here, his children would never fear the Aesir again.
The Battle of Utgard was a long and gruesome affair lasting over four daily cycles and two snowstorms were weathered before the last Jotun was rounded up. Laufey, who had retreated to the heart of the city the better to wield the Casket from the Aldinn Stathr of the Gothahus, ended up facing Odin-King himself in a glorious hand to hand combat. Perhaps it was his recent illness, perhaps it was the bone-deep exhaustion which had taken its toll, perhaps it was the fury of Odin and the need to end it at all cost... Laufey never knew, but as he twisted around, Odin's blast from Gungnir caught him and, burning into the flesh of his ribs, brought Laufey to his knees.

The Casket had been set on its pedestal – a small thing, yet so powerful – and so far from his grasp. It reminded him of what he had most recently lost. Laufey cursed and reached forward, unable to shield himself from Odin's blow. He found himself lying on his back, ignoring the jabbing pains deep within his belly and glared up at Odin's face which was bloody, worn and filled with regret.

For the first time, Laufey felt his age. Looking at Odin's remaining blue eye and white hair, the Jotun King had a feeling that Odin understood as well. Behind him one of the King's men stepped up and removed the Casket – and within hours, at the decree of Odin, the Casket was kept for the safety of the Nine Realms.

Never again would Jotunheim use its power so wastefully and ruinously.

Never would it know power again.

"I wish this had not come to pass," Odin admitted to Laufey one night, on the last day he planned to stay on Jotunheim. "Many have died for this war of which none can remember the origin. Now has come a time for peace – at whatever cost."

It was then, for the second time – and last time, that Laufey thought of the child who never was.

"Whatever the cost," he agreed slowly. "Whatever the cost."

Chapter End Notes

Well. Uh. Sorry for the shortness. Maybe I'll try to make up for the shortness of the chapters by updating more often... Hmm... Yes. That could be a possibility. We'll see... I have to proctor some mid-terms and stuff... Hmm... At any rate...

LOKI IS HERE! Well. He's "the child". Not even that. He's an "it" right now, thanks to the clinical detachment of medics and et al.

On a side note, the age I put him at is more in late 3rd trimester by our standards. My idea is that Jotunns take longer to gestate and sometimes the gestation is variable... Sooo, if the babe is small, the Jotunn think it will just take longer and will let it stay inside longer before forcibly removing the baby. Hope this makes sense. Sort of.

Read and review.

Glossary:

Aldinn Stathr – Ancient Place
Atfirth – energies
blakkrbjorr – black beer
Blakkrbjorn – black bear
blakkrgras – black grass
blargras – blue grass

Dagaheim
dvegr – dwarf
dyrspeki – zoologist

Eybjarg (Chasms of Forever)
fauld – a part of armour around the lower midsection
Flara River – Treacherous River
For-Eldra – Ancestors
Forn Vegr – Old Ways

Gastropnir
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Gothahus – temple
Grafjall – Grey Mountains
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Griotunagardar

hafnathr – sea serpents
heillgrjot – healing stones
Heimsrsal – Soul of the Realm
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Lengi Ofrithr – Long War

manisilfr – moonsilver
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Nattura – spirits
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silvrfiskr – silver fish
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Skalldi
skordyr – Jotunheim goat
Storrholl – Great Hall
thurblakulfr – giant black wolves
tunglbom (moonflower)

Utgard

vaetki – nothing
ventrmlin – winter melon
Virtha Aevi – Coming of Age
Vollrvtn – Lake of the Plains
Abandonment

Chapter Notes

I'm going to wait until Sunday to update this. That's what I told myself. I'm going to wait until Sunday. I'm going to wait until Sunday. I'm going to wait until Sunday. Ahhh... screw this...

And so, a new update. Why? I guess, I just want to get it out and who cares if no one reads this story. It wants to be shared, it's writing itself basically. So here goes...

As for those who reviewed...

THANK YOU!!! I'm so encouraged! It's so great to hear from people who are reading... So be sure to say hi!

[you know you want to talk about epic hair!Loki!]
[you know you do!]
[just do it]

In other news... I will update... Sunday as well. Or Monday? Let's see how long I can hold out. Also, I'll be posting a map of Jotunheim at some point and some fanarts I sketched today while watching Skyfall with friends... Hm. Yes.

If you wanna friend me on tumblr, I'm... hiddlesayings, dappled-things, mischiefmakerloki, kakashidiot, suitsforall. Yep.

WARNING! WARNING! Injuring of a baby and massive feels! WARNING! WARNING!

[runs away]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 3
Abandonment

"What shall we do with it?" asked the master mage, named Vaetta, as he eyed the small babe which lay in the palm of his hand. It fit his palm quite neatly and he knew without a doubt that if he clenched his fist, he would easily break the bird-like bones without much effort on his part.

And no one would gainsay him. It would be compassion to put the little thing out of its misery – and miserable it was, trembling and flailing, tiny fists waving. Tiny cries rang out, thin and weak, easily swallowed by the vast icy darkness around it. Not the lusty cry a full-formed Frost Giant babe should have. It's blue skin should have darkened further and its red eyes were pale – a sign of fatigue and hunger. Not that it matters, thought the mage, it will die before the night ends, that is certain.

"He said to dispose of it," the healer mused. "I could take it for further study –"
"You mean to cut it apart?"
"Runts are born to our kind – but they die so quickly, being abandoned by their families in the dark
of night. Shameful things. It is impossible for us to ascertain why they had been so deformed, but this
tissue is alive and intact. Come, let me have it, Vaetta."
"It is a babe," the mage pulled away. "Small and deformed and unintelligent as it is, let it die with
some kind of dignity – and go to the arms of the nattura and be at peace."

A foot soldier brushed past them, obviously in a hurry, and catching sight of the two giants glaring
down at the small creature in their hands, paused and flinched at the sight of the deformed runt.

"Just bash its head on the rocks," he snarled. "This is war and there is no time for witless giant's tales
or a scribe's nonsense. Asgard is upon us – and Laufey will have us all marching before tomorrow's
cycle is over."
"I will lay it in the Gothahus, close to the Aldinn Stathr," pronounced the mage. "Concern yourself
not with the babe, you are, after all, more needed in the healing tents, Leysa."
"Very well," grumbled Leysa unhappily. "I bow to your higher station, Vaetta, and your foolish
sentiment."
"Be well," Vaetta nodded and left his friend behind, clutching the still wailing runt to his chest.

[... fortunately...]

Unfortunately, the Gothahus would not be be accessible tonight, for a storm had descended on
Utgard and no Frost Giant went out into the cold, no matter how powerful and hale they might be. If
the Asgardians were indeed on their way, they would have to survive the powerful winds which
came from the north and Dagaheim. A cruel kind of wind which stabbed you with its cold knives
and brought many a good creature to its knees.

Vaetta wrapped the babe up in a piece of rough sacking, binding the legs and arms down,
surrounding the bald head which now he saw was fully formed, complete with the matrilineal lines
of Laufey. If it had been but larger, it would have been... perfect.

The next morning, Vaetta was busy with a morning ritual to bless Laufey's early morning expedition,
followed by a very serious council concerning a prophecy of doom foretold by Kaldro's runes. Thus,
it was not until evening time that Vaetta finally found the time to pull the now quiet babe from the
hard bed of warm rocks he had laid it on. He had fed the small thing in the morning and quickly fed
it again – its last meal. Then, cradling the tiny bundle of rucksack in his large hand, the mage left for
the Gothahus and the Aldinn Stathr.

He had only started walking for a short while when a large cry rose from the eastern part of the city,
and Vaetta's steps hurried as he realized that Laufey, who had set out to meet his Royal Consort,
Farbauti, on the road, had returned earlier than expected. From the sounds of it, a battle was upon
them again.

An apprentice rushed up.

"Master Vaetta, you must come quickly – the mages have been gathered by Laufey in an effort to
send a storm to delay the oncoming Aesir, for the first company of Odin have been joined by a
massive horde, complete with sorcerers and the like of their own. Cursed Gatekeeper and the Bifrost
– what have you there – where were you off to at a time like this?"
"I wished to present the runt of Laufey to the Nattura at the Aldinn Stathr," Vaetta sighed. "Here,
take it to the temple steps and set it there before the alter – go, young one. I will return to the others."

With that, he shoved the now squalling babe into Ekol's smaller hands and returned to the Eastern
Wall, hoping that the boy would follow his words to the letter. Apprentice Ekol was oftentimes
careless, although a favourite with Master Virthing. Vaetta shook his head. Sorcerors from Asgard... at a time like this. He sighed. Already too many of us have been lost, our kind are dying out as it is. Depletion of the realm's affirth speaks of a serious matter – a corruption – a breaking of ties with our Heimsrsal. Will the bonds which tie us all together ever be fully healed? Our King is already a clumsy wielder of power... and our land bears the scars of such hasty usage. However, even worse are other alternatives... If Laufey-King were to fall in battle, if the Casket were to be lost... slow death would visit Jotunheim... and stay.

Jotunheim's troubles descended on Vaetta's broad shoulders and as he he the wide courtyard at the Eastern Gate, the mage forgot about the small creature. It's life was over. A mere spot on the large canvas of Jotunheim's history, not even worth a footnote.

[... but do you not know that one blotch of paint can stain a whole silk canvass?]

0-0-0-

Apprentice Ekol was beside himself with worry, his footsteps quick and hasty as he slid and slipped over the icy stairs and stones leading toward the inner parts of the large city – the heart of Utgard, the Aldinn Stathr, the ancient temple of the Heimsrsal, the nattura and the For-Eldra. Others passed him, headed in the opposite direction, none stopping to ask the time of day or question where he was off to. This was no time for idle chatter – and the apprentice wished to complete his duty (however useless he thought it) and return to the side of the Master Mages as soon as may be.

If I drop the thing along the side of the way, Ekol stopped and eyed the small bundle with distaste, who would care in reality? Laufey-King said that our Realm is all – first and foremost in our hearts and in his – and he would give all to save it. And yet here I am, wasting time with a thing – Musing darkly, he looked about him. And then caught sight of a solution.

"Hey you," Apprentice Ekol drew himself up to his full height (not incredibly imposing since he had not yet achieved his Virtha Aevi, but authoritative enough for a lesser clan). He looked down at a younger, poorly dressed Giant who was standing at a doorway uncertainly gazing at the eastern wall. "Apprentice," bowed the servant, catching sight of Ekol as the apprentice approached. "Take this and deposit it upon the steps of the Aldinn Stathr – this is the express mission appointed you by Master Vaetta," Ekol said, holding the deformation upside down absently.

The servant took the thing into his smaller hands and eyed the tiny creature with distaste and loathing.

"It is a cursed thing and should be bashed upon the rocks or fed to carrion or –" "Silence, fool," Ekol snapped, wishing, not for the last time, that the ignorance of the lower clans had not been left so long unattended. "Look closely at the lines of its house." A pause as realization set in and the servant nearly dropped the bundle in its grasp.

"It is of the line of –" "Again, silence! Take the thing and present it to the nattura on the steps of the Under Altar at the Gothahus. Do you understand me?" "Yes, Apprentice," the servant shifted his new charge and nodded, eyes wide. "And not a word to anyone or Master Vaetta will come and find another use for your tongue." "Yes, Apprentice." (Fear now. Fear was good.) "Well, what do you wait for? The Sun to rise? Go now!" "Yes, Apprentice."

They parted ways and it took only a minute for Apprentice Ekol to forget the small scrap of Jotun
now on its way to the inner sacred place of Utgard.

[... Heimsrsal was waiting...]

Thanks to the Gatekeeper, as the Jotunns call him, Asgard was able to land a new vanguard closer to Utgard. When the Asgardians descended not long after, chaos broke loose within and without the citadel. Underneath the cold moons of Jotunheim and the bright, frozen stars, a mighty battle was waged, laying wreck to homes and halls and palaces and old and young. Black blood and red stained the white snows. Smoke rose and billowed and the ground shook as the armies clashed in thunderous battle.

Dodging flying rock and falling arches and roofs, the servant made a slow journey to the heart of Utgard only to find that it had already been overrun in battle. Slipping amongst the shifting shadows, the servant crept in through a newly made hole (thanks to some kind of Asgardian weapon, no doubt) in the side of the Gothahus. Making his way along the ground floor of the great temple, the servant found the Under Altar and at the sound of a crash nearby, nervously shoved the bleating thing onto the side of the step – and ran away. To his death.

No Frost Giant would hear from him of the mysterious runt which came from Laufey's blood.

[... who can hear a child's cry under the voices of war...]

[... only the Heimsrsal...]

Hours passed by (what are called days in Midgard) – blood flowed down the steps of the temple's High Altar and down the Under Altar. Above, miles in the sky, on the very seat of the sacred place, the Aldinn Stathr, where the Casket sat with Laufey's hands upon it, Odin came. Here, they battled and here, Laufey lost.

Soldiers poured in the Gothahus – Asgardian and Jotun alike – and fought and clashed and slaughtered each other in the very sacred halls of the Heimsrsal and nattura. Corpses cluttered the stairways and halls and winding passageways – and the steps of the Under Altar were littered with rocks and grit and dust. Defilement and death mingled in the air.

[... they grieved... they always grieve...]

The small runt, the little thing, the unnamed deformity, had long since been jostled from its spot near the square altar which had once upon a time served as a place of meditation for the long-since defunct priesthood. A Jotun had kicked the poor thing without even noticing it and the blue and brown bundle rolled painfully off the stairs, ending up underneath an icy ledge and overhang, hidden from sight by the corpse of a blonde-haired Asgardian corpse which fell close by soon after.

Stunned and bruised it lay there silently.

[... Heimsrsal wept...]

Chapter End Notes

KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH! BABY ABUSE! [flails] [pets Loki]
There, there, KI is here.

So some of you might be like, this is unrealistic... Actually babies are quite hardy. First, quite a few late-term babies actually survive abortions and have to be killed (don't know how to say this in a nicer way) outside the womb (read this while researching abortion procedures). Secondly, Loki is a Jotunn baby (even if a runt) and that means... HIGH MASS and DENSITY and stuffs. So... even though he doesn't do a thing, I think this baby!Loki is freaking BAMF.

Glossary:

Aldinn Statthr – Ancient Place
Atfirth – energies

blakkrbjorr – black beer
Blakkrbjorn – black bear
blakkrgras – black grass
blargras – blue grass

Dagaheim
dvegr – dwarf
dyrspeki – zoologist

Eybjarg (Chasms of Forever)
fauld – a part of armour around the lower midsection
Flara River – Treacherous River
For-Eldra – Ancestors
Forn Vegr – Old Ways

Gastropnir
Gnottvatn (Lake of Abundance)
Gothahus – temple
Grarfjall – Grey Mountains
grarulfr – grey wolves
Griotunagardar

hafnathr – sea serpents
heillgrjot – healing stones
Heimsrsal – Soul of the Realm
Holdra River – Hero's River
holkimurtr – small flat fish
Holkn Vollr – Flat Plains
holmganga – a method of ending feuds/disagreements
hvaeta – wheat

jarnkottr – iron cat (beast which Laufey released in Thor)
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Lengi Ofrithr – Long War

manisilfr – moonsilver
Myrkr Skogr – shadow forest

Nattura – spirits
Northri Stjarna – North Star

silvrfiskr – silver fish
Sithr Efingi – True Heir
Skalldi
skordyr – Jotunheim goat
Storholl – Great Hall

thurblakulfr – giant black wolves
tunglbom (moonflower)

Utgard

vaetki – nothing
ventrmellin – winter melon
Virtha Aevi – Coming of Age
Vollrvatn – Lake of the Plains
Well... here it is. Chapter 4. Put out on my Sunday... I dunno how China is related to you guys, but I hope you enjoy it whenever you get the chance to read!

AAAANNNND... was on Tumblr and Youtube until 4:30 AM yesterday. Tom Hiddleston - I hate you! You make me do stupid stuff like stay up too late! WAIIIIIIIIIIIIII DO I DO THIS TO MYSELF? MADNESS! Hiddlestoner madness!

(typical lack of desire to take responsibility for mad fangirl actions).

Although I was rather displeased by the amount of drama among celeb fangirls. I had wanted to become a famous writer... now, I'm questioning that. To be pestered. 24/7. I mean, I know it's his JOB in a way and I know that Asian actors have to do WAAAYYYY MORE (like Hhyeul stars)... but still, give him space, people! Let him go home early and chill and stuff. You can mail him and get his autograph the easy way if you think having something he signed is important. [Although, I must admit that I would accept a letter from him - but that has more words than just his name which equals more meaning.] Anyways...

British men are hot. But even more exciting... men with long hair. AKA new Loki. Do you see a theme in my comments?

Onwards.

Thank you amazing reviewers! (Those who were so kind to comment and let me know they're enjoying the story thus far!)

Dunno if I can see Ironman 3 though. It's hard to get to a movie out here. LOLZ. Just too much issues getting tickets and crap and lining up. And I'm lazy...

Anyways. I feel like I'm enjoying myself with this story for some reason and I'm just excited about what I've got planned. I know it's good form to play it cool. But I'm not...

(sigh)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 4
Ugly Twist of Fate

[... here, here, the strands of Time splinter most unpleasantly...]

Whatever glory the temple held before the Battle at Utgard (as it came to be called), it was lost now. Power which had run through the Aldinn Stathr and outwards through the citadel had disappeared as the Casket was lifted from its pedestal and escorted under guard to the Bifrost site and taken to Asgard immediately. To the Asgardians, it was a small matter – an easily achieved affair, with the
High Guard Commander carrying the thing wrapped in blue silk and put in a wood box and then taken to the Bifrost site and Heimdall, activating the Bridge, called them and their treasure home.

It was a simple matter of placing it within the King's chambers and locking the rooms under strict surveillance until Odin returned and dealt with the matter himself. Such magical items, Odin All-Father believed, were best kept under lock and key, far away from those who would use it for ill – whether they be Jotunn or Asgardian.

This, of course, did not sit well with the Aesir High Council of Magics and Academics, but no one dare gainsay the All-Father and so, the Casket was stowed away – to become yet another stolen relic of a forgotten age.

With its removal from the realm of Jotunheim, a silence fell – a hush as any who had been gifted with a spark of magic felt the spirit of the realm die out.

[... a cry of mourning rose...]

By the time the Odin All-Father made it down to the Under Altar, he was spent. Aching and tired, he contemplated the scene of massacre which surrounded him and continued out into the street. A glorious day? He wondered. To some, perhaps, it will be remembered as a time of victory. To others...

Deep voices rose and there was a clash of bone and metal as the Jotunn renewed their struggle in an effort to push past the Asgardians to the Bifrost site. To regain the treasure they had lost. The pain and anger of the crippled people drowned out the anxious cry of the abandoned runt, muffled by the purple cape of an Asgardian warrior.

As if conflicted, Odin paused. Then froze as he thought he heard a sound – surely that was not? – he turned – but then the harsh cry of enraged Jotunn rose again. Shaking his head, chastising himself for his weariness, Odin focused on the task at hand. His guards were coming down the stairs even now with Laufey in tow.

Moving away from the Under Altar, the white-haired, one-eyed, weary Asgardian King turned toward his new captive and nodded. With that, Laufey and Odin walked out side by side followed by the company of guards.

The Gothahus, the Aldinn Stathr, the High and the Under Altar, were left in peace – and quiet came again to the room. The quiet of the dead.

And had its voices not been stolen and abandoned in turn, the Heimsrsal would have foretold the dangers which lay ahead for the Nine Realms alike – as Fate's cords twisted and warped.

But such is destiny.

-0-0-0-

The following day, to ensure the Jotunn would think twice before attacking – even as crippled as they were – the Mages were corralled and executed, wiping out the last of any magical might and learning to be found in the icy kingdom. Laufey, tall, bitter and silent, did not bow, nor did he weep. Face stony, he watched several hours later as Odin-King, turned, met his red eyes and nodded, the golden light surrounded the remaining Aesir force and the Asgardians were gone, leaving Jotunheim to drown in darkness.

Reaching the golden city, Odin did not return to his chamber immediately. Rather, his weary steps took him to his wife's chambers where Frigga sat in the pink of health with a heavy bundle in her
arms – a loud, cheerful bundle of energy and warmth. Thor. That was what they had named him. A powerful name for a powerful king who would one day be as mighty as the force of Nature itself.

"How is he?" he breathed looking down at the blue eyes which stared back at him holding a wonderful sense of glee and innocence.

"How is he?" Frigga rose right away and put the baby in the small, intricately carved cot by her bed. "Thor is well enough – but you look like you have been in the wars," she joked a little, trying to lighten the mood. She paused at the sight of his face and his still red and sore empty eye socket and her voice rose a little in pitch and strength. "Oh... Your eye!"

"It was necessary," grunted Odin. "It will heal – in a manner of speaking."

"Why did you not go to the healers? You know how this kind of thing –" Frigga didn't complete her sentence as she rushed to the doors of her room and called a servant to fetch the Royal Healers. "Dearest, you must take better care of yourself or little Thor will have no Father to look up to! Next time, you will lose a leg or some such –"

"There will be no next time," Odin said heavily. "The news will spread even now – our battle with Jotunn has ended. The war is over. Much loss on Utgard – and many will join their forefathers in Valhalla, but we have won."

"My dear..."

"So much death," Odin shook his head and then allowed his wife to lead him to a chair by the hearth where she eased him back and began to take off his armour, throwing it carelessly aside. "I did not know where to look. Numbing and horrific and overwhelming. The blood of our warriors mingled with theirs – in the end – it was as if everyone was... the same... brothers in death. And for what? So meaningless."

"But it is over now. It is over."

"Yes," Odin closed his remaining blue eye and sighed. "It is over. The Casket of Ancient Winters was taken and Laufey's people will never know power again. Their kingdom will fall into shadow and eventually the Void will take it – unless some kind of understanding can be brokered and a new King comes who will rule it with honour and better care."

"I am sorry to hear it," Frigga whispered. "Without it –"

"It has to be this way. You know it. But we do not have to like it. Still, we have peace."

"We have peace."

"At great cost, we have peace. Peace for their people, in a way, and more importantly, peace for our people. Peace for Thor." Odin exhaled and then smiled at Frigga, lifting a hand to caress her cheek tenderly. "That is why I came directly – to remember what was most important in the end. You... and he. Our family." A pause and he frowned. "But it is odd – I feel as though I left something behind on Jotunheim," he sighed again, shaking his head wearily, "merely the musings of an exhausted mind, I fear."

"Then rest, dear heart," Frigga said softly, humming a magical melody which eased the tension in her husband's war-weary muscles as her hands ghosted over his under-tunic. "Rest."

-0-0-0-

And thus, the spirit of the realm was broken in two. A double blow for Jotunheim, although it knew it not. The Gothahus and the Aldinn Stathr of Utgard, lay empty now, filled only with Jotun dead as yet to be gathered. Servants and younglings trickled back into the city in search of their masters and parents – and discovered a desolation only found in nightmares.

Yet, the Heimsrsal is not so easily broken. It is the backbone of the world. It is the breath of wind and the snow and the ice and the light of the stars. It is the voices of Jotunheim.

[... the silence was broken by a child's cry – but none heard it...]

[... the spirit of the world stirred...]
SOOOO SHORT! GAH!

There you go. More epic-ness - but soon it will get a bit more personal - as you can see from the small scene I put in there of Odin and Frigga and stuff... and you know, she's not Thor's mother in reality, but it's not made clear in the movie and I'm not going to make it clear here. She's with Baby Thor, yes, but Baby Thor's real mother could've died... and Odin got hitched to Frigga really quickly. Believe what you want.

Next chapter will be better/more interesting. Next chapter... Baby Loki and... someone...

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Utgard

vaetki – nothing
ventrmellin – winter melon
Virtha Aevi – Coming of Age
Vollrvatn – Lake of the Plains
A New Destiny

Chapter Notes

Well! It looks like people are slowly jumping on the DiT angst-wagon! YAY!

Thanks to everyone who reviewed and fav'd and alerted and stuff so far! I hope no one gets disappointed by this story - it's going to be a harrowing journey! For realz! Strap yourselves in!

(pauses)

OH CRAP. I forgot two important tags. Ummm... (adds) (points upward) You've been warned. (edges off screen) Now, I don't write graphic stuff. So if you're looking for an author who's going to glorify sex and the sex trade and abuse and stuff like that... this isn't the fic for you.

Otherwise, thanks for hanging in there!

[You might be thinking that this chapter is longer and epic - like Loki's hair. Sadly. It is epic, but not longer than usual. Length of this chapter is attributed to map information at the end. Enjoy!]

Please let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 5
A New Destiny

[... for those who listen, they call...]

Elska's feet dragged through the snow drifts which now piled up in the streets untended to as the Jotuns began to gather their dead. It was a long process – families reunited if possible, loved ones embraced, tallies of dead taken, the remains of supplies hoarded and divvied up – and then the mourning would begin in earnest. His mourning had already begun.

Mind blank, numbed by the carnage he passed by, Elska made his way back as if guided by puppet strings to the only place he could think of – what remained of his small home snuggled up against the lower east wing of the Gothahus. As he approached he couldn't help but shudder at the bone-dead silence of the place.

No longer a temple. Now a tomb.

Where there had been cheery starlight drawn in and enhanced by the Kero Fornvetr, where there had been pinpricks of light from candles and intricately welded iron lamps (imported from Vanahem and Alfheim), there was only dark and blood now icing over in sheets of black and red. Elska's feet crunched along the swirling patterns of red and black as he stood and looked at the tumbled down
portion of what had been the front wall of his house. The jamvithr door, of which Haffa had been so
proud... (Haffa had been so proud of the little things, the idiot, but now Haffa was nothing –

*Haffa was dead –

*and the door was gone*),

Elska turning, discovered that it had been embedded in the wall opposite, across the wide street in
which he stood. He fell onto his knees and raised his voice and howled for Haffa who had died
holding Smarmurtr in his arms impaled on a gold spear – both of them through the heart. Howled
and mourned for the darkness around him and for the blood on his hands and for the silence of the
temple which would, he knew, be filled from now on with nothing but puppet masters – and for the
loss of the his home’s power thanks to the misbegotten hubris of his people.

*Who had paid in the end but we ourselves who would not let go our foolish dreams? And how did we pay – but with the lives of the ones we loved. Haffa. Smarmurtr.*

With a heaving sigh, Elska rose to his feet. Tomorrow, he would clear the dead and wash the steps
and prepare the Gothahus as best as he could for whomever would come to take residence there as
the Priest or Mage.

*Not that there will be any of those for a long time to come,* he sighed. Casting an eye to the lowering
sky now filling with clouds, promising more snow and less starlight, Elska decided to find shelter
within, somewhere in one of the small storerooms – or libraries – if they had not been discovered and
pillaged and destroyed. He paused at the door and then looked back down the street at the empty
houses further down.

*First, he thought, I must forage for some food. With ill health there will be little work done.*

-0-0-0-

After an hour of searching, Elska returned to his home with a sack slung over his shoulder. It was
full of dried fish, blackened hvaeta loaves, roasted meats and a few imported delicacies of which he
knew not the name. There was no one to eat them, but Elska hoped that the ones who had passed on
and become one with the snow of their Ancestors would understand.

Stowing the bag within the closest storeroom by the front door, Elska stepped out and round to his
damaged home. Hefting the black rock and ice chunks away with a variety of curses, the Jotun
caretaker managed to rescue his family’s cooking equipment. Haffa’s prized treasure which he had
haggled over. Many a dear coin had been spent on the metal pots and pans, for the dwarves are ever
greedy and enjoy driving a hard bargain with Frost Giants.

Extricating the last of his family’s belongings, including the blakkrgras woven mats which Haffa had
hung on the walls in imitation of the elves and Aesir (*curse them*), Elska returned to his new hideout
with another bulging sack of belongings. This time, he stayed indoors, hunting down a good
storeroom with a strong lock which matched one of his many keys and then unpacking what he had
brought with him.

Some time passed, spent quietly sorting his things and stowing the food in a corner where the ice box
was set. Filling it with ice, he laid the perishable food items inside, dusted his hands off and looked
about. *Almost done,* he thought. *Now for the bed.*

That was easily gotten from a drift of snow outside the Gothahus.

He laid down in the pile of snow he had gathered. Stared up at the black ceiling. *Emptiness. Empty*
thoughts. Empty spaces. A vast, yawning void – like the darkness of the Void. It brought nightmares, the ones all Jotun feared as children. Look into the Chasms of Forever too long, they said, and it will never leave your eyes. Fall into the Eybjarg and your death will be slow and desperate and your soul will never reach the company of the For-Eldra.

It threatened to swallow him whole – until the light of a most powerful star reached toward Elska. The Northri Stjarna? Without second thought, Elska stepped forward and reached out – and that was when he heard it –

[... the stars sang together...]
[... the music of the spheres...]

A chiming voice calling his name and Elska answered –
"Here I am! Haffa!"

He woke. It was not Haffa. It would never be Haffa. Haffa was even now suckling Smarmurtr in the company of the For-Eldra. Elska turned and forced his wail of rage and grief down – and heard a sound drifting on the wind.

[... the wind's voices are many...]

A thin, weak wailing. Light and piercing.

Grarulfr? Blakkrbjorn? Or a child? Elska rose heart racing and wrapping his kirtle about his waist hastily, he strode out the room in search of the voice. The scuffling of his feet and the crunching of ice was too loud. He stopped. Listened.

Patience...

There, there it was again.

Elska hunted down the hallways listening carefully. It was a desperate thing and young by the sounds of it – and as he drew closer, he realized that it must be an abandoned babe.

Over here...

It was difficult to see in the deep watches of the night, for no light shimmered along the walls except the small torch in his hand. Elska thanked his For-Eldra for his acute night vision when he pressed close to the wall and noticed an absurdly tiny bundle of coarse sackcloth almost completely iced over with Asgardian blood.

Small. Pitifully small. Horrifically small. An abomination. A lagreinn. A Jotun dvegr. Cursed. He nearly dropped it – but the frail blue creature opened bleary red eyes and Elska's heart softened unaccountably at the sight of dark patches on its face and the one arm which had freed itself. Heavy bruising. No doubt it had been knocked about in the battle which had taken place here.

Take him...

Elska could swear he could hear Haffa's voice as he pushed the rough sacking away from the babe's forehead revealing the rounded lines of the House of Laufey. For a moment, he could not believe his eyes... and then the Caretaker remembered the rumours. Elska's stomach clenched as he recalled how Laufey-King had tired so easily during the most recent months. Somehow, he had begun to carry a True Heir despite the war – and had failed.
Was it a war wound which had forced the child out too early? Or had expediency demanded Laufey to be free of this burden? At any rate, Elska sighed, it does not belong anywhere. Not even here. I should leave it on the Under Altar for the nattura...

Tears were rolling down the sides of its puny bald head and the tiny hand brushed against Elska's thumb which firmly held the babe against the palm of his hand. Elska froze as the tiny fingers latched onto his darker thumb – the tiny yawning mouth opened again in a helpless bleat and the tall caretaker's red eyes widened as green wisps drifted from the tiny fingers.

*Take ahold of hope...*

*It has magic,* he thought, his stomach churned. *By the stars and the moonlight, the child has magic – but it is a runt,* he corrected himself. *Still, it is alive,* argued the other side of him, the side that sounded like Haffa and the voices of the world. *And all living things deserve a chance.*

*That may be true – but is this life worth saving considering what lies ahead for it? Likely its brain will never grow – it will be a child forever.*

*But it will be a child,* said Haffa. *It will be my child.*

*Never let it go...*

Chapter End Notes

Well... Does Elska keep the little thing? Does it live? Does it more than thrive? What will happen next? GAAAHHHH!
OK. I dunno why I'm freaking out. I KNOW what happens. LOLZ.
Gosh. I'm liking little Jotun Loki a -little- too much.

Just a little.

Please REVIEW!

Update will probably happen sometime on Friday or Saturday!

THE MAP OF DOOM:
http://s1354.photobucket.com/user/scarecrowslady/media/Fanfiction%20Fanart/labelled-JotunheimmapFINAL_zps04751133.jpg.html

Legend

Cities (Yellow Dots)

1. Dagaheim
2. Utgard
3. Gastropnir
4. Meerauk
5. Griotunagardar
6. Skalldi
7. Thrymheim
8. Vatnboer
9. Snjarhamr

Lakes (Light Blue Dots)
10. Mykyreg Vatn
11. Vollrvatn
12. Gnottvatn
13. Silrvvatn
14. Vithrivatn
15. Grjotvatn

Mountains (Grey Dots)
16. Grarfjall
17. Kaldrfjall
18. Offaerfjall
19. Offaerdalr (pass)
20. Svelshelf (ice shelf/plateau)
21. Thokafjall
22. Vestrefstland (west highlands)
23. Austrefstland (east highlands)
24. Nethriland (low land/canyon)
25. Blarsvel Fjord (fjords)

Woods (Green Dots)
26. Mykyr Skogr
27. Doga Skogr
28. Jathar Skogr
29. Offaer Skogr
30. Smar Skogr
31. Eybjarga Skogr

Plains (Green Dots)
32. Holkn Vollr
33. Auster Vollr
34. Mornathbjoth (the Wastes)
35. Nether Vollr

Rivers (Dark Blue Dots)
36. Flara River
37. Holdra River
38. Vestrisilvra River
39. Austrisilvra River
40. Gleytha River
41. Vithra River
42. Eybjarg River
43. Kvistra Rivers
44. Bathhra River

OTHER
45. Eybjarg
Drekeinn Eyland (the big island)
THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR REVIEWING! (tears)

Some of you may be at the point where you can't wait for the next chapter to come out... and if you enjoy my writing style, I'd like to encourage you to read "Christmas Magic", my first attempt at writing in the Avengers fandom. It's very complex - very sad and happy at the same time, and you may need tissues... but the ending is happy so it's a general feel-good story. But if you want nice!shining-white-armour!Avengers, stay away from it. They are VERY conflicted in this story... And it's quite a looonnnnggg story (like epic hair Loki's new do). Like... majorly. But it's complete! So there's that...

At any rate... more Elska and Loki up ahead... and other things happen too. Don't expect the happiness (such as it is) to remain for long! (heads up)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 6
Crawl Before Walking

Sh-sh-sh-shh... It was the sound of scuffling – leather on hard ice and stone. Scuffling and the occasional jingle of metal. In the dim light of the evening, it was easy to miss, but the keen eyes of three Jotunn passing by were drawn downwards to the slight figure darting across the broad avenue in front of the Gothahus. Two faces twitched in annoyance and the third Jotun, a new inhabitant from the frozen countryside, drew back in horror.

"An Abomination!" he hissed, pulling his friend to the side.
"Ah, that would be Elska's lagreinn."

They watched as the dark hair bobbed closer their way, trying to hug the shadows of the wall – but failing as the pot constantly tripped it up. It paused, hunkered by a bank of newly fallen snow and began to scoop up amounts of the cold white stuff to stow it in the small tin pot. A small pot by Jotunn standards of course – to the Jotun dvegr, it was no doubt the size of a barrel. But snow was light and it was important that leeches like the runt should show their uses.

If such cursed things had uses.

"Ilska, I forgot you didn't know about it, being new and all –" The tallest boomed good-naturedly.
"Well, that's Elska's Folly."
"He bore a dvegr and did not leave it for the nattura?" asked Ilska, confused.
"Well, if it is Elska's..." The other much more squat Jotun murmured.

The pot was nearly full now and the creature paused at the sound of their voices, peering up and then scurrying back to press against the wall and let them pass.
"What thing does it wear on its head, Feitr?"
"Hair," snorted Feitr. "You really are a bumpkin, Ilska. Have you not seen any elves or Aesir?"
"I was too young for the wars – and Dagaheim was never attacked..."
"It is hair, and a strange sight, since our young ones never have a chance to grow it so long... Ah - and a leather forehead band – no doubt to protect what little mind it has within its skull," Hraezla added.

Ilska moved forward, leaned over and down to eye the puny creature some more.

"I can't wait to tell Meglin this... we never allowed this kind of thing to happen in Dagaheim."
"Yes, well," Feitr huffed, "you aren't in Dagaheim now, are you? Come leave it alone –" He paused as Ilska flicked the creature on the cheek.

It flinched but did not cry, merely shrinking back against the stone wall of the Gothahus. Ilska watched, fascinated, as a dark bruise began to form on the pale blue skin.

"It does not speak. Is it mute – or witless?"
"More than likely both," shrugged Hrazla with disinterest. "Elska swears it speaks – but we never hear it – and frankly, we don't speak to it either. Bad luck comes to those who consort with their like."

Ilska drew his hand back as if it had been burnt and he shuffled back nervously.

"They said that in Dagaheim as well."
"It is commonsense. Let us go. Elska may condemn himself to cursed company – he is a walking dead man after all."
"But to protect a lagreinn..."
"Ignore it, ignore it," sighed Feitr.
"It looks so sickly," Ilska said as the three of them moved off. "The colour of his blue is too delicate."
"Lacks some kind of nutrient, no doubt – we all lack what we need and it is not like a dvegr may have first pickings."
"I would have snapped its neck –"

They disappeared around the corner and the street fell silent once again, leaving the small shivering creature to stand there staring at its feet for a small moment before scurrying back to its pot and new burden of snow.

[... but the echoes remain and the words cut sharper than the wind...]

Abomination.
Vaetki.
No-thing.
Deformed.
Lagreinn.
Small one.
Runt.
Cursed.
Dvegr.
Dwarf.

These were the names of the creature who grew within the House of Elska the following years. It was a hard life, full of toil and loneliness. Watching the lagreinn patter across the icy floors, struggling to lift a metal pot of snow in its frail, skinny arms, Elska wondered sometimes if his choice
had been just or intelligent. Commonsense (but Haffa never cared for commonsense) dictated that the child was better off dead.

For Utgard was a tomb.

Utgard, for a while now, had remained more or less empty – a ruined citadel of a more martial time. Poor refugees stayed whilst more fortunate Jotunn moved to the bustling cities of Griotunagardar, which had been easily raised after the fires of Asgard had abated – or Gastropnir. To towns further east, some departed - to Thrymheim and the other great capitols.

But Utgard stood alone, barren and wasted. Cursed by the mark of the Bifrost outside its gates and the dark horrors of the Eybjarg beyond. Its inhabitants found sustenance on the edges of the Myrkr Skogr and, harvesting the jarnvithr which grew there plenteously, found a means for income to buy the other necessities of life.

Useless leeches like the lagreinn were a burden no one wished to bear, but Elska shouldered it without complaint. Haffa was happy. Elska was sure of it. This evening he had decided on a thin soup for their dinner – his favourite which meant bear meat and winter melon. Sooner made than later, if the small one quickly returned with the second pot of snow he had ordered.

"Small one," Elska hollered down the ancient hallway. "Sometime before the moon sets tonight would be – ah. There you are."

He peered down at the insect (now that's an exaggeration, Haffa would say) which scuttled forward, tripping over its own feet in eagerness to please – eyes wide with worry and concentration as it staggered forward. Elska lifted the small pot from the arms of the lagreinn with ease. Small red eyes the size of pebbles (to him) watched with intensity as Elska poured the snow into another medium-sized pot placed on burning red stones by the hearth. Soon the thick iron cauldron would turn a slight red as the fire heated the metal. But the lagreinn did not press forward, keeping back – a harsh lesson it had learned when Elska had placed its hands on the fiery rocks, burning away the tender palms. Jotunheim's first and most important lesson in life: the danger of fire.

*If Haffa and Smarmurtr were here, Haffa would have done the same,* Elska chuckled to himself. *Haffa said that I would father a child just grandly. Perhaps he is right...* He eyed the lagreinn. *Perhaps I would not do as badly as I feared. It helps that it learns quickly. In the end, the deformation is of the body only – in a way, this is a mind so great a weaker vessel is the only way nature may gift it disadvantage.*

Elska had been considering this for the past ten years as the small infant grew. It had learned how to walk – and could already speak some, although only a few words and none fluently, for no Jotun would pay attention to it in the streets if it were to attempt conversation. Talking with a runt brought bad luck, or so they said.

*We have already been cursed,* Elska grunted to himself. *It can't get worse than this.*

"You think it cold out tonight?" he asked the youngling who still stood at his side watching the water boil with interest.

The small head – now covered in long hair not so dissimilar to the Aesir, but black instead of gold – nodded. Elska reached down and stroked back the slightly matted locks, noting how the braiding had come undone. A leather thong was missing from one end. *One day,* he thought, *he will grow horns and his hair will molt and reveal the wires of an adult. Or perhaps not. He is a beautiful creature in his own right – if you look hard enough.*
"Use words, small one," he prompted.
"Yes, Elska," was the soft lisping reply. "It is cold."
"Hm. You think snow will fall?"

A fairly standard conversation between the two for an average evening. Elska turned away from the pot and reached for a shank of blakkbjorn and large chunks of ventrmellin and the spicy sauce and herbs that disguised the sweetness. Turning he noticed that the lagreinn's right cheek was rather bruised. He frowned, sighed and said nothing. There was nothing to be said. It understood as much as he – Jotunheim had no need for the lagreinn and by compassion alone was it allowed to live. Still, Elska knew that the child had much to offer. More than we could ever imagine, he thought.

The small one shook his head in answer to his question and Elska did not push it. Then a small voice broke the silence haltingly.

"The stars are... big..."
"Yes, they do shine brightly, do they not?" agreed Elska. "No clouds make for a beautiful sky. It reminds me of the times when Utgard used to shine. When the King made this his stronghold and favoured resting place."
"The King?"
"The King," Elska repeated. "My father?"
"Yes, Laufey-King. And you know we do not speak of your father. Come now. Straighten your headband."

Untying the leather strap with fumbling fingers, the small child took it off for a moment, revealing the tell-tale lines of his house before replacing the headband and tying the ends behind his head over his ears. It was a makeshift thing, but did its job – protecting the lagreinn from early death.

Idiots who would wish to curry favour with the King would seek to relieve him of his so-called burden... but the lack of enquiry is obvious. The King has no fear nor love of the creature. Let it live. It is what Haffa would have wanted. That was what Elska told himself – and later on that evening after dinner had been finished and the lagreinn had laboriously cleaned the bowls and ladles they had used, Elska combed the lagreinn's long black hair out with a comb Haffa had bought for Smarmurtr.

Smarmurtr would understand, Elska thought as he re-plaited the small one's long locks into one neat row. They have never met - but they are brothers. In spirit.

Ordinarily, after several more Jotunn winters (closer to a decade), Jotunn younglings would gain a roughness to their skin. Eventually, after many years (closer to a century), their hair would fall out or harden and the small horns of adult Jotunn would begin to bud. At that time, the little protection offered them against the elements would no longer be required. But a runt may be weak against the cold forever, sighed Elska. Pray to the Nattura that it be not so.

"Well now," he turned his mind away from such thoughts, "what letter were we learning today?"

With these magical words, the lagreinn wriggled out of his lax fingers and ran over to the large bookshelf and hefted the Jotunn language primer which Elska had excavated out of his old home. Haffa had used it, apparently, when he had been but a youngling and Smarmurtr would have learned his letters from it in his time as well. Although a lowly caretaker, Elska loved language and had often delved into the mage's library in the Gothahus's west wing. Now, he was the only one to enjoy such
texts – until the rightful owners returned.

"You have been learning quickly, little one," Elska said in praise, once again stroking the fine black hair and then lifting the petite child as the lagreinn chanted "Up! Up!"

The caretaker smiled down with pride at the clear blue face and the now familiar curves and lines which whorled along his cheeks and chin. Intent red eyes met his briefly. Elska nodded. It is better the small one learns his place, he sighed. Less pain for him in the future. Still, it is a pity that such intelligence is so limited by what we expect from our people.

"Right then," he said. "Today we learn the last letter and then we will learn how to mix them together. The last letter is ae."
"Aye."
"Ae," corrected Elska. "Ae!"
"Ae!"
"Hm. Better. Let's put together two sounds. Thae!"
"Thae!"
"Sae."
"Thae," the little mouth struggled to form the word and a small chin wobbled as eyes became huge at the realization of the rather obvious mistake.
"What a lisp," chided Elska. "But I know you can do it! Try again."
"Sss-th-ssae."
"And again..."
"Ssssaes."
"Hm. Pretend you are a sea serpent. Ssss."
"Ssssthsss."
"Haha. Well. Let that be practice for you all day tomorrow. Now. To write this letter, you must connect the 'a' sound right next to the 'eh' sound. See how they join back to back like mates?"
"Ae."
"Now, follow the lines as I do."

Together they practised writing along the black lines of the large book and then Elska sent the young one off to bed in the corner – but allowed the small creature to repeat the sounds they had learned three times before dowsing the fire.

Even with the lights out, Elska could hear the small voice whispering to itself under the small fur square Elska had found for it.

"A, B, D, Th, E, Eh, F, G, H..."

[... the wind of the world steals the soft chant away...]

[... Jotunheim is waiting...]

Chapter End Notes

Eh! TOT LOKI! ADORABLE! Yes?
Say yes!

Tell me what you think!
So, if you guys are curious, my top fandoms are: Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, Star Trek, Sherlock, Doctor Who, anything to do with Loki, Naruto/Naruto Shippuuden, Bleach. I have MANY other interests (Garth Nix's "Keys to the Kingdom" and Psycho-Pass, as well as a few K-dramas... to name a few) but really, I write fic only for Naruto and Avengers nowadays... and I want to write something for Star Wars, one day, particularly on X-wing pilots.

I currently label myself an avid Hiddlestoner. I want to see Hiddleston and Cumberbatch duke out a charm battle on a talk show - preferably Graham Norton since he's so funny. But, frankly, both guys are great... I think I just love Hiddleston's degree. LOLZ. A man who can speak Ancient Greek can... well... let's not go there...
Cruelty of Love

Chapter Notes

OK. And the downward trend begins... NOW! Um. Yeah, so read the warnings. You've been warned. Don't like? Don't read. :)

In this particular chapter the warnings about physical abuse of a minor happens. In other words, pedophilic advances. I do not think this is a good thing and this is not meant to titillate or make you feel warm inside. If you do get off on this kind of thing, you may want to get a therapist. Or something. In other words, if you hate a certain someone... please click-y on the review box and foam to your hearts content!

Thank you guys sooooo much for chatting and commenting! It's great to hear questions and bounce off ideas and stuff. I really feel encouraged when people give me a shout out - and I wish I could thank you better for your comments... I hope this chapter will suffice as thanks. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 7
Cruelty of Love

Five winters later, a Mage newly pressed into service of the King returned to Jotunheim. The weary inhabitants of the yet ruined city raised their voices with joy and expectation. With the arrival of the Mage, surely Laufey would return sooner than later – and Utgard would be restored to its former glory. Such hopes filled the air and it did not matter that the winds from Dagaheim and Thrymheim were so bitter that season.

Mage Opna was no sorcerer, not even a magician – but the service of tending to the Altars remained and the protection of the Archives. Elska's workload increased as he the hitherto untouched reaches of the Gothahus were opened. The small one was also pressed into service, running errands to various rooms, carrying what its now larger arms could handle, taking notes for Elska or bringing and sending messages to others in the city. Thanks to its short legs, the lagreinn could not reach the far ends of the city, but it could get to the closest plant and meat markets and that was enough for Elska.

Weaving blakkrgras together, the caretaker fashioned a miniature stiff broom for the tiny child and set it to work clearing out the snow from hallways and from the outside steps and around the Altars. An hour later, half of the room had been cleared away and the little one was working cheerfully in the far corner. The Mage, emerging from the largest study he had commandeered, eyed the runt with disfavour, his red eyes narrowing.

"Elska," his voice boomed down the hallway. "What is that thing... doing?"

Elska, poking his head out of the newly furnished pantry, glanced over at the small figure on the far side of the room, head bent as the lagreinn focused on his task.
"Sweeping, I should think," Elska finally said slowly, wondering if their new mage was soft in the head or just trying to pick a quarrel. "I thought you would wish the rooms clear of debris for when supplicants arrive. And they will come, depend upon it."

"Hmph... Well, keep that vaetki away – a defiled Mage is the last thing Utgard needs if Laufey is to come by this place again. Try to make its puny mind understand, Elska."

"Yes, Mage Opna."

"Very well. I will be in my study. Prepare the Dagaheim blargras brew. My neck is especially sore today."

"Yes, Mage Opna."

Elska sighed soundlessly to himself. Mage Opna was going to be a handful. He could tell already. Later on that night, he watched the lagreinn study a large tome that Elska had borrowed from the library. His heart tightened at the sight of the too slender shoulders. They look too puny to be normal, Elska frowned. Not that there are any accounts of Jotunn dwarves and it is uncertain as to what its weight should truly be... but the bone is sharp beneath the skin and there is not enough fat on it. No doubt the magic of the creature steals away any resources it may have.

He laid a hand on the tiny shoulder and looked down at the book. A basic treatise on Jotunn magicks. Already, the lagreinn was showing further signs of magical development. Elska remembered how a fortnight ago, the small one had changed his skin colour to the pale white-blue hue more common to Dark Elves. Apparently, shape shifting was as natural as breathing to the lagreinn. Elska leaned closer to look at the textbook now opened before the little one. This lesson was on moving from one space to another instantaneously – a matter of legends, but if anyone could achieve it, this one would, Elska believed, massaging his aching chest absently.

"Elska is not well?"

Older, red eyes glanced down at the younger pair and he laid a comforting hand on the lagreinn's head and forced a smile.

"Just tired," he said. "It has been a long day."

"Yes..." For a moment, the lagreinn studied the page and then whispered, "Master Opna has much to say."

"Too bad his words have less worth than Kolvi's rotten fish," chuckled Elska.

The lagreinn snickered softly but fell silent soon after and said nothing more for the rest of the evening.

Outside the wind howled, promising a long and harsh winter. Clouds scudded quickly across the sky blanking out the stars, promising more snow, and Elska gathered the hot rock scuttle and carried it down to Master Opna's wing just in case the mage desired some warmth – or liquid water come morning time. For a moment there was no sound except the whistle of the gale as it tore at the jarnvithr shutters, the sound of ice debris rolling down the avenue, the faraway crumbling of a neglected tower and the clattering of some boarding left unfastened. Then, there was the crunching of Elska's large feet as he returned down the hallway, the creak of the door as he opened it and then the spit and hiss of the red-hot rocks as he bent over their supper.

And so, a few more winters passed and Elska's worries increased as the pain in his chest also grew. The mage and two healers who now reigned supreme over the west wing of the Gothahus (and the entire neighbourhood) examined the caretaker after one particularly difficult bout. In the corner of the room, shrinking against the blakkrgras wall-hanging, the lagreinn watched with wide, worried eyes as Elska lay back, grumbling quietly. Casting a glare at the as yet tiny runt, Mage Opna swept out of the room followed by the healers, deep in conference.
In between meditation services, healing hours (long painful times in which poultices were applied and meaningless prayers were mumbled and the lagreinn gained more bruising from thrashing patients or the less patient healers), and basic feud settling, the mage applied his mind to the matter at hand. The healers when they returned to the still bed-ridden Elska (whose duties were now being completed by a younger, hot-headed Jotun named Thyrstr), they did not bring glad tidings.

"It is a condition of the heart – no doubt damaged during the war... we could not help but notice the wound you bear," long black-nailed fingers ghosted over the aged scar above the Jotun's breast. "And your years are many... I am surprised you have held on this long after the death of your mate. Many of us pass soon after our Other Souls are gone." An awkward pause. "The time for your passing may be sooner upon you than we would like."

"I cannot leave now," Elska gritted out, his sharp teeth grinding against each other holding back the pain which tried to force itself past his throat. "I have... have duties..."

"Thyrstr will take your place as proud Caretaker of the Gothahus," Mage Opna said calmly, leaning back to lift a potion from the table. "The dead do not carry the burdens and duties of the living."

I am not dead yet, fool, Elska growled to himself mentally. And I was not thinking of the Gothahus...

He kept his eyes off the lagreinn. It would not do to draw attention to the poor creature during a time like this. When the mage and healers left, Elska beckoned and drew the lageinn up onto the snow bed beside him. The small head leaned forward to listen to the thud-thudthud of Elska's traitorous heart and diminutive red eyes, filled with unshed tears, rose to meet his.

"Do not be afraid, little one," Elska said softly. "Not for me."

"Does it hurt?"

"A little."

"Do you wish for a potion? A drink? A blanket? Some matting to lay your –"

"Peace, little one," Elska sighed and drew the tiny, blue skinned shoulders closer, so that the young child curled up by him in the snow, its still dark-haired head resting on his larger shoulder as if it were a gigantic pillow. "You are more used to the snow now, I see. Perhaps you will be strong like your father and withstand the roughest winters yet."

"I would rather be like you," was the soft reply. "Fixing things and making things and hunting."

"You will," Elska said. "You will. You are strong, little lagreinn. You will make Haffa and Smarmurtr and I very proud – wherever we are."

"Tell me again about Smarmurtr. The story with the fish." The lagreinn did not wish to think of Elska being anywhere but by his side.

"Well now, that is your favourite tale, is it not? It began when Haffa found a fish and instead of killing it, he brought it home alive in a bowl of crystal –"

And so the night passed and days and weeks also and finally one day, Elska passed too.

[... Heimsrsal bent down, sweeping her child into her bosom, and brought him home...]

[... the nameless one cried...]

He was alone. Yet, some days, he thought: not alone enough.

"Is there no creature more witless than you? I think not!" Mage Opna's loud voice rattled the jarnvithr shutters as he yelled down at the lagreinn who stood before him. The mage was seated in his study, books open before him and he glared down at the watery tea which had just been served him. A large hand rose and descended, landing on the thin cheek snapping the lagreinn's head around. The blow sent the small creature sprawling and after a few moments, it struggled to its feet again and bent its head in silent apology, listening to his master's rant. "Jotun dvegr is no name for
you, vaetki! I told you already the roots must be boiled on the rocks for three minutes – no more, no less! Do you hear me, you witless thing?"

A quick nod.

"Make it again!" snarled the Jotunn throwing the entire service tray and cups and metal teapot at the vaetki which dared not raise its arms in defence. It had learned quickly that was the surest route to a worse beating. With trembling hands, the vaetki gathered up the as yet hot teapot, setting it on the tray next to the mug, now emptied.

"Bring back something besides the swill you think is worth drinking – and clean up the mess on the floor," snapped Mage Opna and he turned back to his desk, muttering.

The vaetki scuttled off, still too-short legs tripping over each other to get to the kitchen and try again. This time, it would have to be perfect. Carefully, he rubbed off the mug and the tray and set the kettle again on to boil. Watching the water carefully, the too slender vaetki absently rubbed snow from the ice box on the now growing burns which laced his shoulders and chest thanks to the warm teapot which had hit him. Dull red eyes watched the flames leap and burn.

I wish I was but a flame, he thought, fingers rising to ghost over his now very swollen cheek. Or like Elska – here, his heart tightened – here one day, gone the next. The red-orange-blue flames blurred momentarily as the youngling remembered the day he had woken up at Elska's side and the older Frost Giant had not woken at his call and his body had turned to ice harder than stone.

The healers had burst into the room yelling something about cursed ones and he remembered the horror of guilt as he realized that perhaps this was something he had done – he tried to reach for Elska, force the green life of magic back into the still form – but Mage Opna had dragged him away, beaten him into silence – and thrown him into the small cupboard he now called home –

A sharp whistle jolted the vaetki out his dark memories and his hands were busy for a short time. At the correct moment, the Dagaheim blargras so favoured by the Mage Opna was added to the teapot with precise measurements – just like a potion, the vaetki thought, if only I could make potions like Master Lind – and then the boiling water was added. Setting the lid on the pot right away, the vaetki patiently counted to a hundred before setting it onto the tray and carrying it out. By the time the tea arrived at the door, it would have brewed correctly – if the batch of blargras was strong enough. If it wasn't, he would be beaten again. The vaetki bit his lip.

This time, the tea was received with a grunt and a peremptory wave of the hand. After quietly mopping up the half-frozen mess of old tea on the stone paving, he fled. It was dark now – time for supper. Creeping back into the kitchen, the vaetki hunted down two small bowls of food he had managed to scrape together – from the leftovers tossed by the others earlier that evening. Quickly, the vaetki finished the bowls of ventrmellin and blakkrbjorn.

Elska's favourite.

He choked it down trying not to sniffle over the memory and then read a little from the magical tome he had hidden and still studied carefully every night. When it was time to dowse the fire, the vaetki slipped open the secret drawer on the side of the cupboard and eased the book in, shutting it carefully away, before drawing the hot rocks into the inner hearth where they would smoulder for the rest of the night.

Then, easing himself into the small jarnvithr cupboard, the vaetki curled up on his now slowly extended fur blanket (stitched with his clumsier, less tutored fingers). If he closed his eyes, he could imagine the sound of Elska's rattling sleep-noise and the smell of wintergreen. The vaetki's eyes
tightly against the unshed tears. If Mage Opna heard him, or the healers, he would hobble on aching legs all day long. They seemed to gain some kind of satisfaction from his whimpers of pain and it seemed like everyday they found something he had done wrong which deserved a strike against the back of his thighs or knees.

-0-0-0-

As time went on, as the struggle to survive became more difficult, the vaetki fell mute, seemingly deaf to the epithets hurled his way. What is it? They taunted it. It is nothing. It became nothing – a tool, a useful thing to have at hand. A whipping boy. A scapegoat.

Time stole away the memories of quiet moments, of kind if awkward hands and a voice quick to laughter. Time stole away tender words and the name it once had been called – little lagreinn. Time stole away so much and left behind bruises, loneliness and abuse heaped upon abuse.

It did not cry.

The wind cried for it.

[... it always does...]

[... did you know?]

Chapter End Notes

There you go. Sadness and whumpage and pain and such-like will now commence. But there are bright rays even here. We will see.

Please let me know what you think! Concrit is much appreciated!

Next update involves Loki’s life and learning. :D
Survival

Chapter Notes

Yes! WE NOW COME TO A VERY DARK CHAPTER!

WARNING! WARNING! SEXUAL ASSAULT ETC OF A MINOR! WARNING! WARNING!

Do not go any further if this kind of thing bugs you. Now, it's not very graphic - but it's there. And you can ignore this chapter and just say 'bad things happen to little Loki’ and that's all you need to know.

Otherwise, thanks to any who chatted with me or reviewed! Give me a shout! Let me know what you think! Concrit is totes acceptable! - KI

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 8
Survival

Many winters passed. Thirty winter snows and then some rolled over the hills of Utgard – and the city grew slowly, as slowly as the vaetki living in the cupboard at the Gothahus. The child had now grown a little more – only to become scrawnier and weaker looking than ever. An everlasting hunger yawned in its stomach, filling the empty halls with its growling. Mage Opna swore that it could call to the grarulfr and bring them down on it.

Curled up in its cupboard every night, the vaetki clutched its concave belly and prayed that the grarulfr would not come. But they came anyways. In its nightmares. *Jaws slathering, fangs bared, howls reverberating through the ground and the thunderous rolling of a thousand paws and claws – and the jagged pain as they dragged it down and feasted on its trembling flesh.* It woke – panting and shivering with fear and for several moments, it lay in the dark and trembled before turning and trying to find its sleep again.

But those nightmares were not so bad.

There were others. If it were taller, if it were not a living curse, it would ask Mage Opna what the visions meant.

The dreams of utter darkness and cold which pierced its bones. *The eternal falling. The falling which knew no end. And it could not scream or call Elska's name.* Elska would not hear its call. He would not come for such as the vaetki. But something else living in the gaps of the world would. *It would.*

And there were other dreams. Dreams about *Elska dying and leaving it, because it wasn't worth living for.*

That is not true... Elska's voice whispered into the night. The vaetki, comforted by the voices of the world, would nod to itself in the dark of the night and echo the words to itself.
Visions and dreams and nightmares. Some of them based on memory, on beatings and cruel words repeating as if it were some dwarven-made mechanized puppet. And other mysterious things which left him feeling dirty and used – Mage Opna and his ungentle hands as they travelled over the welts on the vaetki's back.

"Nothing," said its master, "nothing..."

Mage Opna's voice was rough, like his Jotunn skin, and, like the stroking fingers, slithered around the vaetki's hunched body. The vaetki's hands slid protectively along the sides of its ribs – but protection was useless. And one night, when there was naught but its master in the Gothahus (the healers had departed for a trip to a neighbouring village in the Myrkr Skogr), the innocent vaetki was pulled up into the lap of his master and taught the intricate dance of pleasing his master in yet another way. It gained more bruises then, thanks to clumsiness brought on by fear and more bruises blossomed on its delicate skin when the vaetki flinched away from its master.

"I am patient, am I not?" asked Mage Opna.

The vaetki nodded softly, its hand trapped under the mage's large ones forced to linger on its master's rough skin underneath the rucked up decorated kirtle.

"Am I not?" the mage's right hand rose to trap the vaetki's chin and his lips descended, hard and bruising. Not gently on the forehead as Elska had done. Elska had always been gentle.

Trying to still its trembling, the vaetki followed the mage's instructions, keeping its hands where Mage Opna wanted until its master grunted with satisfaction. That night, it scrubbed its sticky hands with snow before curling up on its furs in the dark of its cupboard. If only, it had followed Elska to the place Elska had gone, it wished.

Even then, it did not cry.

[... and Heimsrsal wept...]

"THOR! THOR!" Frigga's voice was now rising in tone and temper as she walked down the palaces hallways looking for her golden-haired son who had somehow disappeared between his riding lesson and the next appointment for the day - history with Mage Alfreth who was patiently waiting on the Crown Prince in said Prince's royal quarters. "THOR! COME OUT THIS INSTANT!"

No reply. Several paces back, her maidservants were also aiding in the search, more gently calling "Prince Thor!", "Your Highness!" and such-like. The boy was nowhere to be seen. Three guards approached from a distance, looking red-faced and just a mite annoyed.

"No sign of him, Your Majesty," the first said. "I asked the Royal Cooks and he has not been sighted in the kitchens, my Queen."

"Neither has he been sighted in the gardens nor in the fields beyond, Your Ladyship."

"I spoke with the outer guard," the last one, finally arrived looking a little worried. "They told me, Your Highness, just now - not ten minutes past - the young Prince was seen walking out with two others. There might have been some mention concerning the mountain lake -"

"THOR!" roared Frigga, blue eyes flashing as she cut off the guard with a peremptory wave of her hand. "That boy! Ethelwyn," she breathed through her nose sharply for a few seconds before calling her maid. "Ethelwyn, have some tea and pastries sent to Mage Alfreth and let him know I shall join
him in a short while - and that, for today, lessons are once again canceled. I must speak with Odin."
"Yes, your Highness," the young, brown-haired maid nodded and departed gracefully in the
direction of the Royal Library and Archives, while Frigga, dismissing the guards with a courteous
thanks and her maidservants, sought out her husband, who currently sat in his private study, pouring
over a recent missive from Vanahem.

When she burst in, Odin set aside the letter, rubbed his temple and eyed his wife, noticing how
flushed her cheeks were and how bright her blue eyes shone. Not that now is the moment to mention
such things, he sighed. It is only obvious what is on her mind at the moment...

"Again?" he finally said.
"Again."

Silence.

"Mage Alfreth will be most disappointed," Odin finally said. "Having to come into the palace only to
end up drinking our tea and eating our pastries and wiling away the hour with his personal research -"

"That is not the point, Odin, and you know it! That boy is out of control. You must speak with him."
"I have -"
"Well, you need to do it again -"
"We know how this will end," Odin massaged the bridge of his nose. "I shall say something, he shall
yell something, I end up punishing him, you end up crying... There is no change."

Frigga sat down slowly and stared at the pale blue shoes she wore, the rich carpet underneath her feet
- and saw nothing but the bright, bursting bundle of energy her young son had become. By
Midgardian standards, he would seem no more than eight years of their time - but time flowed
differently on Asgard than on Midgard - and Thor's mind, as ever, craved for adventure and the
mighty acts of brave warriors. Doing things. Not thinking things - not thinking things through as he
should. This did not bode well for the realm of Asgard.

"I will talk to him," Odin finally said. "Perhaps a sharp lesson this time. Cleaning the stables?"
"Cleaning - cleaning the stables? He is so young -"
"He feels himself old enough to attempt to leave the city on his own," Odin said, "perhaps he is then
old enough take on the responsibilities of his elders."
"Attempt?"
"Ah... that should be him now," Odin rose then, his hand squeezing his wife's shoulder in comfort as
he called the guards in - the guards who stood behind a very sullen-looking Thor with two of his
friends behind him (the ever artful Fandral and ever silent Hogun), both of whom had the sense to
look a little frightened. Odin turned to look at his wife's astonished face, now relieved, now proud.
He had done well. "I see all things, my son," he turned back to his young son and noticed how Thor
glared back. "and I believe that your current schedule demands your time be spent in study and not in
play. Come now, say farewell to Fandral and Hogun. You may see them later tonight - given that
all..." A beat. "ALL of your studies are completed."
"But Father..."
"Thor..." Frigga's blue eyes gazed at her son's with disappointment.
"Furthermore, because you disobeyed your mother's express command to attend your lessons and be
on time, you and your friends will be also be able to enjoy each other's company tomorrow night as
well - in the stables - mucking them out. Do you understand me?"

Silence. Thor nodded and something like a 'yes' was heard among a lot of mumbling.

"What was that?" Odin asked again.
"Yes, Father," Thor said stiffly.
"Thank you," replied the old king smoothly. "Now, I have a boring letter to read, you have an exciting history book to study and I believe the guards will make certain Fandral and Hogun will be returned to whatever tutor whom they have no doubt inconvenienced as well."
"I will escort Thor to the library," Frigga rose then.
"A grand idea," Odin twinkled down at his young son. "Have a wonderful time learning, Thor. You don't know it - but I'm sure there are many others who would wish to have the opportunity you do to learn so many things. With your station in life, there are many responsibilities you must shoulder - but also, there are many privileges. Do not forget it."
"Yes, Father," sighed Thor - and he was led off to the library.

Along the way, he boasted to his mother about what the stablemaster had said about his riding skills and what he had hoped to find in the mountain lake (apparently there was some legendary fish to be caught). Frigga praised him and hugged him and laughed at the story of the evasive fish which Thor would catch and bring to her. She promised to eat it when he caught it, and with that, she left him to the tender mercies of Mage Alfreth. Shaking her head, Frigga continued onward to her weaving room. He has got a long journey ahead of him, she sighed, as she sat down to her weaving. A thought crossed her mind and for a moment a thread snagged as it tangled on the weft. Made the longer for being alone.

-0-0-0-

"Where is the cursed vaetki gone?" growled Ketill with annoyance. "I wished to enjoy a snow scrub this evening."
"Ahhh, Ketill," Lind's higher voice rose with a chuckle of laughter. "Did you not remember that our great Mage Opna had need of him tonight?"

They laughed long at the unspoken jest for a few moments before Ketill shifted and eyed his friend and partner in distress (what they called each other after their stationing at Utgard).

"No, but I jest not, Lind. I did want a back scrub this evening –"
"I was making no joke, cousin," replied the younger Jotun still laughing a little. "Mage Opna sent the little thing off to the East Gate, poor fool. A fool's errand which will take at least a full cycle for it to complete."
"Lazy illegitimate get of a whore," cursed Ketill casually. "Why did Mage Opna not go himself – the vaetki's legs are far too small for such a journey."
"And yet, our genius patron has - and has cursed himself to a dull evening."

More laughter, this time at their employer's expense. There was nothing then – just the sound of the small fire lit in the corner of the room, hiss of the broth seeping over the edges of the cauldron thanks to a roiling broil and the cracking of Lind's imported nuts which he crushed easily with his hands. The older Jotun, Ketill, scratched his chest absently and considered the problem at hand.

"So then I shall smell like this one sun cycle longer," he finally said.
"That or you may attempt such a gargantuan task by yourself –"
"But you know how I cannot reach that one part of my back which –"
"Or you may ask me to aid you," Lind snorted. "You know I give a better back rub than some abominable runt. I swear those puny things it calls fingers have less force than the wisp of an Alfheim's fairy-bird wing."
"It is young –"
"Youth has nothing to do with it. I considered it – by Elska's accounting it should be shedding its head fur at the very least. In a few years, budding horns. Do you see anything like that happening?"
"Not yet," Ketill grunted. "But due to its size, it may be a late bloomer."
"Hahaha..."

They laughed together again, rough voices rumbling like stones, chuckling over the inanity – the impossibility of the vaetki gaining horns much the less honours befitting a Jotunn adult.

"Can you imagine it – entering heat or taking part in holmganga – or – or –" Here, Lind tried to force the words out, "kostrbotha?"
"You slay me, Lind!" choked out Ketill. "S-s-s-st-st-stop it!"
"Kostrbotha, now that is rare, I admit – when was the last time you saw two Jotunn fight over another's hand?"
"Hm. It is not common – but every Jotunn is ready for it... even if the vaetki were to be allowed the honour of being treated equal to the opportunity – it – it – it –" Ketill was now doubled over with laughter. "I could step on it with my foot!" He managed to get out.
"Even if it did grow a bit taller –"
"It would be laughed out of the arena –"
"Or slain in an instant –"
"Not that it could bed any of us –" Lind added, wiping away frozen tears of laughter and sitting back upright.
"Although Master Magna is willing to try," chortled Ketill.

The two of them shook their head over the perversion of their master. No good would come of it, they knew. Why the vaetki had not been drowned was beyond them. Drowned. Or smothered. Or had its scrawny neck snapped or wrung. There many ways to go about it. Stoning was cheapest and most entertaining – but it drew a large crowd and the last thing the Gothahus of Utgard needed was a scandal spreading through Jotunheim about the breeding of a vaetki within its walls. At the very least, the pathetic creature should have been driven out into the wastelands and left to die.

Let Jotunheim take care of its own tragedies.

[... they vaguely remembered that the land tends to its own people...]

[... Jotunheim is a cruel mother, but a mother all the same...]

On the other hand, it was rather easy to understand why Mage Opna had allowed the vaetki to breath Jotunheim's clean air. The creature seemed biddable and partially intelligent if incredibly mute. Its patient misery was pleasing and knowing that the less palatable chores could be capably taken care of by it was something they enjoyed. So they said nothing and, with sly humour, watched as Mage Opna watched the pitiful thing scuttled about doing its daily work.

[... and the cycles passed...]

The best times of the year for the vaetki were the winter months when no one but the foolish Thyrstr remained as the two healers disappeared north to Dagaheim to visit their clans and Mage Opna went to the King's Court in Gastropnir in order to make his report on the minimal growth of Utgard. It would be many years before the King's Seat would be ready for his return.

While the Mage and Healers were gone, Thyrstr spent most of his days out on the icy lakes to the south, particularly Vollrvatn Lake, where the hafnathr swarmed beneath thick layers of ice. Such a hunting expedition might last a good two weeks, which allowed a comfortable silence to once again permeate the neighbourhood – as it had been before the mage's arrival and Elska's passing.

Left to its own devices, the vaetki scrounged for food and found odd jobs lighting smelling sticks for
those who came to meditate or sweeping floors or running errands. Food left for the For-Eldra was now consumed by him alone, thanks to the absence of the still-growing Thyrstr and boar-like Mage Opna. Besides the usual tasks of clearing snow, washing floors and walls and preparing the meditation rooms and High and Under Altars, the vaetki also tended to Lind's garden of tungbloms, blakkrgras, hvaeta and ventrmellin which grew easily in the uncertain climate of Utgard.

When it returned in the evening, back aching, legs hurting (but in a good way) and hands red and slightly bleeding with open sores from the harsh blakkrgras it often had to untangle or weed, the vaetki felt content. The evenings were spent in solitude. Lonely sometimes, but loneliness was preferable to the pain of Thyrstr's cane, the healer's slaps or the uncomfortable touches of Mage Opna.

No, the evenings were free – and the vaetki could crouch by the fire for as long as it wished, studying the tomes from the library, the lock of which it had learned quite early how to pick, memorizing each of the texts as well as it could before replacing them gently.

Each scroll and each book were treated with the care befitting a Royal Archive – no prints or smudges left as clues. Every line, every swirl, every letter, every picture was studied and the most important spells were copied faithfully onto smaller scrolls and cheaper leather journals. Ideas and theories alike crammed into every available space on the rare vellum it could pilfer.

These long nights were what it waited for each year – and each winter, the vaetki grew in knowledge and magical power.

[... Hiemsrsal smiled...]

Chapter End Notes

There you go. Thor behaving like an idiot - doubly so since Loki isn't there... and I hope it really juxtaposes well with Loki's life. A harsh contrast of what lives they live.

Next up... is... more sadness. Sorry.

No. Not really.

p.s. You may be wondering on Loki's name. Loki goes through a bunch of phases. He was known as the runt, then lagreinn (small one) by Elska, vaetki (by Mage Opna) and then there'll be... hmmm... ulfbrarn, dZh-Aleiko and Kol'la before he gets his real name. From whom? Well... from the person who gave him the name of Loki in Thor (as far as I can tell) - AKA Odin. DUN DUN DUN! (Yes, Odin will play a large part in this Loki's life). Hope that clarifies things. :P

For those of you who are still unsure about this whole Jotunheim world and stuff, check out the map I drew up, which is available in Chapter 5.
OK. So. Here goes: DID YOU KNOW... that if you search the Marvel Universe Wiki, you can find Doctor Who and Gallifrey. Therefore... therefore... if you are a proponent of the Avengers/Thor movie Loki being closer to the comics, you would also be able to argue that the Doctor could be in the same 'verse without using the word crossover. Technically.

Now, I actually separate the MCU-verse (Earth 19999999) (not sure how many 9s go in there exactly) very distinctly from the other comics (especially Earth-616 which most people mix it up with) OR Norse Mythology. When people writing for FFNET's Avenger category casually give Loki kids (or other mythological stuff/life experiences when there is no sign of him having/not having experienced such things) - without saying its an AU or non-canon, I kinda go... "Hmmm... OK...". Of course, I'm writing an AU and if I wanted to, I could write Loki as anything from the comics/mythology... like portraying him as a father. But I won't. Sorry. No Dad Loki in this fic.

Anyway. There you go. Loki and the Doctor. Go for it. :D Nom nom. (just wants Matt Smith and Tom Hiddleston in a scene somewhere together...)

ALSO SAW IRON MAN 3! OMG! (dies) (so fun - although for some reason Chinese theaters added two scenes with Chinese actors in it. What the...)

But also exciting... Tom Hiddleston's Adam the vampire - as seen in the sneak peeks. You can see my tumblr post I made. I want to ship them so hard... Must be the fact that Thor 2 Loki and Adam both have gorgeous long hair. Yes. That must be it.

Anyways... THANK YOU TO ALL REVIEWERS! I genuinely thought that the last chapter would squick you guys and just turn off all my readers - but you guys are so awesome and cool and encouraging! (tears)

WARNING! BULLYING AND MORE UP AHEAD! WARNING!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 9
Diamond in the Rough

"That vaetki – have you seen the vaetki around?" asked the miller, his voice heavy with anger and the tread of his feet was equally heavy. "I swear I saw it a moment ago."

"No, Master Hvati," was the quiet reply of clerk who sat by the door of the mill and inscribed the daily quotas of each individual who brought in the various imported grains to be ground down further for meal. "I have been sitting here the entire time and saw nothing."

"I swear I saw it in the corner of my room just a moment ago – dipping into the corn stores which Skira gave us to grind –"
"Well, since Skira did not weigh it beforehand, it matters not—"
"Oh, he didn't?"
"No," smiled Vani, the clerk, "but I will keep my eyes peeled nevertheless."
"You do that. So will I. I know he was the one who took the hvaeta meal from Elder Orn the other
day." Master Hvati glared down at his young clerk and sniffed. "Go ahead and laugh. I know you
think my age is catching up with me."
"I am thinking no such thing," Vani lied smoothly.

A week before, Master Hvati had burst in saying that Elder Orn's hvaeta sack weighed one measure
short—and that it had been the vaetki's doing despite the fact that it had been stored overnight in a
triple-locked room. Really, Vani sighed, at this rate I will be the one shouldering the burden of this
place...

But Vani had a wonderful sense of self-preservation and held his tongue. If Master Hvati wished to
blame the vaetki (however nonsensical it sounded), none could gainsay it. After all, on this side of
Utgard, anything unfortunate was usually laid in blame at the vaetki's door.

[... the wind did not carry their whispers to the East...]

"Aha—there you are!" Oklo chuckled darkly as the group of short youngling Jotuns circled around a
small corner on the far end of the Gothahus, where they had trapped the small stripling who now
stood, back to the wall, chin down and eyes trained on its feet.

It was the vaetki. The abomination, their parents called it something. The kinder ones called it dvegr.
It had no name. Living curses were not gifted names; they were usually gifted death. And if not
death, which was the natural order of things, then dishonour and shame—and punishment for
continuing on a burdensome existence.

"Where have you been hiding all day?" Oklo asked theatrically.

He was the leader of the small band of younglings who roamed the disintegrating citadel and
scavenged stones and excavated items for their parents. On lucky days, they left the city for the
Myrkr Skogr to hunt for fell wolves in the forest or sea serpents below the thick ice of Vollrvatn
Lake. Today was a free day and it was time to hunt down the vaetki and inflict justice upon its dark
head for the insult it had paid to Shavi's father, Ekil the master weaver.

Apparently, Mage Opna had sent money with the vaetki to pay Shavi's father for a wall hanging—but
upon arrival, there was found to be a shortage in the amount. Mage Opna blamed Shavi's father
and the vaetki. Ekil had unfortunately voiced his first thought—that it was perhaps the fault of Mage
Opna—but a few days later, apparently, the mage had searched the little beast's hideout and found
the missing coinage, resulting in a shaming on Ekil's name for having spoken out against the mage.

All because of the vaetki's trickery.

Oklo's hand darted forward and he grabbed ahold of the creature's hair shaking it roughly as he lifted
it up by the long black stuff. The creature came to his waist—but there was not much meat on it to
weigh down Oklo's arm. A small whimper emerged as he bent the head back forcing small red eyes
to meet his own. Dead-looking, empty red eyes. He snorted with disgust tossing it at the wall. It fell
to the ground in an ungainly sprawl and lay there stunned for a moment.

"There is not a hint of a warrior in that thing," he sneered. "Did you see, Valki?"
"Well, that would be a crime against the concept of being Jotunn, would it not?" asked Valki in his
usual pretentious manner. "Particularly considering that it is a thief." Here, Shavi kicked at the thin ribs. "- and a liar also!"

The vaetki was moving now, scrambling backward and sideways in a vain attempt to slip past Elo's weighty mass, but Valki easily caught it and held it upside-down, pinning it to the wall.

"A crime, yes," Oklo agreed. "It's very continued existence is a crime. That's what Father said."
"Well said," Shavi sniffed. "What should we do with it then?"
"Teach it a lesson, obviously," Valki snorted.
"Hey, hey." It was the youngest of the bunch, Navi. "So, is it true that they are deformed? That they are even unable to bear children?"
"If you believe witless giant tales," Valki shrugged.
"I should hope they are not able to bear children," Shavi huffed. "The last thing Jotunheim needs is some kind of weakling breed leeching from its soil."
"I heard that they have no manhood or womanhood," Elo muttered slowly. "Mother said that it is nature's way of ensuring their poisoned seed does not infect our Realm."
"Hearsay," Valki replied dismissively. "But we have a live specimen – hold his legs apart, Elo. Don't break them, idiot! Do you want Mage Opna cursing you for disabling his slave?"

Elo eased up – but not before leaving long dark bruises along the calf muscles and ankles. The vaetki began to struggle in earnest as Valki tore off the small canvas kirtle wrapped about its waist. Large heads crowded round and peered down and small hand below scrabbled to find purchase against the Gothahus's stone wall.

"So the thing could bear children!" Elo said horrified, nearly dropping the creature on its head.
"Of course not," snapped Oklo. "Have you seen the others with child? The size of a Jotun babe would split its body in two."
"Forget the act of getting with child," Valki added suggestively.

The others tittered nervously, their uneasy laughter drowning out the increased whimpers below.

"No, I think it is in no position to be of real danger to any of us. Unless it grew larger."
"I think that is impossible, Oklo," Valki shook his head. "From what I have read, there is no account of a tall runt. Then again, most runts do not live within the week of their birth."
"What about a slow grower?" asked Elo. "What if runts were merely slow growers?"
"Slow growers?" Oklo and Valki chimed together in disgust.
"Is that even a word?" Valki laughed. "No, Elo. I think not. It may gain several more heads in height – but the end result will probably be more alike to an Aesir than a Jotun."
"Aesir scum. Perhaps this thing could be sent to Prince Thor as – Helheim!" Oklo's sentence broke off as uncomfortable heat blossomed against his chest.

Jumping backwards, the group of teens scrabbled at the flames which had appeared out of nowhere underneath their noses. Elo dropped the vaetki with a dreadful scream as his hands caught on fire. For a moment, there was panic as everyone dived into various snowbanks and rolled in the comforting cold, cursing and exclaiming over where it had come from. When they finally emerged, the torn canvas kirtle and vaetki were gone.

That night, in the secret of the darkness of his cupboard, the vaetki chewed the hunk of meat it had snagged off Lind's plate and a hvaeta loaf it had stolen from an inviting window three streets over. With sustenance in his belly, the vaetki found the strength to chant a healing song and ease the bruised muscles, allowing his skin to return to its recently much more healthy blue. Its fingers
lingered along the lines which branched over its thighs and down to its knobbly ankles.

Mage Opna had told the vaetki that one day they would rise with age and harden into smooth lines. It would happen, the Master Mage said, sometime after its horns began to bud (if they ever were to grow). One day, the swirls would tingle with a heated fire which only another's tongue could quench. The words of Oklo and Valki however spoke of an eternal loneliness. *Which was worse?* It was hard for the young mind to decide.

Wrapping thin arms around equally thin legs, it nestled its head on its knees and smiled. *The incantation for fire went well – and the flame was quite hot...* Carefully, it ran fingers over its face and headband to check for any singes. *None.* The grin grew wider. *Elska was right – magic feels so right. Another part of me I did not know.*

* [... that night the Casket of Ancient Winters swirled brighter...]*

* [... but no one was there to see...]*

* [... Elska saw – and he smiled proudly...]*

-0-0-0-

Several moon cycles later, the vaetki grew its own ice. As the variegating pearlescent and transparent natural Jotunn ice grew along its left arm, the vaetki eyed it with wonder. Its fingers (with sharp, black fingernails now) trailed along the cold dagger which formed naturally into its hand. Squatting there in the far north-east corner of the Gothahus (his remaining secret haunt), the vaetki raised its blue hand and stared at its fingers now entwined with the natural weapon of all Jotunn.

*I am Jotunn,* it thought, *tears forming at the corner of its eyes – small beads of ice which froze on dark eyelashes. I am Jotunn and my mother is Heimsrsal just as she is for the others. Elska was right... in the end, I will not be forgotten. Even if I die tomorrow, I know I will go to the arms of the For-Eldra.*

The ice cracked easily in its grip as it released its will and hold on the dagger and the pieces fell to the ground beneath its feet. Out from beneath its small blue toes sheets of ice spread before the vaetki and behind it up the wall. Unheeded. There was only relief. Relief from the unspoken fears which had grown in the darkness of its cupboard seeded by the cruel words of its betters.

If the snows of his Ancestors accepted him tomorrow, Elska would be waiting for him. That was enough.

The vaetki rose at the distant roar of its name. Mage Opna was calling – but that didn't matter. Summoning small daggers as it walked along the side to the corner and around to the eastern door, the vaetki practised its aim. Who cared what Mage Opna thought now? Today it had been granted the power of the Jotunn. There was hope.

* [... that night, the stars danced...]*

Chapter End Notes

Next chappie... Loki has an adventure and things happen... (of course, things happen! durr) but, I mean, THINGS happen. Update will happen around the weekend, as usual.
:) See you then, folks!

Let me know what you think, etc.
So, today, for various reasons, I'm feeling a little blue. (sigh) (not even seeing long-haired Loki will cheer me up) I'm gonna need to watch something light. Before I do, I'm gonna cheer myself by kicking commonsense fanfic rules and post a chapter a little early because I need some happy chatting with you guys to cheer me up. I hope I don't sound too pathetic.

And I had a nice talk with my parents over Skype and everything today! You'd think I'd be on top of the world, right? Right? Nope. Apparently the numbness in my hands and feet, disorientation, extreme fatigue and disorientation I've been feeling lately may be due to a massive B12 deficiency. Sigh. So tomorrow I have to go, armed with my Chinese dictionary, to a pharmacy and find B12 vitamins that won't kill me.

I hate medicine. Sigh.

Anyways... all this to say that lately I've been having a massive writers block over chapter 23. GRRR. Is it the lack of B12/my unknown illness? Or is it just issues with my muse? SIGH... Now I feel depressed... and this is an important chapter too! Like... Loki and Thor meet for the first time important! What if I mess it up? (panics) (realizes some Linkin Park has come on. FML) Right! Let's move onto happier things... A longer chapter! Yes! Um. Yes. If I were to give this chapter another title it would be... "The Promise of Comeuppance". Yep. That's my hint to you.

Once again, thanks to all my lovely reviewers!

Warning! Warning! Child abuse! Warning! Warning!

May want to look at the map I drew as well. :) Chapter 5 has the link.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 10
New Seasons

It was one such winter season, when the healers had returned to Dagaheim and Mage Opna was once again in Gastropnir and Thyrstr had departed to the dark regions of the Myrkr Skogr to hunt for wolves, that the vaetki was able to sustain himself enough to practice one of the new magicks he had been, as yet, unable to complete thanks to complete exhaustion.

From the rising of the cold suns to the domination of starlight, the vaetki was worked hard – running errands, cleaning, cleaning, cleaning, washing and scrubbing and sweeping and dusting and answering to his many masters – and fed little. Those were the hard months of the slow years which passed. But one winter season, the vaetki foraged along the edge of town and using a simple misdirection spell and a notice-me-not magick chant, it was able to steal the left hank of a wild hog.
and several rare fruits which had been imported from Alfheim and Asgard itself.

Partaking of his unusually large feast, the vaetki leaned back and patted its belly, eyeing the small sack he had packed in preparation for what he wished to attempt.

Short-distance transportation. Of himself and his small pack.

Once again he considered what he had stowed away. Two short knives, flint'n'tinder box, tiny bundle of coal, his journal, the ink and pen he had long since stolen from Ketill, his second kirtle, four leather thongs for his hair, food stuffs (including dried fish and sea serpent), a fishing rod, twine and bait. Over it all was laid his second, small fur blanket-cloak, which he carefully wrapped about his shoulders and secured with a black piece of twining rope.

He looked about the room and double-checked that everything was in its place and the hearth was safely clear of any possibility of wild fire. Pulling on the pack, the vaetki rose to his feet and stood there, imagining the place which he wished to see – the damaged portion of the South Wall which he had scouted out previously as a possible hiding place for short-distance transportation. Twisting his hands, letting his fingers drift down in the now familiar sigil, and chanting the short command, the vaetki felt a jolting pull from the centre of his stomach – there was a flash of green and black smoke.

He was gone.

When he opened his eyes a few seconds later (somehow they had closed of their own accord and he berated himself for his cowardice), the vaetki surveyed his surroundings, forcing down the bile and nausea that caused him to sway on his feet. Waiting for the sickness in his belly to settle, he imagined the bit of wall on the other side of the city's massive ramparts now falling into disrepair. He disappeared and then reappeared gain - now outside of Utgard. From there, the vaetki took his time, moving slowly on foot or by magic to the far bridge which crossed the Flara River a half-days journey outside of Utgard. On the last teleportation step, sharp red eyes widened as he recognized the black tall jarvnithr posts which rose about him along the sides of the wide bridge which Thyrstr had described to him in excruciating detail that one time he had gotten drunk and talked the vaetki's ear off about his hunting exploits. Head swivelling about, the vaetki took stock of his surroundings – and then without hesitation, darted southward down the road toward the lake he had always heard of from Elska and the others: Vollrvatn, Lake of the Plains.

The Flat Plains, known as the Holkn Vollr to the Jotunn, were situated south of the large Garfjall mountain range – and in the middle of its narrow western section was the large Vollrvatn Lake, into which streamed the Flara River and out of which streamed the Holdra River, which, it was said, a mighty Jotun had carved in a battle against one of the ancient Titans. These plains were wide desolate places and filled with only scrub, the hardy blakkrgras and the wild wind.

To the young vaetki, it was a glimpse of oft-wished for freedom and terrifying emptiness. Carefully, he stepped forward onto the snow, leaving the wide road, and made his way magically in short bursts down the side of the river, crouching low in the snow and trying to make as small a profile in the open spaces as possible. An hour later, when he arrived at the shores of the eternally frozen lake, the vaetki found enough energy to dig deep down into the snow, creating a small warm burrow which he hollowed out carefully as Elska had taught him so long ago –

- when he could leave Utgard in the protective arms of the one he considered father –

- when he was happier –

Better not to think of it, he scolded himself and he began to press down the snow carefully as he had been taught and then carefully hollowed out a deeper, harder hole below and a smaller hole for
ventilation above. Afterwards, the vaetki laid several stones down which he scrounged for at the edge of the lake. On the rocks, he laid the coal and the tinder he had brought and lit the small fire, curled up by it and fell asleep.

Several watches later, the vaetki rose, tended his small fire again, ensuring that the hole at the top of his burrow remained clear before he left with his fishing gear. Scurrying over the ice in the bright starlight, the vaetki avoided the small village of huts which perpetually sat on the edge of Vollrvatn Lake, and made a beeline for an abandoned fishing hole. Several hours later, he had a fair catch—four hafnathr, eight silvrfiskr and two holkimurtr.

*Well, that was surprisingly easy,* he thought, eyeing his catch. *If I come for one night once a week, I will eat like a king every night.* He was quite pleased with himself.

Of course, the winter months passed by in their own good time and Mage Opna and the others returned in no better temper than when they had left. Nursing his new bruises, while healing the worst ones, the vaetki sighed. *Perhaps they do not love Utgard after all. Perhaps it is the place which makes them so unhappy.*

Every night, he was once again locked away in the jarvníthr cupboard in which hung several robes (which he was not allowed to "maul with his dirty paws") of office—and experience had taught him that jarvníthr, the dense wood so easily grown in Jotunheim (and nowhere else if you believed the books) dampened his magic and disallowed him from magical travel. (Teleportation, the books had said, but the vaetki did not know how to say the word.) It was a dismal stuffy prison and bred the voices of condemnation deep inside.

*Perhaps it is not Utgard at all... perhaps,* a dark voice within whispered, *it is you.*

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Mage Opna sighed as he read over the King's missive yet again. Laufey-King was choosing to travel to the far east to Thrymheim for the clement months, ignoring the state of the citadel once again. *When will we be released from this cursed place,* he scowled. *Tear it stone by stone to the ground and be done with it—It is under the watchful eye of Odin and his Gatekeeper, forever shadowed and it will never raise its head again.*

*But no,* he told himself, *Laufey-king is a grasping king and does not wish to part with anything that may have some kind of worth—although what worth there is to be found in Utgard nowadays is beyond me. It is nothing.*

*Nothing.*

At the word, Mage Opna thought of the steadily growing vaetki who now stood three spans tall. No sign of ageing in the Jotunn fashion, of course. Still blessed with soft hair and skin—His lips quirked up and for a moment, the older Jotun considered calling the creature to him for some evening company.

The tall Jotun rose and eased open his door and peered out into the gloom. An icy eyebrow rose at the sight of the ever puny vaetki kneeling before the Under Altar head bowed and hands clasped. His jaw dropped open. *Surely not... the thing... was praying to the nattura? The... nerve...* His eye twitched. (For a moment he saw red and all the injustices of his life reared up before his mind.) Nearly tearing his study's door off the hinges, Mage Opna stormed out, taking pleasure at the startled squeal of the impudent thing which had thought to desecrate the sacred place with its abominable prayers. *And who does it pray to anyways? Who does it think will listen?*
Heimsrsal is always listening...

Scrambling backwards, the vaetki pressed up against the tall sides of the Under Altar (on top of which burned the eternal scents of tungbloms now farmed by Lind). It trembled like a leaf, flinching as Opna's broad hand descended to slap it soundly across the face, sending it tumbling down the steps from the force of the blow.

The mage swivelled, didn't even have to turn, to grab the beast by its long matted hair and unceremoniously dragged it across the floor, its short legs trying to keep up and failing. Ignoring its soft whimpers of fear and pain – and the small fingers which scrabbled at the hand which jerked its head along painfully, Opna pulled it into his study. Ketill and Lind put their heads out of the storeroom and jeered something about Opna showing the little dwarve its place in life.

The thick, slightly stiff leather belt around Opna's waist was good enough – and within minutes, he had pinned the vaetki against the table and applied the leather strap to its back, over its bottom and down to its legs. A good twenty minutes later, he stopped – uncertain as to how many strokes he had applied – but it was enough.

The creature had passed out. A few seconds later, dark lashes fluttered and he gave the vaetki a few ungentle slaps before he hauled it unresisting to its feet. Stomping down the hallway, the Master Mage threw open the small cupboard and tossed the thing inside, yelling something about sacrilege and it learning its place.

"Don't feed it," he snarled at Thyrstr who nodded with disinterest. "You can keep it inside the whole day and on the second, make it work extra for its food. As soon as it gets ideas, foolishness will abound, you hear?"
"Certainly, Mage Opna."
"If it protests, you know what to do."
"Of course, Mage Opna."
"I will retire for the evening. Tomorrow, I go to the West Gate to see what can be done to partition off or build supports for the new cracks appearing in the West Courtyard pavement."
"Very well, Mage Opna."

The Mage disappeared for the evening. After a few moments, Thyrstr rose and left for a late night drink of blakkrbjør. The scrap of nothing locked away in the cupboard cried silently.

... the spirit of the realm had been stolen...

... but its soul remained strong – and it flared with anger...

Three months later, the Mage and Thyrstr rode to the Myrkr Skogr to receive the annual taxes due to Laufey-King from the two villages situated within its murky, gloomy depths. Mage Opna thought it was a dreadful waste of time since the entire amount collected from either village was not even enough, he thought, to buy the King a comfortable bed. Still, I must finish this one task, he smiled to himself, and then I can ready myself for Gastropnir. The Dagaheim blargras is running out and Myko says that the traders from Alfheim this year are particularly generous.

Fog was drifting in now across the path and the steady tread of Thyrstr grew faint as Mage Opna dropped behind. When he came to the crossroads of two small paths, the Jotun turned to his partner only to find that Thyrstr was nowhere to be seen.

"Is it my lot in life to be surrounded by fools?" grumbled Opna to himself – and at the sound of a howl far in the distance, he gathered his fur cloak tighter about him and glared up at the canopy of dark leaves above his head. The giant, silent forest of Myrkr Skogr. Never before had it seemed so
Howling again. Closer now – and Opna, glancing about nervously, eyed the roads. Which way did Thyrstr say again... I rarely come out this far, since it is as abandoned as Helheim, he cursed to himself.

"Thyrstr!" His voice boomed loudly in his ears – but it could not penetrate the thick fog rolling in. "Thyrstr! Holla! You idiot! Where are you!?"

No answer. Only increasingly more distinct howling. Opna shifted uneasily and turning back down the road he had come from, he decided to return to the North Gate and then return with one of the farmers who would no doubt come to the market to trade around mid-day. Thyrstr will be fine on his own, the hot-headed fool.

After slipping and slithering down the treacherously slippery ice path which wound downwards from the hills rolling through the forest, Mage Opna found himself puffing and panting in a very embarrassing kind of way as he eased out from under the eaves of Myrkr Skogr. Behind, he swore he could hear what seemed to be a large wolf pack coming from the depths of the forest. It was hard going thanks to the winding paths which ran up and down the hills situated to the north of Utgard. They were troublesome, but unavoidable since they spread from the uncertain ground of the Eybjarg’s edge and thence eastward to make steadily higher foothills before building up into the Grarfjall Mountains.

With these thoughts in mind, Mage Opna fixed his eyes ahead of him – to the far walls of Utgard which seemed like a pinprick in the distance and he began to move quickly, abandoning the narrow roads and making a beeline across snow and stone and uncertain ground. At the sound of one long particularly long-drawn wail, he turned slowly and then began to run in earnest as the quick glance imprinted itself clearly on his mind.

A pack of thurblakulfr. Giant black wolves which roamed the far north -

[... what lives in Utanheim but the wind, the wolves and the spirits of Jotunheim?]

According to Ketill and Lind, these could tear a Jotunn apart before you could finish chanting the First Prayer. What are they doing so far south? He spared a thought to the puzzle before focusing on the most important task at hand – getting safely across the wastes to the North Gate of Utgard. He could see the sentinel watches on the walls. Other dark shapes swarmed inside and the mage bit back a curse. If those witless fools lock the door on me, I'll –

Another howl. Too close for comfort. Mage Opna sped up, cursing his long nights spent reading and sleeping and not running with the others on the wastelands to the south. Why must this happen to me, he wailed. The large Jotunn’s sense funnelled to the sound of his heart thrumming in his chest, his feet pounding over the sharp ice ignoring the cuts growing on his thick soles, the sight of the slowly growing black walls and the still open gate.

Heimsrsal, he prayed. Let me make it in time.

[... the wind carried laughter from the heavens...]

[... he had forgotten the creeds of all Jotuns...]

[... do not disrespect Heimsrsal...]

[... they will find you...]
I HOPE YOU DON’T MAKE IT IN TIME, YOU TERRIBLE CREATURE! (ahem)
We’ll see what happens...

Loki is, Earth years, about 8 years old or 9. Poor baby.
Peace and Desperation

Chapter Notes

So... have spent an entire evening and morning tumbling Tom Hiddleston... and his Cannes appearance. And heard about the rumoured fan who jumped him. (sigh) I hope it's just a trolling thing - but I have a feeling it happened. You know... keep it up and he'll end up as a cynical actor just like the rest. This is so sad and disappointing. I'm gonna need some time tumbling long-haired Loki to cheer up.

Does anyone else feel the urge to apologize to Tom Hiddleston even though they didn’t do it?

No no no don't think about sadness like this...

Long haired Loki. Think about that. Yes.

Anyways... Thanks to everyone who is hanging in there! Thanks to my lovely reviewers!

I hope this chappie is as nice as I promised!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 11
Peace and Desperation

[... do not disrespect Heimsrsal...]

[... for she will find you...]

In the shadows, the vaetki was crouching, trying to figure out a way to steal the tempting hvaeta loaf on the table just newly made by the ever industrious Illska, when the sturdy jarnvithr door banged open revealing the familiar slight figure of Shavi, the master weaver's son. His dark face was alight with excitement and for a moment, he could not do anything but stand there and pant – until he managed to force the words out:

"Illska! You would not believe!"
"What is it now, Shiva?"
"It's fat Mage Opna – running like the best King's courier! And you'd not believe – a pack of great black wolves at his back! You much come and see!"
"Ta! Shiva! Who put you up to this nonsense? If you must tell lies, at least give me a good one!"
"No, no!" Shavi's eyes were wide. "Father sent me – he said it was worth a good laugh if nothing else."
"Thurblakulfr are nothing to laugh at, idiot," Illska rose and made his way quickly down the main street. "Why are none going to his aid?"
"It is a large pack!" huffed Shavi. "The like of which we have never seen!"
Together they started down the main North-South street which was now beginning to crowd with excited Jotunn.

"Did you hear, Illska?" another Jotun showed up at the two runners' elbows. It was Lind. "Seems like idiot Opna has the hounds of Helheim at his heels."
"The Mage is your master... Have you no care?" frowned Illska as the three of them burst into the now crowded courtyard and equally crowded ramparts of the wall. Lind snorted and moved off – keeping far away from the as yet open North Gate. "Ah! They have not closed the door at least."
"False hope," boomed another – a farmer from the north. "He will not make the gates in time. Fools. I warned Thyrstr but he said he could take care of himself."
"Now that is true enough," Lind said. "Master Mage Opna, however..." He shrugged. "Come, I wish to see this spectacle for myself."

The more conservative Illska shook his head in mild disgust at Lind's casual attitude toward the fate of the Mage of Utgard's Gothahus. In Dagaheim this kind of behaviour would not be tolerated...
However, he followed the healer and pressed close to the outer ramparts to gaze over the snow. Gazing over the small white clearing before the gate and beyond to the hills of the north, Illska winced at the sight of the large pack and the steadily slowing Mage Opna.

_This is not looking good._ He glanced to the Jotuns on either side of him. _No one is foolish enough to leave the relative safety of the city._ He sighed. _Utgard is a wreck – its walls, its homes and its people... such desolation of the soul._

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At Shiva's news, the vaetki spared no thought to summon his magic and transport himself to a hidden crevice on the tall tower roof situated on the north side of Utgard's grand wall. Sharp red eyes instantly locked on Mage Opna's dark figure in the distance. A black wavering shadow of a paunchy figure slipping and sliding over the white expanse of ice and crevices. Elska had forbidden the vaetki from traversing those snowy fields and hills for a reason - it was a treacherous land to the immediate north, west and south-west. The Eybjarg was hungry.

His small feet shuffled nervously at the obvious fate of his master - rudimentary calculation and commonsense dictated the inevitable. Wrapping his thin arms around his knees, the vaetki considered the matter.

*I could transport myself there, grab Master Opna and bring him back... I could distract the wolves with a copy of myself. I have enough power for that as well. I could save him...*

*Or you could watch him die. Slowly,* a darker side muttered.

He shivered. He did not want that... _Did he?_

-0-0-0-

Opna could feel the hot breath fanning over his bared, broad back – his cloak had long since been cast off for increased mobility. Underneath, shards of ice thrust upward as he pounded across the hard fields. Every now and then, he lost the advantage to slippage and the hidden crevices which threatened to trip him up or swallow his feet. The mage kept running - eyes trained on the as yet open black gate. There were figures on the high ramparts and the sound of yelling echoed over the wasteland.

A howl sounded in his ear and somehow the Mage found another burst of energy to speed up. He was so close. Surely, he would make it. _So close._
Shutting his eyes, envisioning his master, the vaetki reached inward for his magic and then paused as a familiar warm presence pressed close, embracing him. For a moment, the cold world fell away and there was only a gentle kind of warmth and a peaceful silence as all sound faded away. *Elska?* He whispered, hesitating.

*Let him go, beloved mine...*

*He is ours.*

At the sound of a triumphant howl, the vaetki’s eyes flew open – and with wide, disbelieving eyes, he watched as massive claws and fangs rose – as lithe, giant fur legs leaped and bore down – as his Master's bellow echoed across the plain – as the cry of the Jotuns rose up unheeded by the ravenous pack – as his Master's cries finally tapered off – as the greatest wolf howled and the vaetki heard the call – and understood.

*This one, this despoiler –*

He is ours.

The vaetki’s darker blue lips opened a little and sharp teeth flashed in the night. A long-forgotten smiled crossed his face swiftly. Before him, the snow stained a blue-black and fat flesh now ripped hastily from the bone.

*He is ours.*

[... and there will be no escape.]

From that time onward, the vaetki was shunned even more, now a creature of bad luck. Elska had nurtured it and his heart had failed. Master Opna had taken it into its home and he had been consumed by wolves. And worse, the great black wolves showed no signs of leaving, contented to prowl through the wastelands of the northern hills and the Myrkr Skogr, preying on the smaller grey wolves, wild boar and Jotun who fell into the wolves’ path. Curses upon curses.

Superstition drove the inhabitants – balancing their desire and need for the vaetki's blood with the fear of its cursed touch. Almost a single great cycle of the sun passed. A year of splendid isolation as the Jotunn runt went about its duties, largely ignored by his remaining three masters. Without Mage Opna, the little thing grew wild and fond of tricks – and its appetite, as it increased, drove it to thievery.

In the end, it was Ketill who travelled with a trader's caravan to Gastropnir to lay Utgard's case before the King. He would tell the tale of Mage Opna's fall and reveal the secret which festered at its core: the existence of a wild vaetki in Utgard.

Laufey-King would know what to do with it, surely.

With that, Ketill set out, bidding farewell to Lind and Thyrstr, glowering at the vaetki who stood in the shadows watching with its beady red eyes. *What a monster*, he shuddered. *Soon, Ketill, the insect will be exterminated. Soon.*

Two months later, splendid news came from the West road – three farmers had left their work to run ahead of a slow-moving procession. A procession, they said, fit for a king. Larger than a caravan,
complete with large Jotunn servant-pulled carts and the Imperial flags!

"Is it the King?" asked Elder Orn, as he left his house for the West gate. "We can not tell, for they did not stop to pass the time of day," replied the one farmer. "But there must be one of the Royal Family, surely..."
"Hm. We can but hope," replied the Elder. "Go to the Gothahuus and tell Healer Lind the news. He must be prepared to bring the vaetki to the Royal House as soon as may be."

With that, the Elder moved slowly up the street to gather up the City Council while the farmer ran to tell the Healer Lind the great news. Royalty had come to Utgard at last. Days of bright starlight were ahead!

Chapter End Notes

DOES HAPPY DANCE OF JOY! I have never felt so satisfied killing a character off as I did Mage Opna. I hope it was satisfactory for you as well. Pedophiles... well... let's just say... they deserve a lot of pain, if not pain of death.

But, um, someone from the Royal family is coming. Oh noes!
Health update: Got pills. Am taking them. It will be a good 2 weeks before I see changes. And I'm also changing my diet to something a bit more healthy because there's a high chance that I have/will have diabetes. Kyeh. Well, I'm feeling more positive already. :D

Well, this looks to be an interesting chapter. A little longer than the last one. Yep. With the introduction of...

You have to read on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 12
Hope Found?

Utgard, they say, is a symbol of Jotunn endurance, clinging as it does to the crumbling earth on the edge of forever. Tall and dark, it looms, a desolate picture of a greater time when Jotunheim had been full of life and martial vigour. Outside its gates, they also say, the cursed burns of the Biforst on bared rock mark the fall of the great Frost Kingdom – the last spot on Jotunheim where the Casket had been seen.

Outside its gates, the mark of a curse is burned – and inside its heart, a living abomination clinging to life against all odds and reason.

These were the tales of Utgard and the rumours that circulated through the rest of Jotunheim about the ancient citadel – and Helblindi, gazing up at the hidden heights of the Grarfjall Mountains, had an overwhelming desire to return there. It was, after all, the city he had roamed as a child in the more clement seasons. Before the War had come to a head and brought the metropolis low.

Utgard, a vast jungle of towers and passageways and secret vaults and forbidden caverns and chasms which could gape suddenly at your feet. Perfect for hunting games and hide-and-search. Not for the faint of heart.

But then, Helblindi had never been faint of heart – and newly ushered into the ranks of adulthood, the eldest prince had an urge to show his worth, be the shining example needed for young Byleistr, make Farbauti proud and prove right Laufey's decision to name him future King.

-0-0-0-

"He is not a True Heir," Farbauti had protested one night after Laufey had spoke of the matter with young Helblindi. His heart broke over the passing of yet another Great Tradition. "If I did not know better, I'd think you had an unhealthy fascination about seeing me fat," Laufey chuckled, drawing his consort closer in the wide bed of snow they shared each night.
Farbauti did not reply. Merely bent his head – and the gentle words felt suddenly awkward, the small joke falling like a stone pebble into a still pond. Ripples spreading outward...

"We will keep trying," sighed Laufey. "I have not lost all hope."
"Perhaps if you tried with another –"
"Nonsense," the King cut his mate off abruptly. Then, to soften his dismissal, he drew Farbauti closer, nuzzling his nose against his consort's cheek, their cool breaths shared as one. "There will only be you. I am content."
"Sentiment," Farbauti sighed, but his lips quirked up at that. "This is a time of peace – but peace will not last forever – the Healers may have made an error... and perhaps the fault lies with me. I would not be jealous if you took another Consort. For I know I have your heart."
"Always," agreed Laufey. Then he asked. "Do you have so little faith in your own children, love?"
"Now that is cruel," cried Farbauti. "You know I believe Helblindi is more than capable for the task and Byleistr loves the prospect of advising the Throne." He sighed then. "But the Court—"
"The Court can go to Helheim," Laufey snorted. "The busybodies must remember again that I am King – and if I break with Tradition, it shall be so."
"Jotunheim's most tempestuous King. That is how you will be remembered, Laufey-love."
"I did lead us into war – and out of it," Laufey nodded ruefully. "We paid a heavy price for my folly. Our Traditions were destroyed that day, Farbauti, when the Casket was stolen. It rendered... everything... meaningless, I fear."
"Do not speak of the Mages," Farbauti groaned, "else I too follow you into a dark path of depression for the evening – and what shall we do then?"

They both laughed for a short time at that. Now, the King and His Consort could find some humour in their predicament. A kind of battle humour still present long after the war had been lost – a desire to find the tungleblom among the blakkrgras. To find equilibrium after the storm, to find healing after the severe crippling of their race.

Perseverance and resolution to never give up.

Utgard on the edge of the Eybjarg.

And so Laufey announced that thanks to his war wounds (Farbauti thought it was more due to the loss of the Casket), he was unable to bear a Sithr Efingi, and thus, Helblindi of His Blood and Farbauti's Womb, would continue the Line of Kings. The Court would have to be content.

And so it was.

[... Jotunheim, how low you fell...]

[... trading in base coin...]

When the Healer of Utgard's Gothahus was ushered into Helblindi's presence a few months later, the Crown Prince took it as a sign from the For-Eldra. Time to prove his worth and rid Utgard of its supposed curse forever.

And so it was.

Laufey-King was currently far beyond the Kaldrfjall Mountains, wintering in the Eastern Capitol of Thrymnheim. It would be impossible for him to return in time to settle this urgent matter, Helblindi told himself, and apparently, the mass of country folk in Utgard have succumbed to superstitions which only leaves the King – and his Representative – as capable of dealing with the matter at hand.

"A runt," he finally repeated with disbelief. "A runt has caused unrest in Utgard? Who was so
foolish as to let it survive?" Helblindi frowned in distaste at the topic.
"The old Caretaker of the Gothahus was –"
"It matters not," Helblindi rose and descended the short steps of the small dais he had been sitting on.
"That a mere Jotun dvegr has brought an entire community to its knees in fear is a travesty which only the King can rectify. Sadly, my Royal Father is not able to come so swiftly – so I will go in his stead and deal with the matter myself."
"Your Highness – so gracious –" Healer Ketill's relief was palpable.
"And I will bring two mages this time to cleanse the city in a proper way," Helblindi went on, as he considered the situation. With such superstitious folk, the Traditional Rites may ease their worries even if it is just for show. Helblindi nodded and then his mind was already moving on, as he began to take stock of what to do to prepare for the trip. "It will be a worthy gift for my Lord Father – the renewal of Utgard." He nodded. "Utgard."

And so, that is how the West Road came to carry the Royal Procession with great difficulty through the dangerous, wolf-ridden Grarfjall Mountains and out beyond to the vast city, the empty city, of Utgard.

-0-0-0-

Although he wished to deal with the matter of the vaetki swiftly, Helblindi had a feeling that settling in to understand the situation at hand would not be so simple. More easily said than done, for certain. There was the matter of unpacking the boxes which had to first be unloaded carefully from the great carts, clearing away the rubble from the Great Doors to the King's Hall (which had fallen recently from the opposing watch tower, Healer Ketill had said), touring the cleared Northern and Western quarters of the city and praising the master labourers who had mended the North and West walls and gates.

Not the South or East ones, however. Everyone knows that to the east and south, there is nothing but dark.

After the initial introductions between the Crown Prince and the motley group of Jotunn which were called the Council of Utgard, Helblindi was taken out for a short grarulfr hunt which was pleasingly familiar to him and was a great opportunity for the ambitious prince to show off his abilities to the rough yokels of Utgard. And future subjects. They were those as well. Running across the barren foothills now shrouded in fog and blanketed in another gentle layer of snow, which was still softly falling again, the hunters returned carefully, keeping a wary eye out for any sign of the cursed thurlakulfr. Yet, they were also in high spirits thanks to the success of the hunt – and the prospect of a great feast. For the first time in many decades, they would feast and raise a toast to Laufey-King and the Royal Family.

That night the Royal Hall was filled with cheer and food and blakkbjorr, as Helblindi focused on raising the spirit of the Jotunn who had too long been forgotten. Tomorrow morning, he promised himself, I will deal with the thing. With the vaetki now safely stowed away under the watchful eye of Healer Lind and the two mages he had brought with him.

-0-0-0-

Mornings in wintery Utgard seemed much like the night to Helblindi – gloomy and dismal. Utterly cheerless. And the city itself did not make things any less grim. Unlike the garland-decorated homes of Gastropnir or the intricately carved jarnvithr ornaments found everywhere in Griotonagardar, Utgard spoke of barren souls and minds too bent on survival to spend much time or energy on the finer things and lighter side of life. This spirit showed in the grim faces of the farmers and hunters, the muted cries of suckling babes and the stony looks of the city's guildsmen and craftworkers. The
wind too spoke in a harsh voice, blowing briskly down from the icy peaks of the Grarfjall range and brought nothing but the smell of oncoming snow and the howls of wild beasts.

And from the east... nothing.

Older and wiser now, Helblindi felt the presence of the Eybjarg even more sharply than before. The threat of the Void loomed.

[... It swallows everything...]

[... so hungry. It is so hungry...]

"Bring it forward," Helblindi said calmly, eyes trained on the slight figure, thin ankles heavily shackled with jarnvithr, stumbling into the room with the firm grip of the current Caretaker of the Gothahus on its head. The Caretaker grinned. *A sturdy fellow fond of hunting and blakkbjorr,* Helblindi recalled.

"Take care, Prince Helblindi," the Caretaker grunted as the small thing's fingers pried at his larger fingers which gripped the small skull and long, matted black hair. "It is a wild thing."

A *youngling,* Helblindi snorted. *A mere runt youngling has cowed an entire Jotun city... This is so pathetic as to be laughable...* But the Prince set his face and presented a bland enquiring air.

"I can see that," Helblindi replied dryly. "But I –"

"Aiya!" Thyrstr cried in surprise as a small hand stabbed into the more tender flesh of his underarms – with a small ice dagger. With surprise (he would say later) and less in fright, he shook the thing off, flinging it casually forward, nearly bashing its head on the paving stones. "The cursed thing stabbed me! Damn vaetki to Helheim!"

"Hm," Helblindi eyed the small creature with curiosity. "The dvegr has some affinity with our ice."

"An abomination! An abomination!" the more theatrical Mage Ikelo stiffened.

Helblindi eyed his new Court – the two mages, three healers and the City Council. Then, his red gaze lowered to the small creature which was now drawing itself slowly up – prising itself up from the icy ledge of the dais's lower step. Knobbly knees drew together and thin arms strained to raise the scrawny body up (Helblindi could count its ribs) – until it stood shakily on its own two feet.

"Leave us," he said, waving his hands.

No one moved.

"I wish to speak with it. Alone."

"It is mute, my Lord," Healer Ketill said.

"And witless, no doubt," added the more practical Mage Orfr.

"Nevertheless," Helblindi said. "I wish to be alone with it."

The two Healers and the steadily cursing Caretakers left first, mumbling to each other about Mage Opna and the strange tastes of the Inner Court. Helblindi decided he did not want to know. The City Council left on their heels – but it took some more stern commands to budge the two Mages.

"We are not superstitious fools," Helblindi said, keeping his voice steady with mild reasonableness. "An accusation of murder was laid at its door and the Dead, being so entwined with it, may not receive the respect due them – unless we can prove the vaetki is indeed as witless and weak as you believe – and therefore not connected with their deaths. With a Royal Proclamation of the vaetki's innocence, the Dead are released from contamination – but only if I know for certain. I will discover the solution to this mystery – much easier done without a vicious audience around, think you not?"
Sound reasoning – and in the face of that and his indisputable authority, Helblindi got his way. 
*Sound reasoning – but not the only reason.* He looked down upon the pathetic creature and grunted. 
*A vaetki of some years... this is unbelievable...*

And so he found himself alone –

Carefully eyeing the object of his curiosity.

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**Chapter End Notes**

DUN DUN DUN! What will Helblindi do? Will he find out? What would he do if he found out? How is this going to get angstier before it gets better? 
(because it will)  
(you know it will)  
(it's me!)

In other news, I'm going to try to write Chapter 23-25 this week. Please wish me luck as I try to get over a massive writer's block! (winces)

Update on Friday/Saturday. :D
WRITER'S BLOCK SORT OF BANISHED! I got through the first painful awkward conversation between Thor and Loki. Ugh. I don't know. We'll see. And now I'm starting to find momentum again. YAY! And I started on this short fic about Tom Hiddleston and Loki. Don't ask. It's, like... almost halfway done. I'll post it up somewhere. AFF or something. And when I do, I'll let you guys know. XD

Onward. CAN YOU GUESS WHAT HAPPENS BY THE CHAPTER TITLE? Pull out those hankies. Well. Not yet. Maybe. We'll see.

Thanks to all the reviewers!

I'm so encouraged and I hope that I can keep writing something great here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 13
Hope Lost

At the news of the arrival of the King – no, Eldar Orn later corrected the gossip-mongers, the Crown Prince Helblindi – the vaetki felt only curiosity, which as time passed by grew into suspicion. Crown Prince, he thought, my older brother... then? And then more questions crowded in. Why is he here when Utgard is not ready? Is this only because of Mage Opna – or is Laufey-King really about to return? Has he heard of me? Has Laufey-King come back for me? Will I be taken from Utgard...

But then, Healer Lind had grabbed the vaetki painfully by his bare shoulder and dragged him to the metal-worker Hritha, who pulled his feet across the table and clapped jarnvithr shackles on them. Now, he was locked – trapped – in yet another hateful jarnvithr cupboard, curled up yet again in the dark, unable to flee his doom.

In the pitch blackness of his prison, the vaetki’s thoughts turned to the faces of those who had looked down at him all his life – if they ever looked at all... Horrified faces. Sneering faces. Angry faces. Always so angry. And then, fearful faces.

None like Elska.

Of course, the darkness whispered. What do you expect, you - the pitiful burden on their backs? Useless leech!

Thin arms tightened about bruised knees.

And you really think your brother will come to... what... save you? All night long, what do you think they are telling him? The thoughts descended into his deepest fears and realizations – if your Royal Father had wanted you, he would have fetched you before now.
Burying his head in his knees, the vaetki shivered.

You are... alone.

[... never alone...]

*Dear heart...*

[... never alone...]

Now he stood before his brother in the Storrholl of the King’s Court – a great hall filled with splendid pillars, paved with the special blue-black marble imported from far to the north and east – beyond Skalldi and Thrymheim. Ornate carvings newly dusted gleamed from high above and long windows spaced evenly along either side let in intricate shafts of Jotunheim's cool morning light. The dais before him was wide and long, situated at the far end of the room before a wall now decorated with intricate banners no doubt weaved in Alfheim or Vanaheim. Several stairs high, the King's throne stood empty now... the vaetki's eyes widened – it was at least the size of his cupboard!

Crown Prince Helbindi sat on a smaller seat before it in respect. He cut an imposing figure. Amongst all the other Jotunn, Helbindi had stood out like a tungblom on a black plain of blakkrgras. Tall, washed and well-clothed with his sharp muscles and aristocratic posture, Helbindi dominated the room in style and authority. A circlet of manisilfr around his upper arm and another intricately wrought buckle which sat on a fine belt made of Vanaheim braiding had proclaimed him the highest ranking personage in the room. The silver set off his even skin tones and matrilineal lines which swooped over his broad forehead – and the vaetki sighed in envy at the short hair obviously molting to reveal the stiff wiry under-hair and horns of adulthood.

Unconsciously, the vaetki pushed back his long unkempt mane, lingering on the flat, worn headband across his own brow. For the first time, a small seed of shame in his belly blossomed.

No horns yet. *No horns ever,* something deep within him sneered.

Then the Prince rose, straightening to his full height and, walking down the stairs, loomed over the vaetki who had to bend its head back far enough to meet the taller Jotun's eyes. Small fists clenched.

*I may be nothing,* he thought, *but if I die, I will die without tears. Elska will be proud to welcome me home.*

[... the spirit of Utgard, of Jotunheim...]

[... it lies in the least of these...]

-0-0-0-

"You have caused us many troubles, cursed one," Helbindi leaned forward, eyeing the small thing. "Do you know what the mages would have done with you?"

The vaetki stared back and Helbindi smiled.

"They say you are an abomination and your blood running on the streets of this city as we stone you would cleanse this place – ah ah ah!"

Helbindi's foot moved forward, stepping on the length of jarnvithr links between it's ankles, tripping it up as the vaetki began to move back, fear in its small red eyes. For a moment, he stared down at the wildly thrashing thing. The arms, the fingers, the legs and the feet were all tiny and stunted. Ugly,
yet fascinating, for it reminded him of the pictures of Asgardian children which he had read in books bought at great price from the Elves and Dwarves.

But the Asgardian children were fair-haired, where this one was dark. The Asgardian children were well-built and round-cheeked, where this one was skeletal and concave with hunger. The Asgardian children were clean and shining, where this one was beaten and dirty. The Asgardian children were like their horses – energetic, groomed and spoiled rotten. This one was a wild animal, more like a wolf than a Jotunn – full of fire, if thread-bare and half crazed.

Witless, Mage Orfr had said. Perhaps. Mute? I think not.

Judging by the low growls and hissing issuing from the vaetki, it could make noise of some kind, if no known language. Foot still not budging despite the scratching of small black fingernails along his toes, Helblindi knelt down on one knee and pulled the creature up by its unwashed hair, the better to look at it. Dirty blue skin pulled tight over thin sharp ribs, a sunken belly to match its cheeks and a low riding, threadbare kirtle which had gained a hole over one thigh. Its lines were still faint as usual with youngling Jotunn. Helblindi wondered if they would ever rise and harden. He thought not. Not that we will ever know, he amended. The miniscule black nails were now scratching at his arm unpleasantly and he cuffed it gently, tutting.

"You should know your betters, vaetki. Something you forgot during your impudent existence, obviously." Helblindi smiled then, "Well, at least you will die knowing that you caused an entire city to quake in fear of you. That is something at least."

At his words, there was a renewed struggle, twice as desperate, and he watched with amusement as sharp, white teeth fastened on his hand and attempted to bite through his tough hide.

"That will do me no harm, I am afraid," Helblindi laughed then. "But you can understand me. Come now, desist and let us talk together." He pushed then at the headband bound across the small forehead. "Who is your father? He must be beaten as punishment for his carelessness – if he has not already died in shame..."

The thrashing increased and the creature's ice dagger reappeared, sinking into the Prince's wide palm. Helblindi cursed, slapped it and holding its head still, dragged the binding off, revealing its matrilineal lines. For a moment, there was nothing but stunned silence.

[... silence fell...]

[... on Jotunheim...]

He blinked at the lines and then, dropping the leather headband absently, his hand rose to trace the lines which ran down from the black hairline – down the small forehead and across in sweeping curves and straight lines. Helblindi knew these. Knew these like the back of his hand. Literally. They curved on his hands and up his arms. And he had traced his father's lines enough times as a child at play.

"You are –" He dropped the runt and staggered back as if hit by a blow to the chest. "You are –" Helblindi choked out with revulsion. He felt ill. Felt betrayed. Flummoxed. Uncertain.

The vaetki watched him – terrified eyes in a stoney face.

"How..." Helblindi said and then stopped trying to process it. "When..."

Silence.
At some point in time, Father was with child... and since then he has been unable to bear one. Perhaps it happened during the War – or at the end of it. They never speak of those days but say that they paid a terrible cost. Which means... at some point, if my tutors are to be believed, if the mages' stories are true and if Mother is right... then... this, this... this thing is the product of – of Mother and Father and the spirits of this realm. Is it possible that the blessings of the Heimsrsal belong to THIS? Helblindi's thoughts followed the horrifying logical truth. This was to be the future King of Jotunheim – the future Other Soul to the Kero Fornvetr? The mightiest wielder of the Casket of Ancient Winters... They said - they said that if Jotunheim were to be blessed by the For-Eldra, a great king would come. The True Heir. Tutor Eeltha told me the King of Jotunheim would be bound to its treasure and the spirits therein... and if that is true. If that is true. Then... Then this... this thing had the potential to one day be the King to save Jotunheim and – and – it is a runt?

Helblindi shuddered.

This is my... brother. And he - it - IT is a runt. Why was it not slain at its birth? Obviously no one knows the truth of this matter... or perhaps Mage Opna did... Helblindi's eyes narrowed as he stepped forward again, watching with pleasure at how the vaetki flinched and edged back until the small back met the cold wall of the King's Great Hall. Father and Mother think it dead. And even should it be shown to be alive... what would be the reaction of the Court? The Realm? To see the open dishonour of my father's seed... and it would not gain a peaceful existence - it would die within the week at the hand of a malcontent. It would never gain the throne... would it? This puny thing has no right to take away the birthright my father bestowed, for which I labour so hard...

Of course it has no right – and it can't, he reassured himself, it will be killed by nightfall and this will be nothing but a bad dream. It will never be spoken of again. But he knew then, that this day would haunt him till he returned to the snows of the For-Eldra. Feeling more exhausted than usual, lifting the headband off the ground, Helblindi threw it back to the runt and watched as it bound its forehead, hiding the traitorous lines, the horrific truth.

Already learning to lie and steal and fight to live, Helblindi thought, such an existence cannot be allowed to live. Let it taste our mercy and end its sorrowful existence as it should have done so long ago. And let it's going be honourable and within the mandate of Heimsrsal herself. Stoning... it is potentially tricky because if the lines were to be discovered... well, they must not be. Furthermore, allowing the people to riot in the streets only encourages barbarism. And going so close to the Eybjarg to toss it in the Void is the act of fools and the desperate only – and I am neither. Hmmm...

"Mage Opna was a Jotun of some standing, did you know? I do not think you could comprehend what he was," Helblindi sighed, "considering your... upbringing. Still, you must have heard, if not seen what happened to him?"

The vaetki nodded.

"I thought as much." With that, Helblindi pulled the small one forward by its hair, ignoring its renewed scrabbling – and he raised his voice, pleased that at once everyone came pouring in. "Judgement has been decided upon," he smiled cruelly down at the now whimpering, shivering dwarf youngling. "We shall bind him and cast him into the ungentle arms of nature."

Everyone nodded and for a moment nothing was said until Mage Ikelo asked, "And what would that entail?"

"That it know the pain of the people upon whom it had inflicted his presence, it shall be thrown to the wolves and freed to the arms of Heimsrsal herself. Let Jotunheim care of its own. It will be forgotten - and never be spoken of again."

"We have that pack of thurblakulfr lingering to the north, may they rest in Helheim," spat one of the
Council members.
Thyrstr smiled, "A sound plan to be sure, but it shall make a poor mouthful."

There was laughter then, laughter which increased as the abomination began to struggle again. In the end, they beat it until it stopped resisting and bound its arms to its sides. Thyrstr threw it over his shoulder and the group of men strode to the north gate, discussing on how soon the thurblakulfr would catch its scent.

[... so soon...]

[... they would be free...]

-0-0-0-

Three hours later, the expedition left the safety of Utgard's walls and wound their way to the barren wastes outside to the north. As was habit, the wolves were close by that night – the few scouts sent out earlier met them with the good news that the wild horde was on its way, following the scent they had laid down. Tossing their burden to the ground, the Jotunn looked about one last time before returning to the walls. They would watch.

The Great Traditions would be upheld and Utgard would be cleansed and the suffering of the creature would be eased.

[... Can you hear it? The voice of the wind...]

[... and the howling...]

[... they are coming...]

Chapter End Notes

Well there you go, folks. Helblindi's decision. We'll see what happens to Loki next chapter.

BRING YOUR HANKIES!

But good times will happen soonish. Like Chap 14/15.

Authors Note: [This excerpt is taken from a review reply to wbss21's amazing review of the PREVIOUS chapter. I felt that I made a few important points here and if any of you are going... 'Noooooo! Helblindi! Whhhhhyyyy?' This might help. Maybe.]

"I did write Helblindi this way for a reason. He is reasonable and, as you say, intelligent. He's level-headed and educated as well. So, Helblindi is in a curious position. Loki could be a threat to the thone... but as you say, as a runt, would Loki really be one? I guess, I don't want people to hate Helblindi too much, whatever he chooses to do because ultimately his motivations are right (the good of Jotunheim) - but he's forced to act within the strictures of his station and society. The fact that Laufey could kill his own child for his country sets a PRETTY high standard for Helblindi as well (and not a good one IMO - not that Helblindi necessarily KNOWS his father was pregnant... but Laufey's life-long commitment to Jotunheim is pretty much scary). But Helblindi may
question this at some point. That's all I can say.

The interaction between Laufey and Farbauti was important to me, I think. Utgard, I will mention later, is in a state of spiritual desolation, being the Ground Zero, as it were, of a massive spiritual... slaughter or rape. Spiritually speaking. There's a sense that the residents of Utgard, living in the shadow of their greatness, are psychologically tense all the time... and while Laufey and the rest of Jotunheim are fixing themselves up, slowly... Utgard isn't. Which is why, of course, Helblindi trucks out there.

Poor Helblindi. Biting off more than he can chew.

And of course, as you point out, despite their intelligence and civility, Farbauti and Laufey have to live with the fact that they screwed over their kingdom (although they don't know how much yet) (that will come later) (before chapter 20, I think) by killing/abandoning the True Heir - and condemning their kingdom to spiritual/magical emptiness as well as physical decay.

On the other hand, despite living a life that is literally empty of anything good and surrounded by spiritual/moral/magical/physical decay, Loki thrives. As you point out, Loki has guts. Loki has abilities - and Hiemrsal at his back (sort of). OMG! JUST REALIZED THIS IS THE OLIVER TWIST PARADIGM! (oi vey!)

So, some of you might hate Helblindi now - but his part to play is far from over and he's just trying to do the right thing with devastating consequences for 1 individual. I know some countries who would consider that totally justifiable collateral damage. Which is so sad. Because ALL life is precious. EVERY ONE. But some people get the short end of the stick.

Next update will be Monday, or so. Soon.
He woke to dark. Dark which slowly lightened – the white spots little by little sharpening to pinpricks of starlight and the great moons which rose over Jotunheim. Sound and smell clashed just seconds before – fresh wind, clean snow and a wolf's howl carried on the whistling wind of open spaces. The wastelands. Red eyes widened as comprehension set in.

The smell of tanning leather, treated jarnvithr wood, hot loaves, bitter oil and smelting iron was absent – as was the sight of tall, crumbling towers and walls. He was outside.

Shifting his badly bruised limbs, the young Jotunn whimpered as sharp gouging pains lanced up his right arm to his shoulder and through his torso. His arm – the fingers weren't moving as well as he would like. It was confusing. Disorienting. Then, the vaetki remembered the day Elo had broken his arm in the lower foothills of Grarfjall Mountains. For a month, it was bound until the bones knit.
inside (so said Healer Lind) and the arm was straight. Healer Lind had said that in the old days, magic worked through heillgrjot could have healed it in a matter of moments. Then the healer had sighed at the blank expression on the vaetki's thin face and sent it off, grumbling about witless fools, little knowing that the youngling had read of such magicks before and had only just practised the most basic spell less than a fortnight ago on a set of broken ribs he had acquired thanks to a drunk Thyrstr.

So, he thought, forcing down the panic which rose and curled about in his belly like a sleeping dragon. A broken arm. A broken arm – tied tightly to his other. And his legs... The vaetki shifted, rolled onto its stomach and discovered that the shackles around his legs had remained. Another stabbing pain up his left leg. Close to his foot. No doubt injured as well.

Whimpering quietly, the small Jotun curled his knees underneath him, gaining enough leverage to force himself painfully upward onto his knees and from there to his feet. Wind at his back – nearly knocking him down again – the vaetki began to shuffle back to the walls of Utgard, swaying from side to side. Tall and dark, the ramparts stood in the distance – they looked so far away – but that was more than likely due to his poor vision. One eye had swollen shut and the other had trouble focusing. The world blurred, sharpened, blurred and then sharpened as it's left foot stepped forward a little too forcefully. He bit back the loud cry which threatened to burst from his throat.

He was strong. He would not cry. He would not cry. Crying helped nothing.

Nonetheless, tears rolled down his cheeks silently and from split lips spilled heartfelt promises in his broken grasp of the Jotun tongue. Barely intelligible with a hoarse voice so long disused. So long unheard.

Unheard even now – for the wind whipped the words away and broke them as breadcrumbs along the wasteland so not even the keenest ear of the Jotunn could hear him beg.

[... but Heimsrsal heard...]

[... she hears all...]

"I will be good."

I promise. I will be whatever you wish me to be and never complain. I will do whatever you wish me to do and not fail. Father... Brother...

The vaetki shuddered as another gust nearly knocked it down on its face and for a moment, he lost his footing on a rough patch of ice, nearly pitching down the hill – but long years had honed his reflexes and he managed to gain his balance. At the cost of leaning to hard on his left foot. A definite cracking sound then. Gasping in pain, nearly bent double, the vaetki shuddered to a stop.

Please...

[... she will always hear...]

[... for this is her heart...]

-0-0-0-

"One feels rather sorry for the poor little thing," sighed Kelda.

Illska glanced over at the metalworker and raised an eyebrow. Kelda was with child, and that sometimes meant a kind of protectiveness was aroused in preparation for the long care of his child.
He grunted as he turned to watch the small figure stagger forward.

"Hm."
"It should have been put down a long time ago," Kelda went on with a frown. "Quietly and quickly. Then these barbaric measures would not have to be taken."
"A shame, indeed," Mage Orfr nodded. "The parents should have been found and punished for their neglect. Letting a thing like that live shows poor care for the souls of their children. I am surprised it did not die earlier as most do."
"I dislike how cavalier we take this kind of thing," Ilska finally said. "In Dagaheim, these kinds of things are dealt with in a more efficient manner, often before they are even born."
"To regain the city, however," Kelda sighed, "the Prince must show his ability to deal with such problems and to stand firm in the Old Ways. The Forn Vegr demands much from its people and often at the cost of our hearts. But in truth I do not know if I like it..."
"Now, that is the babe talking," Mage Orfr chuckled. "I got that way when I had Aklo..."
"Hm," Kelda said, not amused.
"Still," Ilska had to point out. "I am impressed by its endurance – a surprising will to live – and even now, it is attempting to escape its fate. An attitude that has long since become rare in this Realm, since the Lengi Orfrithr and the loss of the Casket."
"It is surprising to see it in something so young and forsaken," Mage Orfr agreed and then started at a familiar face standing suddenly beside him. "Ah, my Prince, I did not see you there."

It was the Crown Prince still looking stern and august despite his young age, his red eyes trained sharply on the small figure trudging back to the wall.

"You were saying?"
"Ah," Mage Orfr smiled. "Just noting the perseverance of the vaetki. A testimony in a strange way to Jotunheim and more specifically, this city, Utgard."
"Yes," Helblindi nodded slowly. "Dvegrs, I hear tell, do not live past their first hour of life or their first year. Witless and disabled, gifted or no, there is no strength within them... This one however..."

A pause. Then, softly; "His parents may find pride in his strength and courage – and the nattura look on all of us, large and small, with love. They will take him as they should have long ago before he shouldered the burden of this life." Helblindi smiled at Kelda. "Weep not, for this is a kindness."

He clasped the shorter Jotun briefly on the shoulder before moving on down the rampart.

The rest had nothing to say. They watched. They listened to the wind and shivered as the howling grew louder.

-0-0-0-0-

Long ago, before the Casket had been taken from its remote tower, the Aldinn Stathr, for its more bloody and violent use in the Long War, it had provided the life blood of the ancient kingdom of Jotunheim – the source of all life and, more importantly, magic. It was at that time that Jotunheim was filled with so much variety as to be a thing of legend now. In those days, they say, the hills were filled with the hardy skordyr, Jotunheim's version of goat, grarulf, thurblakulfr and many other creatures both large and small. Many survived even to most recent times on the far side of the Realm known as Utanheim, but in the lands and the wastelands lying between and surrounding the cities of Utgard, Griotunagardar, Gastropnir, Thrymheim and Dagaheim, all that remained were bear, wolf and the occasional jarnkottr, iron-cats, which were captured immediately and partially domesticated.

Of the wild animals, the jarnkottr was the most dangerous, although with time some kind of an understanding between slave and master could be reached. With the thurblakulfr, there was only distrust and animosity. Dominating the lands north of Dagaheim, the thurblakulfr never attempted to
breach the Jotunn city walls – but neither were they afraid to wreck waste on the countryside and the unfortunate farmer too isolated to receive aid in time.

A keen-minded creature, the thurblakulfr appeared to have systems within their clans – and a distinct awareness... some kind of sentience within the packs, which Jotunn dyrspeki had studied for centuries. Despite their careful watching and cautious note-taking, no real understanding had formed between the Jotunn academics and the great black wolves. The thurblakulfr seemed to answer to no one but themselves...

... and they understood who owned the winds of Jotunheim...

Jotunn feared them – and the Northern Gates were closed this evening as a large bulk of Utgard's inhabitants came out to watch the end of the curse which had lived among them.

It was time.

... they were coming...

-0-0-0-

No matter how loud the howling grew, the vaetki struggled on, teeth clenched and body vibrating with pain. It knew now that there was no hope – the gate was locked shut, the shackles on its feet and the binding on its wrists precluded any use of magic. Neither could he run, nor dig deep enough into the snow – for the ground was too close to the surface here and would provide no real protection.

His words had dried up – and his tears. There was only a deep exhaustion left – a heavy ache, which he could not name.

... Elska would have told him...

... it is called grief – a breaking heart...

Exhaustion and a quiet determination. He would not die like a squealing wild boar. Like Mage Opna.

Elska – he thought –

He could feel the earth shake a little under his bared feet and the ice sheets cracked.

Elska – he thought –

A keening call which spoke of bright moons and wild days underneath the stars and the sweep of empty land and nothingness and death. The wind flew past him, whipping long black hair in a dark curtain forward. Hot breath on his neck. Hard teeth clamping down on his shoulders, forcing him to the ground.

Elska – he thought – I will see you soon.

Dark blood oozed out onto the pale snow as he was tossed across the ice to land by a particularly large black paw. Pain engulfed his senses, but the vaetki bit down on his tongue silencing sounds of pain. The taste of iron filled his mouth. He would not cry. Bright eyes, which glinted in the dim light of the setting cold suns, and a wide, black-furred head blotted out the starry sky. The vaetki gasped as the gaping maw leaned forward, opened and then closed around his pinioned arms and torso. Underneath the fur, he could see nothing now but dark –
Sound returned as he was hefted up and there was a flurry and surging of claw and fang and fur and then...

He was gone.

Watching from the city wall, Prince Helblindi said nothing. Said nothing as he gazed at the patch of dark blood which stained the snow. There was no sign of the vaetki. To the people, that was good enough – the curse which had inflicted itself on their lives was gone, but the Prince was nonplussed. Was it dead? Or no?

*What do I tell Father?* He thought. *There is nothing to say...*

*So say nothing*, another part of him pointed out.

Still, he stood there for quite some time – long after everyone else had trickled back to their early evening duties and business. He stood there, alone, on the ramparts and remembered sharp, red eyes and a wilful spirit.

*It... It seemed wrong to refer to such a brave soul so callously. And do we not all have souls?* Helblindi wondered. *No, he earned his place with the For-Eldra - he faced his doom with courage and pride.* Helblindi paused and listened to the wind. *He is one of our blood - and blessed by Heimsrsal herself. And perhaps his story is not over... If there was anyone who would survive the thrublakulfr, he would.*

So, Helblindi gazed across the snow and watched a new snow flurry cover the dark stains of a cursed... brother's... blood.

"Little Brother," he whispered. "Be free."

[... stood in silence...]

[... Jotunheim fell into...]

In the morning, news came from the village of Myrkr Skogr, long cut off from Utgard and glad to bear the city good news. Sometime in the evening, they said, the pack of thrublakulfr had thundered past and disappeared into the north. Why, they did not know, but there was no sign of them – and even better evidence showed in the hesitant return of the grarulfr into the foothills of the Grarfjall Mountains. A cry of joy rose up in the great city. Hope had returned.

It was a good day for Utgard.

Chapter End Notes

Well... he's gone~ Thank goodness. They so do not deserve him.

Let me know what you think! Update will be around Wednesday, I think.

Author's Note: A few things to clear up. Laufey has only birthed Loki in this fic. This is
(or may not be) NOT PURE NORSE MYTHOLOGY. AT ALL. This is all me and my silliness and doing what I want a la Loki - because I think Marvel MCU-verse is very much its own beast and we should respect that. In this story, Farbauti is the Mother of Helblindi and Byleistr, making them Princes - but NOT Crown Princes (traditionally speaking) Of course, we all know what has happened to tradition on Jotunheim. (aka DED in most ways)

And as for the TRUE HEIR. There are a bunch of requirements that I will elaborate on LATER (this is a slowly unwrapping story and I'm the type of author who withholds info sometimes)... but we already got a few hints, if you read VERY CAREFULLY. I have stated that a True Heir needs to be born of the King himself/herself (in this situation, Laufey). Which Loki has been. Age relation to other siblings does not matter. Parentage does. That's the basic Jotunn standard for True Heir. Which Laufey had been at one point.

But to be a really really great True Heir there a few other (forgotten) requirements... such as the conception is blessed by Heimrsral, the Casket power seeps into the growing cells, and the child has natural innate magical abilities. Loki meets all requirements. Now... the fact he is a runt... well, there's a mystery there, which will... unfold... in time.
Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 15
Healing Paths

The fields of Dagaheim lie fallow in the winter under a permanent layer of ice and several meters of snow. The small, northern capitol looks across them nervously at the narrow chasm and the lake and beyond their sight, the distant Eybjarga Skogr – a forest which hangs on the edge of forever. It is a forest which had lasted eons of winter... before succumbing to the legendary Rift – falling into the slowly growing Eybjarg, losing three-quarters of its might to mark the beginning of the destruction of Jotunheim.

[... When did it first start? No one seems to truly know...]

That will all change.

They say, one day, a King will be born to Jotunheim – a being of great power, the Sithr Efingi, the True Heir, who will stand as the Bastion Against The Void and heal the land once again. So they say.

If one believes the tales of witless giants.
If one has hope.

[... even without the Casket, there is still hope...]

[... there is still... hope...]

And so the Jotunn of Dagaheim till the ground in the last moon cycles of the winter season – but with half an eye on the horizon. It is, after all, across these plains, during the late winter, that the thurblakulfr come running – from the east to the west and then beyond to the Utanheim, the Outer Realm. For the Eybjarga Skogr calls all wild things – and it is said that those who disappear into its
pathless ways are never seen again. Yes, Utanheim is a wild place where no Jotunn cities lie and is only traversed by the most hardy (foolhardy, some would say) Jotunn hunter-trader.

The only other way to Utanheim is by the ever winding East Road which leads from Thrymheim and ends in the Offaer Skogr. Beyond stretches the wastes, the lakes, the mountains, the fjords and all manner of empty lands filled with wild creatures and starlight. Here, Heimsrsal's voice rings out purest –

[... for they are silent who would listen...]

[... Are you listening?...]

Journey-hardened paws ran over the frozen waters of the Myrkyregvatn – the long, thin lake north of Mykyr Skogr with its accompanying, smaller lakes to its west, hard by over Utgard's North Road which ran upwards to Dagaeheim. Without rest, they moved through the night, raising their voices in a clarion call – for they had gone hunting and had found their prey. The small creature, still hanging limply in the pack leader's mouth, had long since fallen silent, but with the intuition of all living creatures close to Heimsrsal's heart, they knew that it breathed still and its pulse beat strong.

Thundering along, the pack of fifty wolves or more moved through the night without rest until they had passed under the eaves of the Eybjarga Skogr. The pace slowed then, but none came to a halt – and small snærharra, sneaky melrakki, and restless herds of villrkyr watched with trepidation as the pack approached, scampered out of its way and then returned as the thurblakulfr rumbled by. The Eybjarga Skogr was not dead, after all. Besides many creatures, Jotunheim's hardy plant life grew. Blakkgras, jarnvithr, tungblom and the more rare hota-eik and silvralmr thrived, yet the danger of becoming prey to thurblakulfr deterred many Jotunn from venturing too far within.

Here, the vaetki would be safe.

-0-0-0-

Hlutí was as old as the hills, the traders in Utgard and Gastropnir said. As old as the hills and as crazy as an old she-goat. The ancient hunter with skin as tough as wild ox hide and a skull as thick as a jarnkottr travelled the Utanheim, bringing to the capitols unbelievable tales of majestic mountains and plunging depths and fairytale creatures. Nonsense, of course. Anything Hlutí said was utter babble... Hlutí heard voices.

"Don't look at him," the townspeople of Dagaeheim whispered to their younglings. "And don't speak with him... Who knows where you'll end up then?"

With each fair season, Hlutí returned to Innaheim, pack full of furs and rare elm and white oak saplings – the promise of rebuilding the Eybjarga Forest in a fairer place. The north-eastern city of Snjarhamr, slumbering before the foothills of the Offaerdalr close by the Jathar Skogr, had committed to planting new jarnvithr and silver elm and white oak in an effort to raise the forest anew. And each year, Hlutí bore ten roots and tender branches swaying atop his massive sack of fur and bone and claw securely strapped to his broad, scarred back.

"Don't look him in the eye," the townspeople of Snjarhamr whispered to their younglings. "That one looked into the Eybjarg one too many time... Don't you remember – the Eybjarg is by the cursed city of Utgard – the chasms of forever. Fall in them, and your spirit will never find its way home to the For-Eldra."

Such tales were not entirely true, however. Long years of loneliness in the wilderness, gazing up at the starlight with nothing but the wind of Jotenheim to keep him company, Hlutí had stared into the
expanses and, upon returning to the small villages and large capitol he no longer called home, the quiet hunter had discovered that the glittering world of Innaheim had gained a superficial gleam, a smattering of tarnish. For things once sacred were now profane and the gestures of the Mages and the Rites of the King and the Great Traditions were now meaningless. Hunter-Trader Old Man Hluti made the city folk uneasy, for his clear eyes saw far and deep.

The Casket was gone and the world of Jotunheim languished at its core.

And it was that time of the year again. As the massive pack of thurblakulfr moved its surefooted way through the forest, Hluti sat in the shelter of a small hill by the north side of the Grjotvatn Lake, contemplating his upcoming treacherous trek to Dagaheim through the Eybjarga Forest now at his back. The boughs of the elms and oaks creaked ominously and broken boughs cracked as the smaller woodland creatures scurried through the snow and ice and fallen leaves and bracken. Wind rustled through the luminous tunglbloms which cast a strange glitter on the reflective leaves of the silver elms. Hluti cocked his head.

"Eh?" He mumbled to himself – no, he thought, not to myself. To her. She's always listening. "You must speak louder if you wish me to hear," Hluti poked at the small pit of fire he had built, upon which he was currently boiling some black broth of tunglbloms and white oak sap. A putrid concoction, but incredibly invigorating for the long road ahead.

Wait... he is coming...

"Who?"

He is coming...

Hluti grumbled. Things can never be simple, can they?

-0-0-0-

As the cool suns rose over the edge of the world, Hluti rose and stretched and listened once again. There was a stillness in the air – a watchfulness. A silence. At the edge of the lake, he caught fourteen holkimurtr, deciding to break his fast with fish.

"Your guest will be hungry, Hluti, depend upon it," he told himself as his hands busily sliced the silver fish open and gutted them deftly. "You watch – in a matter of moments, there will be company and what do you think they will be asking for but some kind of tea and broth and fish and whatnot. Perhaps they will have been lost for days on end and on the brink of starvation – and what then? You will have their deaths at your door because you could not catch a few fish?"

As he was laying his catch in the icebox of the small hut he had built into the side of the hill so many years ago, Hluti heard a distant rumble. At first, the ancient woodsman wondered if he had read the signs wrong (again) and rain was coming.

"That would be odd, Hluti," he shook his head, scolding himself. "At this time of year? What are you thinking?"

But the sound did not abate. It was not his imagination. The Jotunn scrambled out of the low hut which had been built into the hill and downwards into the ground – and peering past the smoke now rising from the hillock, where the small carved hole allowed it to escape his home, he recognized large furry shapes bursting out of the forest without warning. Grabbing his spear which stood ready in a mound of snow by his door and clenching the haft in his firm grasp, Hluti tensed – and then blinked as the pack began to part, some running east, some west – none approaching him.
"Now, then," he sighed. "If it was to be wolves, beloved mine, could you not have sent me some Jotunn first to prepare for them?" Hluti shook his head and then stilled as a large, black and silver furred thurblakulfr approached and slowed to come before him. "You are the Pack-Father?" The trader-hunter asked, trying to keep his voice calm and firm, but not aggressive. "I wish you no – oh..."

The giant head lowered and its jaws opened releasing a bundle of blue skin and bones, judging by the awkward angle of the left foot and right arm, broken bones. A starved thing. A starved youngling? Yes. Yes. Hluti thought. A starved youngling. But a small one. Too small... He forced down the horror that rose in his gut at the sight of the bruising, the swollen face, the bound hands and shackles. A runt. A lagreinn. Vaetki. A nothing belonging to no one.

No, the wind whispered. Mine...

"Well," Hluti lowered his spear and edged forward, glad to see that the leader of the pack was likewise stepping back. "I guess those fish will come in handy then."

-0-0-0-

It was a simple matter to bind the bones, wipe away the blood and tend to the cuts and bruises with the ointments which he always carried with him for such emergencies. The irons were easily unlocked with two metal pins more often used for skewering and the thick rope around its hands and scrawny neck – a reminder of a time when it had been owned by someone – was cut away gently.

"Someone loved you enough to keep you alive for a little while," Hluti sighed. "Unkind – unkind – but, even more so, to toss you away when your usefulness ended. Such beasts live in those cities, beloved mine. Such beasts."

At some point in the night, young red eyes fluttered open and the wolf by the door yipped in warning, at which Hluti bolted upright and to attention in enough time to stop his young charge from attempting to scrabble out the front door. Despite the fact that it had broken its arm and leg, the puny creature seemed rather agile – thrashing, scratching, biting, until Hluti pinned it with one arm against his chest, while his other reached about for some elm branches to raise the fire with. After a few moments, the flickering light grew and he was able to look down at the small black head resting against his own strong sternum.

Cutting fingernails scrapped along the backs of his hands and before he could say anything – anything to calm the creature down – a tiny ice dagger grew in its palm and it was stabbing downward at his forearm, while simultaneously growling as its puny teeth bit into his hand. Hluti's chest shook like an earthquake as laughter rose from his belly – and at the sound, the runtling's struggles ceased and it cocked its head in silent query.

"Come now, lagreinn," he said. "Let us have none of that now. Beloved mine would be angry at us both, I think, if we quarrelled over long. Look, bite this fish instead, for it is less leathery than this old cow." Here, he placed a short strip of fish temptingly by the fire. It was raw – but that was the traditional manner of things, before the elves and Aesir had come with their fire and their mannerisms and styles of cooking. The shrunken belly of the lagreinn grumbled loudly and Hluti smiled then, knowing he had won this argument.

"See, you cannot hide it now, come and eat and let us talk."

He doubted it would speak – but that was fine. Hluti could talk for the both of them – and Heimsrsal herself could fill in the rest. Letting go carefully, he lay the lagreinn on the stone paved floor of his tiny home and watched it with pity as its trembling hands snatched up and held close the strip of fish.
flesh with wonderment and disbelief. Hluti clucked his tongue and shook his head. *Does the little one not know what a fish is? Or is it a matter of not understanding such a simple act of charity? Either way...* The hunter-trader sighed and put the thoughts away to consider another time.

"It's a fish, now," Hluti said, adopting the scolding tone of an Elder he had loved to hate in Dagaheim. When he was young. "You should know what a fish is – and you'd best eat it slow. Come. Eat –"

Suspicious eyes rose to meet his and then glanced down - Hluti reached forward, thinking to cut the hefty chunk of meat into small pieces, but the long piece of white-pink fish-flesh was suddenly hugged to a bony chest protectively and angry growling-hisses emerged from the young one. Hluti leaned back and laughed then.

"Have it your way then, lagreinn. And when you are finished that, drink this nasty brew," here, he set down his smallest bowl full of the tunglblom and white oak concoction. "'Twill invigorate you like nothing else, little runtling."

Without a word, the lagreinn wolfed the fish down, trying to obey Hluti's command and eat smaller bites – and totally failing. Eyeing the small one's now rounded belly, Hluti gave it some of his draught and watched with something akin to amusement as the lagreinn fell asleep again mid-way through his second bit of fish, small cheek pillowed on the fish clutched possessively in his hand. A protective measure. *No longer necessary*, Hluti told sleeping one. *No longer necessary.* Carefully lifting the weightless child up, Hluti laid the lagreinn in his robe-cloak of furs, uncertain if it felt comfortable in the usual cold bed of snow.

"Let us see how you feel after some more sleep," he said. "And there is that matter of what in Jotunheim she wants with you." Hluti shook his head. No one was going to believe this.

No one did.

-0-0-0-

After a week of steady eating, the small one, on a morning rose to his feet, leg and arm apparently as good as new. Hluti said nothing, for he had seen enough – the way the black wolves lingered close by, yet peaceful still, the whisperings of the wind and the telltale sparkle of green which wafted from black fingernails when the lagreinn thought he wasn't watching.

*He is bursting with magic*, Hluti thought. *And that is why... that is why he belongs to her...* 

[*... all belong to her, but some more than others...]*

Three days passed afterwards. One night, Hluti brought out a rough pick and managed to bring the wild mane of the lagreinn back to some kind of semblance of neatness. *Lagreinn. That isn't his name anymore*, Hluti smiled. *Not really. He is her child – and he is free as he ought to have been from the start.*

"Well, probably you were meant for greater things, ulfrbarn," he mumbled to himself as he smoothed the black hair down and then, displaying his small knife carefully so as not to frighten the nervy youngling, Hluti began to cut the ragged ends. Each cut jerked awkwardly at his head, but the ulfrbarn did not cry or complain.

*He is used to deeper pain than this*, the old hunter thought. And he remembered the night before last when he had pulled the ulfrbarn onto his lap and had discovered to his shock that behind those empty red eyes, there was no hidden innocence. Hluti had stilled the wandering hands then and shook his
head, pressed the child to his side and mourned for his people. To let a lagreinn live was cruelty, but to take advantage of his life in such a way... It made him ill. How low have we fallen, beloved mine, he whispered then, aloud, and smiled down at the ulfrbarn, trying to comfort the confused red eyes which met his. Hluti had smiled. Somehow.

"You are free now," he whispered to the youngling as if it was a secret. "And even if I spoke of you, they would not believe this..." He traced the small hands which could heal and summon fire and change their hue at will. "You belong to her... she wants you to go. And I must also leave..." A pause. "We may never meet again, ulfrbarn – but perhaps, one day, we will meet again... in the company of the For-Eldra."

The lagreinn's eyes rose sharply then, as comprehension set in. A small hand rose hesitantly to Hlutí's chest and magic flowed into the old Jotunn's skin probing gently.

"Elska..." whispered a small voice, just slightly lisping. "Elska? Is that your father?" No answer. "Well, it matters not." The hand did not move, until Hlutí gently took it in his own larger one. "I am not ill, little one," Hlutí reassured the wolf's child. "But time is shorter for me than it is for you – and you will travel far... It is what she wants. Beloved mine has plans for all of us, you understand. You just need to learn to listen to her." Hlutí gave the small one a secretive smile – and that was the end of it.

The next day, he packed his bag – his furs, his well-pressed blossoms, his bone and claw and rare animal skull and a small portion of fish and six bottles of his draught and the swaying saplings over all. Large eyes in a too thin face watched him silently and he bent down to kiss the ulfrbarn on the brow, presenting it with a small dagger (small to him, but a hefty sized weapon for a youngling of its stature) and half of a gray wolf's pelt with an awkwardly attached rope which had been threaded through a small hole at the top corners to fasten the square fur firmly under the youngling's chin. And there were five fish left by the fire.

Hlutí sighed. His work here was done. It wasn't enough. It had to be enough.

Thank you...

"You are much welcome," he smiled down at the ulfrbarn. "The both of you." The hunter paused at the sight of the pack still dotted about the edge of Grjotvatn. "All of you," he grinned widely then, red eyes empty with nothing but starlight and ice and wind. "I won't forget any of you. Old Hlutí won't. No, he won't."

And he went off, mumbling.

Behind him, there was only silence.

[... but not really...]

[... the silence of Jotunheim is broken by a wolf's cry...]

Chapter End Notes

Hlutí is an accidental character... but he was awesome to write. What do you think?

Let me know~!
So, uh, for those who don't mind RPF stuff - I'm writing a fantastically humorous/angsty fic called 'The Mortal, the Jotun and the Wardrobe'. LOLZ. You can read it on my Tumblr if you like (kakashidiot DOT tumblr DOT com). Other sites too (pm me for details). Good times. Basically: "Tom Hiddleston can't sleep one night - and finds a door in his wardrobe to another world. And it isn't Narnia." LOL.

Also!

Am toying with the idea of inserting a chapter after this one that is just about details of a day living with the wolves. Um. Yeah. So. If I do decide to go ahead and insert a previously unplanned chapter, one which I haven't written yet, and allow us to have a bit of emotional down time, I may be a bit latish with the next update. Maybe Sunday. X.X
Wild Days

Chapter Notes

Just survived a visa-related medical exam. UGH. This 31-year-old virgin does not appreciate having to do ECGs which involve baring herself before her coworker. GAH. If I could erase the past 3 hours, that'd be great. Just great.

So here we go - the unexpected wolf chapter. Uh. A sorta doggie pile happens? Sorta? I hope you like anyways! My thoughts on the matter are as follows.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 16
Wild Days

A broad, white plain of snow unmarked save by soft ridges formed by the ever capricious wind. No Jotunn had traversed this place for a long, long time. These were the long-forgotten paths, the white, frosty wastelands of the Utanheim. Of Jotunheim's Outer Realm, populated by no civilized kind except that of beasts and all wild things that are.

[… here…]

[… silences hold fast…]

[… but not entirely so…]

The wind whistles and howls as it rushes past unhindered and then it comes to a flat, blue-black sheet which spreads as far as the eye can see. White snow and blue-black ice meet a fair sky this morning – and the cold suns' pale light glow lightly on the fields of tungblom and ovarmorn blossoms which grow along the edges of the Great Ice Shelf, the Svelshelf of the Utanheim.

[… the skies are empty…]

[… on Jotunheim…]

Look closer.

[… what is that call carried on the voice of the wind?]

Standing on the edge of the desert-like ice shelf, feet planted firmly, dwarfed on either side by two thurlakulfr, the ulfrbarn braced himself into the wind. Black hair whipped forward like a tattered flag and bright, red eyes stared out over the short expanse of ice before him. Behind lay the Svelshelf – a vast plain of frozen cold beneath one's feet – rising to meet the blue horizon and the great cold suns edging up over the world as it seemed.

And before him… a few steps forward and his toes hung slightly over the edge of the Svelshelf and
the rocks below it which hung downward. Downward. The ulfrbarn felt it – the pull – the nothingness calling – the Void –

This was the edge of his world.

"Not really," he answered himself, his unspoken thoughts, softly. Words whipped away with the wind into the Void never to return. "You know already, Storr-Fathir, do you not?" He asked the Pack-Father of the great thurblakulfr clan. "All the edges of this Realm have felt the weight of your paws."

… we roam far indeed…

… little one…

… our ancestors before and our descendants after us…

Hot breath accompanied by a short growl fanned over his neck in warning as the wild Jotunn runt craned his head and leaned over to look further down. Nothing met the eye. Nothing. Nothing but expanses of a blackness lit with stars and faint light and gaseous clouds.

The Void was nothing. It was empty. And yet… And yet, he knew (here, he shivered), it is not. It is always hungry. He remembered Elska's warnings and Mage Opna's curses. The Eybjarga is always hungry.

Edging back carefully, the ulfrbarn moved away, one step at a time. He was no one's fool.

He did not turn his back.

-0-0-0-

North of the Svalshelf, if the ancient maps in Utgard's Gothahus which the ulfrbarn had memorized so long ago were to be believed, a massive lake lay complete with an unreachable island toward one end of it. Sure enough after several short sun cycles, the pack arrived on the shores of Vithrivatn Lake. Around its edges, clumps of trees and bushes grew together as well as broad swaths of blakkgras. There, on the west side of the expansive lake, the ulfrbarn cast a line for fish.

It was Hluti's old fishing stick which he had left behind with an old pack made of coarse sacking. Inside, the ulfrbarn had packed what the Hunter-Trader had left for him – a rather worn tinder box cracked at one end, an ironwood bowl and ladle-spoon blackened with fire heat, seven lumps of blakcol, two rough pieces of fabric which could be swathed about his middle, a ball of rough twine, a neat, round, grey whet stone and a small pocket-knife. The small-pocket knife was his own – fashioned from a bit of left-over jarnvíthr stacked in Hluti's hut and sharpened on the whet stone. Everything was packed inside the course pack and then bound with its various straps about his chest digging into pale skin and boney shoulders.

The broad wolf-fur cloak was all that rounded out the ulfrbarn's possessions. He did not mind.

It was better to travel light with the Great Pack, adding little weight to the back of the thurblakulfr he rode upon with pale blue hands clenching in dark, thick fur.

[...was borne away to the north...]

[... to the Utanheim...]

No words broke the silence – no tongue of the Jotunn breached the afternoon air in this desolate
place. There was only the occasional yip-yap of the four young pups now nursing with their mothers, the everlasting breeze which whipped off the large lake briskly, the lap-lap of the slowly increasing waves alongside the far beach and the plop of his bait as the bit of eel sunk below black waters.

Only a few minutes passed before the young boy felt a familiar tug on his line. With a practised flick of his wrist, the twin jerked and the rod flipped upward – a silver-backed flatnfiskr flopped wildly, caught on the vicious hook Hluti had bent and sharpened out of jarnvithr. A wicked barbed thing which did its job nicely.

The ulfrbarn caught his eighth fish when the rest of the wolf pack returned from their respective hunts, bearing two long-legged snardaera and several snaerharra triumphantly. Others joined them from their hunts, each bringing some hard earned sustenance for their families. Such is the way of things in the Utanheim.

Storr-Mothir – that was the impression of her name which he had lifted from her bright mind – large with child, sat close to the ulfrbarn. Her intelligent, golden eyes watched as his fingers turned the fish this way and that, while his other hand moved up and down rhythmically, removing the scales with the small pocket-knife which he had strapped to his thigh.

Unlike Hluti's short-knife, this small, wicked thing could fit the palm of his hand easily. Flick, flick, flick, flt-flick. Silver scales flew right and left – and then the sharp blade slipped along the edges of the fish's body and inwards, breaking through white bone and pale-red flesh.

Guts were tossed aside and scooped up and wolfed down by Starf and Thiofir (so named by Kol'la for their mischief and thievery). Storr-Mothir hovered over the ulfrbarn protectively, her commanding eyes flashing warnings at any of the other wolves who skulked about and watched the scrawny creature lay out its catch on the white snow.

The other fish were likewise treated – scales and innards removed, the flesh cut neatly into strips and a few were frozen by the ulfrbarn's magic, wrapped in one square of cloth before being stowed away in a separate pocket in the sack which hung from the bottom. An ungainly way of managing his things, but it would do.

Looking innocent, the ulfrbarn snuck a fish to Storr-Mothir who sniffed it carefully before devouring it with one bite. He ate two fish himself. Looking up to the dull, grey sky, the ulfrbarn sniffed the air tentatively and eyed the increasingly high waves which now rolled up to the steep embankment upon which he had stationed himself. Spray rose in the air and white caps were forming further out. The ulfrbarn glanced at the slowly approaching Storr-Fathir who bore the hindquarters of a snardaera in his great mouth.

A storm was coming.

When the Storr-Fathir tossed down the meat before his mate, the ulfrbarn backed away, allowing the two to nuzzle each other and share the evening meal in peace. No sooner had he turned about when two pups, barking madly with high-pitched yelps, dashed over the snow toward him. They leapt up into the air in a vain attempt to bowl him over and worry at his nose and ears as was their habit in the more recent days. One of them was attempting to climb into his arms and the other one had fastened small fangs onto the ulfrbarn's ankles. The ulfrbarn growled back and shook the two pups off.

"Aiya!" The ulfrbarn cried, finally sinking to his knees to tussle with the two little ones carefully. "Did you not eat your fill this evening?" He shook his head. "Ah-ah! What monsters you must be, ha! And with bellies the size of the Eybjarga itself!" The ulfrbarn rocked a little as a bit heavier weight suddenly appeared on his back. "Oho! Feitr has decided to join us. Perhaps a bit of exercise to lose weight. Ahhh!" He twisted about then to smack the fat pup's head, for it had sunk its teeth
into his ear. "Not the ears again!"

[… silence breaks…]

When the storm hit, the pack had hunkered down ready for it toward the west side of the lake among the clumps of trees which offered some protection against the blizzard. In pairs or groups, the thurblakulfr huddled – and partially carved out of the deep snow which already lay on the never-seen soil and rock of the Utanheim, the ulfrbarn huddled by the warmth of the Pack-Mother and Father. He had placed his pack in the hollow and he sat within it as well, Storr-Mothir slightly overhead, her fur hanging in and he pressed up against her as the wind and snow blew about. Storr-Fathir returned and settled by her head, curved about protectively against the main blast of the wind. And so, uneasily, they fell asleep.

[… silence breaks…]

[… on Jotunheim…]

There is white again. A broad expanse of white. Unmarked. Untouched. Once again. The snaervethr passed by and left a quiet world and the suns rose over a new flat desert of snow, freshly hardened by ice. And then – a sharp crack and barking cries and howls broke the air. Dark figures struggled upward – once formless humps broke free and snuffled the free air. Virgin snow now harrowed up as the thurblakulfr pack awoke. Shaking their fur and darting about to ensure everyone was rising, vibrant howls filled the cold, crisp air.

The first thing he heard, as if from far away, was the sound of a wolf's call. Fear stiffened his limbs – and then relaxed as he remembered. They were his family. His family now. The Great Thurblakulfr Pack of the Utanheim. And he felt so warm. So warm. He grumbled at the noise and turned his head away as a pale light beat on his eyelids.

Then heat. Unwelcome, yet welcome as it descended on his face – soft and wet, running from his chin up to his forehead. Grunting he turned and scrabbled muzzily in the comforting snow. More tongues now. Smaller ones joined the larger one. A few were running up along the sides of his ribs. The still-sleepy ulfrbarn snorted a little as he rolled over onto his stomach – and his hand nestled up against a wriggling bundle of fur which was now tickling his ear with a quivering warm-wet nose. Ugh.

A large tongue then ran down his ribs and his groggy snort transformed into something foreign working up out of his throat. Opna. Thyrstr. They had made the sounds often. Sometimes they were nice – other times, there had been a biting edge. Hluti and Elska. Elska. The ulfrbarn did not remember the name for it – it eluded him, but still it remained with him as the tickling increased along his sensitive ribs.

[… there is laughter…]

"Aiyaaaa…" The ulfrbarn choked out between snorting and his high-pitched… whatever it was. "Sto-stop-stop. I am up now. I promise. See. I'm getting up."

He did indeed try to rise and only got as far as his knees before one of the pups decided it was time to attempt to climb the ulfrbarn's back again.

"Feitr!"

With that sharp reprimand, Feitr darted off whining sadly and the ulfrbarn finally managed to find breath and rise. That morning, he ate a piece of frozen fish and a light tea made of the bitter
blakkgras slightly sweetened by the rare ovarhmorn flower. After breaking his fast, a small group of the younger wolves gained permission from Storr-Father to take him northward to the far edges of the Eybjarga. Sending him off, the Storr-Father's muzzle nudged the most recent addition to the Great Pack.

... be safe, little one...

_I will_, the ulfrbarn promised and buried his head for a moment in the long fur of Storr-Father's neck before turning and then climbing up onto the high back of the young thurblakulfr – with the helpful nudging of Storr-Mothir who had appeared to have adopted the strange, short blue creature. Then they were off.

It was a glorious place – the place of a Thousand Falling Waters, the Eybjarg Rivers and Hratath. Standing on the sharp, black rocks, the ulfrbarn spread his arms and faced the Void once again, this time on the Outer Rim of the Utanheim.

Cold and slick beneath his feet, the rock chilled his bones – but nothing was as awesome as the sight before. Inspiring, terrifying and profound. _The sight of beyond a billion suns_, he knew, _burning through the Void_. And he could hear them: voices calling to voices, spirits to spirits and before his eyes another world of colour opened as a scroll. It was the power of the Realms, the strength of the Heimsrsal chiming in unison. Birthing, growing, fading, and dying in an endless cycle of magic and life. He could feel it. In his very bones, bursting outward. The ulfrbarn tried to keep it in –

He closed his eyes and listened to the roar of the water as it fell endlessly over into the great blackness. _This is the magic of Jotunheim, of the Nine Realms, of the cosmos itself – that it can give and give and yet never be taken._

As he stood there at the edge of the world, he remembered Elska suddenly. _Elska and Hluti. What had they said?_

_You will make Haffa and Smarmurtr and I very proud – wherever we are._

_We may never meet again, ulfrbarn – but perhaps, one day, we will meet again... in the company of the For-Eldra._

Something came to him – unbidden then, the memory of a melody which Elska had hummed to him before he fell asleep each night. A wordless tune he had sung for Smarmurtr, Elska had admitted. A melody of love – and slowly, yet certainly words formed for each note within his mind and on his lips.

Haltingly at first and then gaining in confidence –

*Laugh into the blackness*
*And sing,*
*For this is the day we pass onward*
*And join our hands.*
*Close your eyes, little one,*
*And rest.*
*We are always here, little one,*
*Sleep.*

It had a name as well, and he would teach it, he thought, to any who would listen. _The Lullaby of Elska._ The ulfrbarn gave it to the Void, thin and wild yet beautiful, for it was his.
It was his.

[… there is laughter…]

[… there is singing…]

[… on Jotunheim…]

Chapter End Notes

There you go! The wolf-ulfrbarn chapter. After this... plot starts to move along-ISH. Some set up before we go downhill again. HAHAHAHA!

DID YOU THINK THE LOKI WHUMPAGE WAS OVER, FRIENDS?

IT IS NEVAH OVAH! (gets on podium and starts stirring up fandom)

Ahem. Yes. Ignore that crazy writer person over there. 2 more names for Loki before Loki is named Loki! Ha!
Distant Rumble

Chapter Notes

So... MANY MANY MANY THANKS TO ALL THOSE WHO REVIEW! TO ALL THOSE WHO READ AND FAV AND ALERT! I appreciate you guys!

Also, in response to a question - ulfrbarn means 'wolf child'! Sorry! It has been added to the list!

And... as for the upcoming chapters - prepare for lift off! Kyehhehehe. Although, this chapter may seem really dull since it's more of a bridging chapter. Eh.

Also got over a minor hump re a fighting scene involving Thor and Loki. Fighting scenes can be difficult and I have a feeling I'm gonna tweak it to death... v.v But anyways! Fun fun fun times ahead!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 17
Distant Rumble

[... in the distant reaches of Utanheim, a child's cry...]

[... you can hear it on the wind...]

[... if you listen...]

The long cycles of Jotunn years passed onward, ticking slowly as does the Asgardian clock, while mortal-kind on Midgard slowly grew to awareness of the heavens. As they raised their eyes and built monuments to the stars, another watched the changes of the cosmos – and learned. It was not a commonsense kind of wisdom, or a matter of learning book knowledge, nor was it a world weary learning of the world's doings, but rather an ancient understanding of the true manner of things – what Hluti's mind had broken against and what the Heimsral teaches to all, should all be willing to listen.

Young eyes grew wiser with each passing season but growth was slow, as the short limbs lengthened, leanly muscled and fragile compared to its peers, yet strong in their own way. Feet became clumsy as the growing runt learned anew how to coordinate his movements. Fingers lengthened and tapered, long black hair flew back in the wind barely combed and his face, never fat to begin with, gained a slight aristocratic air as cheekbones finally began to set, preparing for the next stage of his life. And when he passed a small cavalcade of Dark Elves traders travelling to Snjarhamr from their favoured arrival point in the Offaerdalr, heads turned at the sight of the small, blue-skinned Jotunn with a full head of black hair and beautifully vicious, red eyes and the air of a wild thing. An untamed thing. The spirit of Jotunheim personified.

"Feral, that thing is," those of Snjarhamr mumbled among themselves, when farmers from the north
dales came south to trade and share gossip. "Someone failed their duty. Poor thing."
"Mindless like a beast, it is."
"Stay away from it," they told their more curious younglings. "It will spirit you off, eat your flesh
and gnaw your bones."

Such are the roles of the ancient Elders – spreading common knowledge in those communities which
had tales originating from the Dawn of Time itself. The story of the ulfrbarn became one such tale.

-0-0-0-

If the ulfrbarn heard what the others said, he made no mention of it. At times, he approached various
farmers and miners in the north with saplings, small woven, blakkgras baskets of fish or furs. Some
ignored him. Others, desperate Jotunn who cared not who brought sustenance on the desolate sides
of the Offaerfjall, accepted and paid in cloth, leather pieces, small blades, potions or what small
things they had about their equally bare homes. Hunting the ulfrbarn was ill-advised – no Jotun
wanted the herd of thurblakulfr to come knocking.

And thus, for three hundred years, there was an uneasy truce between the villages and the wild
things of the north. And that cursed creature which the Jotunn did not speak of.

-0-0-0-

A hundred and eighty-two years after the disappearance of Utgard's Curse, Laufey, who had since
then visited Utgard once to oversee Helblindi's progress (with a proud and very pleased heart), now
directed his realm from the central seat of Gastropnir – and it was there that he first heard news of a
Jotunn dvegr who rode with the giant black wolves of the Utanheim.

Boisterous laughter filled the court as Hylli told his tale – something he had heard from his mate who
had heard it from the local tunglblom seller who had heard it from some lack-witted trader from
Vatnboer. Everyone knows that any Jotunn living beyond Thrymheim is a ice-rock of superstitious
belief – more solid than a glaciar and just as thick and slow-moving. Laufey cracked a smile at the
idea of a Jotunn dvegr racing with a pack of thurblakulfr.

"Although, one can see why," Bitra, another fun-loving Jotunn chortled, "it's size and all – 'twould
barely be a mouthful for those beasts."

More laughter.

"That is not all, however," Hylli was struggling now to keep a straight face. His red eyes widened
with theatrical seriousness. "For there is more to the tale. Not only is the parentage of the cursed
thing a mystery – but green fire erupts from its hands and it can change the hue of its skin – for it...
Pause. "...carries the gift of – of MAGIC!"

Even more laughter ensued – the sound of it rumbling through the hall and out the narrowed winds –
low and powerful as thunder claps before the lightning strike. Cups or fists were slammed repeatedly
on the table, backs were slapped, heads thrown back and someone was begging Hylli to sit down
before he slew them all with his increasingly improbable tale.

"Gossip out of the Offaerdalr has gotten worse by the minute," Jafnathr shook his head. "Those fools
will believe anything up there."
"That is what happens when you look too long at the snow's brilliance," another said.
"Well," Bitr had to point out, "what else do they have to look at?"

Another round of merriment – but this time, Laufey did not smile.
Had Helblindi been there, he would have recognized the small line which formed between his royal father's two brows. A sign of thoughtfulness. But when Laufey wrote Farbauti, who was visiting Helblindi during that season, his missive bore no mention of the rumours which were growing of a Jotunn youngling dvegr who roamed the hills of Snjarhamr and the Wastes beyond.

The dangers of Jotunheim were growing.

-0-0-0-

[... yes, the danger...]

[... it grows...]

Beyond the obsidian cliffs of Offaerfjall Mountains, so called because of their almost impassable nature, beyond the skeletal mining crews pressed against the rocky edges and the farms below who harvest the delicate heithrsker blossoms which grow only in the desolate climate of the north-eastern mountains – beyond all, lies the Offaer Skogr – a dark, dense woods whose roots are covered with the treasures of heithrsker and luthrblom. Untouched thanks to the fast hold which the thurblakulfr and jarnkottr have on the region. Within these woods, the ulfrbarn had clumsily erected four slats of jarnvithr across the branches of a wide hota-eik and three walls, thus far had been raised in protection against the wind. It was poorly made - but it was home.

This particular white oak was stunted, and its branches drifted close enough to the ground for the small runtling to grab onto in order to climb up into the relative safety of the tree's boughs. Within the three walls, sat a drift of snow and a few wooden chests, small and square, which held his few precious things in good order.

[... a home in the face of...]

Two hundred and thirty-four years after his forceful ejection from Utgard, the ulfrbarn returned to the tree he called home and, clambering up the entrance branch as he called it, he made his way to his flet. His house in a tree was nothing as nice and neat as Hluti's cabin... but the ulfrbarn did not dare stay too long close to Utgard. At any sign of him, those inhabitants would be more than willing to attempt to chase him down.

And Helblindi was there. I never want to see him again, Ulfrbarn told himself. I never want to see him again. It hurt... too much... and for a moment, he sat there on his partially open flet, back pressed up against the wall by his snow-bed, head in his knees, arms wrapped around his legs, as he tried to force the memory of his brother down. Down, he imagined the image of his tall, perfect brother being shrunk and folded and put inside a chest where all the other bad things in his life went – Elska's didn't respond to his first call – Mage Opna's hand on his small chest – Thyrstr's fist rising – nonononono – He curled up tighter and fought back his memories, beating them down until even the memory of the horror on his brother's face began to fade – such horror. He had not looked at himself again since that day, if he could help it. There were no mirrors in the Utanheim excepting the occasional sheet of ice or obsidian cliff. The ulfrbarn did not look. Did not need to remind himself of how much he continued to fail as a Jotunn – and since that day, he had tied a new leather band about his hornless brow which he rarely removed.

At any rate, now was not the time to cry useless tears over snow long melted. There was something greater at stake now, for the snows and winds and ice of the Utanheim winter had swept down through the Offaerfjall Mountains to Snjarhamr beyond - and above them all, the peaks were now laden with a dangerous burden. Winter was coming and with it, the dangers of ice and snow.

A whining, yipping sound rose from below. Crawling to where he was working on raising the final
wall for his small tree abode, the ulfbarn poked his head out and over to peer down at his friends and pack-family below. Groenn. Feitr. Hraustr. Beini. Reka. Skathi - his friends. His pack-brothers - Fenris and the twins, Digor and Dolge. His pack-sister - Vaenn. They were not yet adult, yet no longer children. Like the ulfbarn, they roamed freely, happy to return home - but only after getting into and out of trouble. Their bright eyes glinted up expectantly and the ulfbarn rolled his eyes as Groenn, the youngest and most impatient, leaped up and began to scratch against the bark.

"Hey now! I will be down, Groenn," he rolled his eyes, instantly feeling better at the sight of the young thurblakulfr. "Be patient. You know what Storr-Fathir always says – snow does not fall faster with the watching!"

With that, the ulfbarn scampered forward and pulled his small pack over to his icebox, where he stored newly caught fish and then stowed away the remainder of the previous catch in his small leather pouch which he slipped into his pack along with two hair thongs, Hluti's dagger and a few potions as well as the fabled heillgrjot – the multi-coloured crystal rocks which grew encrusted on the slopes of the Thokafjall mountain range in the north-west.

A while back, the youngling had stumbled upon the outermost field and, from a distance, watched with fascination as a small pack of Jotunn carefully gathered as many as they could before swiftly returning the way they had come through the Nethriland along the Bathmra River down to Gjotvatn and Hluti's cabin. When the Jotunn had disappeared into the gloom, the tiny hands of the ulfbarn picked up small fragments of the rock and turned them over. As the luminous stone shone in his small palm, he remembered the books Elska had read aloud and which he had also poured over. Distant memory of a happier time – a time when he could read and write – and – best not think of it. You know what these are anyways, the ulfbarn told himself. Healing and concentration stones. Rare. And you can use them...

On this particular evening, he packed the heillgrjot also wrapped in another pouch, this time of wild-ox hide awkwardly stitched up. Surveying his small home, the ulfbarn hefted his pack onto his back and slithered down the tree. Groenn was sprawled out on the ground, lolling about and paying no particular attention to his surroundings while the other more mature pack-mates had taken positions around the small clearing to peer out into the dense forest watchfully.

"Did Storr-fathir give the word?" asked the ulfbarn. Groenn whined and it was Fenris, the eldest, who yipped an answer to which he nodded. He gave his blessing and we are to proceed as planned, but have care for a storm is coming. "Of course. You can tell from the wind." He sniffed the air and frowned, pulling his badly stitched slowly widening fur cloak about him. "It will be cold on the other side tonight. We must make haste if we wish to reach them in time."

Climbing on Fenris's back, the ulfbarn settled in for the now familiar ride through the steep Offaerfjall mountains. It began with gentle slopes which rose into small paths cut into the sides of the cliffs and there were moments where stones clattered ominously from above as the great grey-black clouds of a magnificent thunder-snowstorm formed. A day and a half trek, travelling light, the small pack were both tired and famished when they finally looked down at the dwindling dale which stretched out from the mountains and then disappeared into the flat lands which surrounded Snjarhamr far in the distance.

"I tried to write..." the ulfbarn sighed looking down at the farmsteads and the gaping hole which marked the entrance to the cramped, smelly mines which he had traversed once invisibly. "But they would not listen... they never listen."

Groenn yipped and the more serious Digor barked sharply in response.

"No, Groenn," sighed the ulfbarn, shaking his head as he slipped down to stand beside Fenris,
eyeing the peaks which soared above them. They looked even more ominous than usual tonight. The ulfrbarn shivered as the wind howled past bearing with it something dark and dire. "Digor is right. I should have known better. They never wish to speak with me – and of course they would misunderstand the entire matter. Come, let us go to the far peak over on that end – we must finish the last side tonight if we are to make it in time. The storm is upon us. If she is right, we will have much work before the sun rises tomorrow."

And as if to prove him right, the ground beneath them shook in warning.

Chapter End Notes

So there you go - the ulfrbarn is a Jotunn on a mission. For what? We shallll seeee~!

I began this fic saying there would be 50 chapters, but now it's looking more like 56. We'll see... But I have a feeling this thing could go up until 60 chappies. But on the other hand, the chapters are short. Sooo... Yeah.

Update on Friday!
Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who reviewed! I'm woozy with happiness. As it were. :D

Don't be afeerd to chat! I appreciate concrit and Loki/Tom Hiddleston-related ranting! Yep! And for those who reviewed Chapter 16 so nicely - there's this shout out! Thanks a ton!

ALSO... at this point in time, Thor is about 16/17 years old Earth equivalent and Loki is about 14/15. Still YOUNG!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 18
Against all Odds

... you should not have come...

Niflheim is a mysterious Realm and one of the lowest, hanging as it does by the roots of Yggdrasil itself. Long ago, before Time was measured by any being, tales tell of how this ancient Realm spawned life out of primordial darkness combined with the fires of Muspelheim and the magic of Asgard. So they say – and so it remains – an empty, dead place – cold and remote.

But even more mysterious and cold and remote and dreaded is the haunted realm of Helheim. Stretching over most of it lies the ever increasing Kingdom of the Dead itself. Ruled by Hela, Goddess of the Underworld, each of her feet planted within the realms of the Living and the Dead, she reigns even now, a dichotomous being and a paradox besides.

[... if you believe such things...]

[... the Afterlife...]

[... but Jotunheim stands apart, they say, even in death...]

Cold, flat, grey and icy, Helheim lay silent – until the sky burst aflame with golden light and a scorching beam cast down the youthful Crown Prince Thor, The Warriors Three and Sif. For a few moments, Helheim drew breath as the magic of Asgard's weight fell on its land. There was a crackling, a shuddering of ice, and far away deep within her halls, Hela woke.

Exhale.

[... Death woke? No...]

[... the right hand of Death rules Valhalla...]

[... and on her left stands Hela...]
"We should not have come," Hogun muttered to the group at large as they stood back to back roughly in a circle, gripping their various weapons a good day later. His breath puffed out on a small cloud, warm air hitting the ever-frostiness of Helheim, the Realm of Mists.
"You always say that," Thor laughed, hefting Mjolnir more securely as he eyed the horde of undead who now surrounded them. "And yet, here we are – again!"
"I keep hoping that perhaps next time would be different," the stoic warrior replied, swinging his small battle mace experimentally.
"I thought you had more sense than that," Fandrall quipped with a light chuckle. "As useless as getting Volstagg here to change his diet!"
"Hey! I resent that!" Volstagg huffed. "Speaking of which, anyone have any of that smoked venison? I'm feeling rather... peckish."

Sif rolled her eyes at the unsuccessful attempt at battle humour. This situation, she sighed, tossing her long, dark hair over her shoulder, is well out of hand. Again. Hogun's question is a valid one – and I don't see how we are to get out of this one unless All-Father were to aid us. Thor may have outdone himself this time. The dark-eyed warrior girl swung her sword and raised her buckler again.

"An army of the dead, Thor. Really?"
"An army that does not die," Thor laughed then, blue eyes sparkling with the fervour of battle. His laughter rang free and wild, a golden thing in a world of monochrome, jarring and alien – but to his friends, comforting. "How can one resist?"
"Let me consider that a moment," Fandral replied. Paused. "My answer is... fairly easily a 'no'."
"How long have we been fighting already?" huffed Volstagg uneasily. "I would say two days already – but time here seems rather slippery."
"An even better question is how much longer must we fight?" Hogun added, turning slightly to glare at Thor's broad back.

... forever...

The dark-haired warrior glanced about uneasily and shifted from foot to foot. He could almost here it – the soul-leeching soul of the place. Haunting, lonely and dire.

"We. Should. Not. Be. Here. Thor," he repeated with a bit more force now. "We must go! Can you not hear it? Feel it?"
"But I have just begun –"
"Thor –"

The mass of rotting skeletal guards who had herded about them surged forward, cutting off Sif's remonstrance as they blindly grasped at her – hands and breath cold and damp. They wielded crusted swords, somehow still sharp, dragged from the barrows of the dead. Ancient and oft-times magical things, cursed for protection and coveted by dragons. These were the armies of Hela who protected her borders with a vengeance – and, of course, Thor saw them as a chance to prove his mettle.

Instead of attending an important court function with the All-Father, Thor had decided to ride out with his friends in search of a new adventure like never before. He was young – and it would be many years before he came of age, but Thor was not to be gainsaid. Of course, his friends banded round. There had been a small matter of enlisting a magician's apprentice in order to deceive Heimdall – and then they were on their way. As the Gatekeeper activated the Bifrost (happily unaware that Odin's signature had been falsified), Thor had promised his friends a grand chance to hone their skill with an enemy like no other.
Hone our skills, yes, Sif thought as she brought down her sword, cleaving a guard in two through the skull – and then watching with annoyance as it gathered itself up and staggered forward yet again, it's gaping, decaying maw hanging wide open in a gruesome imitation of a smile. Enemy like no other? She cocked her head and considered the situation. He wasn't lying there either. However, I would like to survive, so I may enjoy my new-found – here, she kicked two guards off and hacked at another in the back – skills, and tell the tale myself in Odin's Hall.

Mjolnir, she noticed was whirring around their perimeter, smashing heads and decimating legs, before returning to its owner's hand. Whirling it round and round, Thor called a storm and brought lightning splintering down with laughter ringing out.

And still the Horde came.

Hogun had long since abandoned his bow, mace and throwing axes and was now using a short broadsword to keep the guards at bay, while Fandral's swift sword neatly hacked at the legs of the undead in a vain attempt to cripple their movements. Volstagg, growling and grunting like a savage boar, rammed through twirling his current weapon of choice – a long-hafted blade.

And still the Horde came.

... you are mine...

Hogun flinched – and he was about to say, we should go, when a golden light engulfed them and the fighting youths were pulled from the Land of Mist and the Kingdom of the Dead.

... but not today...

When the stream of the Bifrost cleared and the group of truants looked up, expecting to see the stern face of Heimdall, everyone froze at the sight of the Imperial Guard. Everyone froze and fell silent at the sight of the two august personages of the sovereigns of Asgard themselves – a furious Odin and a very worried-looking Frigga. Everyone froze – except Thor. Bounding forward with no less enthusiasm than he had displayed on Helheim, the usual excitement he showed (like that of an untamed colt, Volstagg thought, or a young pup), Thor grinned at his parents with pride.

"Father! Mother! This is a surprise! Did you see what I did, Father? I took on fifty –"
"THHHHOOOORRR!"

Odin's roar echoed out from the Observatory, down the Rainbow Bridge and all the way to Asgard's inner gates.

Ah. Yes.

Another day in Asgard.

-0-0-0-

[... the spirits of Utanheim are restless...]

[... they stir the heavens...]

The ulfrbarn's warnings earlier that week had fallen on deaf ears – but when several ominous cracks of lightning hurled themselves at the mountain tops, many of the Jotunn looked at each other in apprehension and began to prepare in earnest for the worst. Some even began to leave their homes, trudging away from the small town toward the nearest city of Vatnboer. When a distant cracking and creaking sound echoed across the valley, the Jotunn farmers grabbed their younglings and their
always ready packs which were prepared specifically for emergencies such as these – and fled. They
discovered that the miners were already beating a hasty retreat down the wide valley – as well as
several Dark Elves and Dwarves who had made the mistake of arriving in their favoured dales two
sun cycles earlier.

A short time later, when the cracking and creaking sound grew, crashing and smashing through the
jarnvithr trees which sparsely decorated the mountains, the Jotunn realized with dread that perhaps –
perhaps – perhaps the vaetki had been right and perhaps it was too late. Small younglings wailed and
wolves howled and all manner of living creature, they could see, were already up ahead, scampering
over the wastes westwards toward the Jathar Skogr. Older Jotunn children were hefted up by their
parents and thrown clumsily over their backs. Behind, the avalanche grew in power, thundering
down the sides of the Offaerfjall Mountains.

FWOOM. The avalanche, now as wide as the village, hit the ground – and a large cloud of powdery
white snow rose into the air, blotting out the lower northern sky as though a large wave was to
engulf them all. Several of the younger Jotunn who were watching over their parents' shoulders
shouted with horror as the mine shaft entrance was buried and the further upland, sturdy jarnvithr and
stone homes were swamped by the swells of white. Loose stones from poorer constructed dwellings
flew in every direction and the ground shook as the ice began to crack and ripple under the combined
pressure – the ice sheets below their feet cracked – swelled – and then as they shifted – froze.

The avalanche now spent itself on the hills and dales, creating huge mounds of snow across the wide
landscape – and beneath their feet, the shuddering ice slowly stilled. Far in the distance, further
rumblings spoke of smaller snow-floods, but as if in response, the ice underneath their feet only grew
thicker in resistance. It was then that the Elder Skyne drew back uncertainly at a surprising sight
before them. The sight of an unwelcome, yet familiar figure hunched over, small hands flat on the
ground. Green wisps emanated from its fingers aiding its natural abilities, spreading the ice further
and further. The miners and farmers and traders came to a complete stop, uncertainly - behind them,
the avalanches shuddered to a close and the ice settled. When all fell silent, the feral ulfrbarn of
legends rose.

"It is the lagreinn," hissed one farmer. "He..." A pause. "Saved us?"
"Impossible," grunted a miner. "Why would a living curse –"
"Hush now," the Elder waved a hand. "We should have listened to its warning earlier," he added
with a sigh, counting the Jotunn who had not fallen behind. "And now we have paid for it. Ahhh..."
He sat down with a groan and nursed his left foot which had, at some point, gotten cut by sharp ice.
"What has Jotunheim come to?"

There was a small rustle and then the Elder's large hand, stemming the cut as he tried to roughly bind
it with a leather thong, was lightly touched by slender fingers, which opened to reveal the gentle
sparkle of luminous stones of bright yellow and fainter blues. The smaller palm turned over, holding
the stones against the cut and green wisps poured forward again, stitching the skin effortlessly

"Lagreinn – you –" The Elder gasped and the other Jotunn whispered amongst each other (So it does
have magic! Yes, yes. That is what I said.). Watery, aged eyes gazed at the dark head now rising at
the name.
"It is not lagreinn."

Everyone froze at the quiet whisper of the cursed one.

"It is ulfrbarn."

And in a flash of green, the wolf's child was gone, no doubt to rejoin his kindred far away in the
green forest of Jathar Skogr.

It was Ulfrbarn from that day onward in the tales of the Snjarhamr Elders – and when the Jotunn returned warily to their homes, and looked upward, they could see the traces of thick walls of ice, clinging to rock and tree, which had borne the brunt and redirected the force of the blast away from their village by ten spans. Walls of ice and carefully carved paths of rock cleaved by a grand working, they realized.

It was Ulfrbarn from that day onward. Ulfrbarn who gained respect and thanks besides fear - and the Elders' tales multiplied until the final day when the ulfrbarn showed indisputable strength and worth for the sake of Jotunheim, when the enemies of the Jotunn came and took its undiscovered treasure.

When the unnamed ones came.

[... the Void brings nothing but sorrow...]

[... they are coming...]

Chapter End Notes

I AM SORRY WORLD FOR THE SHORTNESS!

There you go. Loki rocking it big time in Jotunheim. And as you can see, avalanches! Yes! I researched avalanches for 2 hours. TWO HOURS! Even watched a documentary until I had dreams of a White Christmas. Sigh. Discovered a ton of things - like the fact that there are 3 main types of avalanches and how to deter them and turn them aside and how they hit and impact the ground when they get to the bottom of a slope and et cetera. I hope it seemed realistic to you. :D

Uh... coming up next - the start of a new ARC! YEP! Be prepared! For... ANGST!
Next update around Tuesday. XD

Let me know what you think!

Author's Note on Chapter 16: Writing fluff is rather difficult in a fic like this - because I don't want it to BE FLUFF. I want it to be weighty but light and hopefully that's a feeling you came away with. I had this image of an art-documentary really (like Oceans or Journey to the Edge of the Universe or Planet Earth) - bizarrely enough. This feeling of silence (like Black Stallion meets Eight Below meets Princess Mononoke) - a feeling of... nature and being on the edge of things. And then, in this wide wide world, the camera focuses - closer and closer - on a small black dot. It's the ulfrbarn cleaning his fish with the Pack-Mother at his side. Yeah.

And of course, yes, magic is important. Loki hasn't stopped learning about it. You could say that here is where he will apply theory and do things on his own. There is a bit of "Colour of Magic" by Pratchett here, I think, in the sense that he is starting to see the warp and weft of the world and discovering how the cosmos is bound together, and it is empowering him.

You can also check out my Tom & Loki fanfiction: The Mortal, The Jotun and The Wardrobe!
Nightfall

Chapter Notes

I'm so glad you are enjoying this - I'm not alone anymore! YAY! Be sure to say hi! Don't be shy and drop a line!

Thanks to those who reviewed! As always, you guys are awesome.

LET THE GAMES... BEGIN~! Don't kill me! (runs away)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 19
Nightfall

[... the skies are empty on Jotunheim...]

[... a harsh, grating hum fills the air...]

[... they have come...]

"Five. No more, no less. Final offer," the grimy miner grunted, shifting forward five dull discs of plated tin across the ice and sat back on his haunches, his gaze fixed on the smaller face contemplating the coinage silently. It was a fair bargain – and although the ulfrbarn could have tried for six or seven, the tiny Jotunn nodded, snatched the five pieces swiftly as if expecting them to disappear and edged back, allowing the miner to take the two snow fox pelts he had brought to market.

"Many thanks, lagreinn."

"Ulfrbarn," the wild child tossed a blunt ice dagger at the older Jotunn's head in correction before turning back to peer at the coins. Carefully, the slender hands stowed away his hard-earned profit in the badly sewn pouch which was bound tightly to the ulfrbarn's bony chest.

"Hmph," the miner said, thinking that the cursed dvegr was too prideful by half – but held his tongue lest something other than ice be tossed in his direction. Any sign of hostility drove the youngling wild.

Youngling, no longer surely, he sighed to himself. Some time has passed since first mention of its name in these parts... it is no longer a child, even if it shows no real signs of aging...

The two parted without further words. A regular day in Snjarhamr.

That was how it began.

-0-0-0-

The first sign was a distant hum. Elder Esaf raised his head and frowned – a distant memory of fear flashed before his eyes and he glanced at fellow Elder Skyne, who rose, strode to the council hall door and looked up into the dull late afternoon sky. Several of the villagers were also outside looking
upwards curiously – and with some apprehension.

Traders often came to this part of Jotunheim – by astral travel, through Asgard's Bifrost or by the secret branches of Yggdrasil. Others landed in mechanical carriages which travelled the black spaces between stars, something which most Jotunn considered repulsive and unnatural. And, of course, these newcomers to Jotunheim had the habit of landing in these parts of Jotunheim – not in the too-distant Utanheim, but far enough away from the stern eye of Laufey-King and his protectionist policies. Here, on the borders of Utanheim, anything could happen.

Then, the hum grew and the mountain snows filled with light as through the dense clouds overhead, the landing gear of some massive vessel pierced through the grey and large round lights gleamed brilliantly – blindingly. A wind whipped up and for a moment, there was nothing but the sound of a thousand metal gears and venting and hissing and whooshing.

When the ulfrbarn opened his eyes, all he saw were the gigantic black-grey, meteor-pocked sides of a metallic wall that dwarfed even the council house. One wall slowly opened and it lowered downwards to meet the ground – and far away, a metal bell of warning from the miners rang out. Even then, he did not know enough to fear.

Not until Elder Skyne began to race forward into the village square bellowing like a wild boar, "GET THE YOUNGLINGS TO THE MINES! RUN!"

At that moment, the entire village sprang to life as trader-hunters grabbed their spears and formed ice daggers, as the jarnkottr sprang from their leashes and as the various house-mates grabbed the younglings up and began to sprint for the Offaerdalr's limited protection. The door had fallen opened and out thundered some creatures which the ulfrbarn had never seen before.

They were tall – tall as Jotunn – but wide and square with rounded edges where Jotunn were lean and rectangular. Yellow-white skin spoke of a long time spent in a land with no light, the ulfrbarn could guess – that or perhaps because they travelled the spaces between worlds... Hands the size of a large window, definitely the size of his tree home's wall, held long metallic things – weapons, he guessed, and gaping mouths revealed blunt, yellowed teeth. A gargling sound filled the air.

Laughter? No time to think on it, the ulfrbarn told himself and grabbing his pack, began to weave his way down the wide main street. It was not an easy task to avoid being stepped on – for chaos had erupted, with the Jotunn village scurrying about. Even the few dwarves and dark elves visiting had taken to arms and were busily engaging the enemy.

It was when one of the intruders grabbed a young, almost-adult Jotunn, stabbed it with the metallic object and put it to sleep that the ulfrbarn realized what they were.

Slave traders. He began to run in earnest.

And then paused.

-0-0-0-

They have no name, the tales say.

[... nameless horrors...]

They had no name. No known official name among the worlds they terrorized. They were known to others only as The Slavers, but amongst themselves, they called their peoples the Mahko'na'i. It was a sacred number and the current count of moons they held within their stable empire. The Skrull, the Kree, the Phalanx and the variety of other races and species within the galaxy and the universe
beyond shifted in an ever changing cycle whilst the Mahko'nai stood firm. They were a giant, stocky, strong race – the rhinoceroses of the galaxy and just as stolid.

Stability, however, depends on the little things – and each part of society had to be upheld by various trades, one of them, dealing with slaves. Across the galaxy, the Mahko'nai people roamed for treasures of great price – and passing by the Realm of Jotunheim, the captain of the *Na'Yulsa'ahlei* had decided to increase his payload by ten Jotunn, since those creatures were rare and difficult to get otherwise and he was already in the quadrant for a rack of Terrans.

The first shuttle landed and the company of ten rushed out knowing that in this dark world, their landing lights had destroyed any element of surprise. However, luck seemed to be on their side, for the Jotunn appeared to be in an uproar and, judging by the size of the town, this was a smaller outpost and less protected than usual. Adjusting their suits, hefting their highly energized shiv-staves, the company split up in pairs, lumbering after the young adult Jotunn. Aged Jotunn were of no use to them and younglings were prone to die without their parents, but Jotunn between five centuries and a thousand years were worth the trouble. So, watching the information streaming past the high-def, IF data-goggles secured around their eyes, the Mahko'nai kept an eye out for the appropriately sized three meter tall Jotunn.

"Ten of 'em," grunted Green Leader. "In this crowd?"
"Got one in my sights, Cap'n," said Green Five (the usual overachiever). "Cover me, Green Six."
"Gotya," was the quick response, and the two darted sideways with Green Five taking the lead, spearing the young Jotunn in the side, breaking its tough skin easily with the diamond tip of the shiv-stave before juicing him. As the young Jotunn collapsed into sleep, Green Five hefted his burden easily over his shoulder and made his way back to carrier. Just as he threw down his burden on the ramp, something pricked him in the foot, right through his tough boot.

He looked down and blinked in surprise. A small Jotunn. Scratch that. A baby Jotunn, attempting to spear him through his foot.

"Uh, boss," Green Five lifted his boot, casually kicking the little Jotunn aside so that he could pull his catch further up the ramp. Then he turned and peered down into the large snow drift to get a closer look at what looked to be a clear racial anamoly. "I've got some Jotunn kid runnin' around here. I mean, the size of a baby or just a bit larger – I thought you said they didn' walk –"
"Can your chatter, Green Five –"
"Boss! I'm not jokin' here – it's puny… it's like somethin' I never seen afore."
"Catch it," suggested Green Eight.
"Now, what would we do with a runty Jotunn?" asked Green Leader, exasperated as he fended off two Dark Elves and a Jotunn.
"Well… It's a pretty thing – could pass for an Aesir or somethin' like that – an exotic pet?"
"In a cage?" Green Ten quipped. "Seriously? Well… we've seen stranger."
"I'm getting' some strange readings off it," Green Six put in. Pause. "I can't believe it..." He gasped.
"Switch to Sub-atomic Field – you seein' what I'm seein'?"
"By the Emperor…"
"What in the…"
"I thought you said Jotunn runts were mentally deficient - and weak -"
"Yeah, that's what the books say -"
"Didn't Jotunheim lose all its, um, magical users during the War?"
"Laufey-King has magic, right?"
"What are you talking about?" Green Leader roared over the intercom.
"Switch to the Sub-atomic Field, boss. You'll see what I mean."

Green Leader turned and looked back to the carrier where he saw that Green Five and Six were
watching a small Jotunn stagger to its feet – except this time, in a world of monochrome, the puny being was lit with green fire.

"We've got a live one!" He hollered. "Catch it!"

With that, everything happened very quickly. Green Five reached for the dwarf Jotunn – but it slipped past his three fingered gloves easily and began to throw ice daggers at his legs and back as the small body skidded past him between his legs. The daggers splintered and broke against the All-Terrain suit – and Green Five laughed – for only a minute.

No sooner did realization that the suit would need something a bit stronger to penetrate, the young Jotunn had stooped down, put its blue hands flat on the ground and chanting something short, the ground began to build with ice – Green Five leaned forward – arm stretched out and then froze as a huge shaft of ice hit him from the side, stabbing through his armpit and up into his neck, chin and skull.

"Green Five terminated," the intercom intoned.

A chorus of invocations of the Emperor and his Spawn splattered over the comm.

"Grab that thing and neutralize it NOW, Green Six!" snapped Green Leader. "Green Two and I are on our way. Everyone else, stay calm, Gold Team is coming in –"
"Green Three terminated."
"By the Emperor," snapped Green Leader. "What now?"
"What are you doing over there, Green Four? You're supposed to be watching your partner's back!" yelled Green Seven. "Eight, cover me!"

With that that, the Green Company split up, while overhead, the landing lights of the Gold Company blinded everyone for a few seconds. Beyond the shuttle, Green Leader could see the dark shapes of the Jotunn mother-mates, as he called them, escaping to the hills with their small babes wailing in their arms. He shook his head. *Those will be for another day,* he grinned crookedly to himself. *Another time, children, we will return.*

And beyond the second shuttle now landing, a swelling tide of miners now streaming out, bearing picks and axes and shovels and spears. He sighed. *Just our luck.*

"Mop it up, boys," he bawled into the intercom. "We've got company!"

Gold Company landed. The high-powered landing gear beams powered down and night descended once again temporarily. Green Six took the chance to snatch the small Jotunn around the waist. However, no sooner had his left hand pinned the Jotunn, while his right hand searched his side satchel for some magic-restraints then the runty creature turned into a literal ball of fire. Flames erupted up his arms – and as Green Six yelled and dropped the magic-using Jotunn, the youngling took the opportunity to fling himself forward, clinging to his chest guard – and reaching up, heated the entire metallic piece – and setting fire to his face.

It was hell – if you believed in that sort of thing and all Green Six could thing was to scream and bellow. Somewhere far away someone was yelling at him to roll in the snow – and he fell – but already the jetpack on his back had begun to smoke and spark.

There was an explosion.

There was light.
So this chapter is gonna feel... alien toward the end - or strange or bizarre or like a piece of a puzzle that doesn't quite fit. Let me know if it's too jarring for you... but I want to have the idea of something completely foreign breaking through here. If that makes sense.

Since this chapter is shorter, I will update around... Hmmm... Thursday my time~.

XD

See you around! Don't be a stranger and send me a note!

-KI

Author's Note:

Double-Gemini asked a few great questions – and I was unsure if I had written of the matter within my author's notes, so I will address them here.

First, what is your take on Norse Mythology? I will answer this question as it pertains to my story. My story is an AU of an AU-reboot (MCU-verse) of an AU-reboot (Marvel Comic Verse) of a mythology. (read: the link to the original mythology is tenuous at best, sorry) I hope that answers the huge question. See below for more details. XD

Secondly, are the Avengers going to appear in your story? Yes. I believe I stated as much when I said that this story was set in MCU-verse and I also mention it in the section labeled "comments" towards the top.

For those who want a more detailed explanation:

First off, I need to say that I like Loki in his many forms of canon – but I hold to the fact that the canon of Loki is very much splintered at this point and any self-respecting fanfic author would recognize this after browsing the Net for a while. So almost any Marvel version of Loki, as it were, should NOT be presented as canon nor should any author assume that their version is the "right version" because it is based on Marvel Comics or the Norse Mythology. I have seen some of my favourite authors apologizing for not reading the comics... I was like, "Um, your fic is in the Avengers Assemble category – why should you be referencing the comics?" Like Loki himself, there is a marvellous amount of room for multiplicity and we should celebrate it – but also tag our fics appropriately.

That is to say, in my mind there are 2 major subdivisions related to this discussion here: Norse Mythology!Loki and Marvel!Loki. There is a difference between the two. That is the first important point to realize. And then, the second important point to come to grips with – is that within Marvel!Loki there are further VERSIONS of Loki all separate and distinct. My Loki is ONLY BASED ON the MCU-VERSE, TOM HIDDLESTON LOKI. You might think, um, what does THAT mean? That means I am extrapolating entirely from the scenes involving Loki and what the verse looks like from the movies.

There are actually a variety of sources to pull from: Norse, Marvel Earth-616 and other versions plus the movie-version (Earth-1999999), but as a fanfic writer I am more fond of sticking to the MCU-verse (Earth-1999999). As an author and critical reader, I have
personally come to the conclusion that MCU-verse Loki has had no children, is rather quite young mentally and sincerely did NOT know of his Jotunn heritage before the vault scene. I have my reasons. That's just me. Don't get me started.

Marvel Comic Loki (and Norse too), depending on which version you look at, knows his heritage from the get go – but few comics show him with kids. I enjoy reading dad!Loki – to a certain extent, but have come a little disenchanted by the gratuitous use of his children to invoke sympathy or fluff. Just does not cut it for me. Once again, don't get me started. Still, I will read dad!Loki fics... but if you are reading this in hopes of seeing Hela or Fenrir or whatever as his kid and having some nice heat-warming parental chit-chat... ain't gonna happen. Yep.

On the other hand... BECAUSE this is strictly an MCU-verse fic, I have an imperative to bring in Thor and the Avengers... and so, they will be brought in. Also, I love writing them too much.

I hope this clears up any confusion. If you have read my Christmas Magic fic, then you know that I have a great interest in writing detailed Avenger dialogues – but the Distortions in Time Avengers will have a different slant.

- KI

p.s. Also, in Christmas Magic, the scene in which Loki helps with a homebirth is used as a way for him to understand why Odin did what he did – because in my mind, Loki can't understand Odin's need to save a child on a battlefield – because he's never had a child of his own or brought life/helped bring life into the world before.
I am so pumped today. I did my first formal lecture - on poetry... and it went OK! I didn't kill my students with boredom. Time went by fast... too fast. And maybe I did a good enough job they'll ask me again. Heee~!

**AN AMAZING PIECE OF FANART!** BY... (drumroll) TheEverhearted! SO AMAZING AND CUTE AND SAD!

Thanks again to people hanging in there! I was afraid that this turn of events (which I had planned way back) would turn people off. Anyways, thanks again for reviewing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Distortions In Time**

[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

**Chapter 20**

Starfall

Two down. Several more to go, the ulfrbarn pulled away and began to run forward, just as the miners burst into the open square of the villages. He would have been trampled if he had not already had the experience of running with the pack. *The Pack...* Just thinking about the creatures he called family, the ulfrbarn wondered if they were playing it smart and keeping their distance. *I hope they stay away,* he thought as he watched two more of the tall, grunty giants approach. *This form of battle would bring them more harm than they could bring help... especially thanks to those lightning and sleeping staves...*

The ulfrbarn contemplated the three sleeping Jotunn now stowed halfway up the sliding bridge which led up into the spaceship. *These look small for long-distance travel,* he thought, *which means there must be a bigger ship somewhere above...*

The two slavers were on him now. *One is fatter and runs slower... maybe...* Already the ulfrbarn's mind was teeming with possibilities. Face set in determination, he darted forward, just barely missing the spark of lightning which seemed to spark from the end of the device as it was aimed at his torso. Running forward, his pursuer easily keeping up with him, the ulfrbarn swivelled at the last moment and disappeared between the legs of the second pursuer who had come up on his right, attempting to herd him into the wall.

It was a dangerous gambit, for he could have easily been stepped on – but it worked beautifully – the two monsters crashed into each other, the spear of the taller cutting through the leg covering of the shorter. Pale tough skin ripped open with a small wound – and as they untangled their limbs, the ulfrbarn's hands were already filled with a set of miniscule throwing daggers. They were new – bought only three weeks before. Dipped in poison, they had become his favoured way for bringing down the grarulfr who ventured north – accurate and deadly. This time was no different. Within moments four daggers had sunk into the soft flesh, the poison had set in and the shorter, fatter one keeled over, stone dead.
No time for triumph however.

This time, the ulfrbarn was grabbed again, from behind and slammed painfully into the ground. There was a cracking sound – ice and bone painfully jamming together and something in his shoulder snapped. Crying out, he rolled, attempting to twist out of the firm hold on his feet. His fingers and hands filled with flame, but this time he was merely lifted and slammed again – this time into a drift, dousing him swiftly. He fought, clawed, bit and squirmed.

Overhead, the wind whipped up, snow began to fall in gusts and ice began to creep with slow deadliness over every moving thing in city. The miners, looking about, grabbed the few surviving traders and began to edge away while the Gold Company found themselves being forced back to their shuttle. Their actions became more defensive as the radars beeped warningly - more Jotunn were streaming up from the south. Apparently another town had been alerted.

Yet, in the centre of the square, a battle was still being waged. Wind, snow and ice were forming large spikes and rills and drifts of snow dunes as the apparent leader of the slavers fought with the Jotunn dvegr. If there had been any doubt as to its powers, there was no doubt left now. It was a ball of fury and green magic and ice and fire – and it was not to be taken without a fight. Several Jotunn darted forward – but were held back as the others pointed out that the rest of the company had drawn back to the shuttle and were even now gathering around the youngling.

It was a lost cause.

The Jotunn watched as the small body was pinned by heavily booted feet and a wide, black, metal collar was fitted about its small neck, containing the magic. Almost instantly, the wind died down, the snow lightened and the ice stopped spreading outwards –

And silence fell.

[... silence fell on Jotunheim...]

There was another sharp cracking sound as one of the boots sank heavier onto one of the ulfrbarn's ankles – and a quiet whimper emerged before the Jotunn dvegr, the ulfrbarn, succumbed to its injuries and was hauled away with the three others. Nothing was said as the two shuttles rose while the ramps slowly closed and the last sight Elder Skyne saw of the ulfrbarn was a limp hand falling away from a too slender chest.

Was its magic gone? Perhaps... but only for now, he sighed sadly, but then smiled grimly. Not for long. The ulfrbarn carries the spirit of Jotunheim – and the spirit of Jotunheim always endures. As it always has been since the dawn of time.

-0-0-0-

"It is the duty of a King to be a father to his people." That is one of the basic tenets of Jotunn kingship – one of the first things Laufeys's father had taught him when Laufey was but a young Prince and more than ready to take the throne. As a father, it was the duty of the King to protect and to fight for the people he called family – the entire Realm of Jotunheim. And so, in time of need, the King, if he could not be there when the time was right, would at the very least succour and aid in the healing of his subjects.

As soon as news reached Thrymheim, Laufey left with Helblindi for the north, sending word to Farbauti and Byleistr in Gastropnir to join them in Snjarhamr. Utgard's progress reports would be dealt with at another time. At the moment, there was much work to be done. When the King and Crown Prince arrived but two and a half sun cycles later, much winded but ready to take on the
challenge of raising the city, they discovered that the Jotunn were still struggling to deal with the devastation. In the confusion of the fight, several homes had been damaged and the major causeway running through the small city had become impassable thanks to a strange build up of snow and ice which would not weaken easily.

"What happened?" Helblindi said, voice muted as he looked about. "Utgard is a grim place, but this is –"
"Slavers," sighed an elderly Jotunn, emerging from behind a stone wall he had been building up. "Came out of the sky so suddenly – without warning and the city was caught up in chaos – two companies landed…"
"No…" Helblindi glanced about. "How many were taken?"
"Three or four Jotunn, we believe," the old Jotunn said, then, catching sight of Laufey approaching. "Your Highness... it is an honour..." He bowed.

Laufey nodded and, coming up behind his eldest son, jerked his head to the left, "Come, we are summoned to the city council and there will receive an accounting from the village elders. If you are not too fatigued, that is."
"I will manage," Helblindi said tightly, following his father into the long hall filled with a simple table and a round of humble stools now holding ten Jotunn.
"Glad to hear it."

Everyone sat – Laufey-King in a seat of honour at the head of the long table with Helblindi on his right. The village elders shuffled about and then one particularly aged Jotun rose to his feet and nodded.

"Our tallies have been complete and we have spoken with all from Snjarhamr and up into the Offaerfjall," he announced in a creaky voice. "and from our census of last winter, we hold to our initial guess that only four were taken."
"Only four?" Helblindi mumbled at his father out of the corner of his mouth. "That is a paltry number. Have they become so weak?"
"If it was not for the aid of the Dark Elves and the company of Dwarves who had come for trade," the elder continued, "the battle would have lasted longer and would have taken more lives – but as it is…"

Laufey nodded, understood the unspoken plea, and said, "We will be sure to reward and compensate any visitor to our Realm who aided us in our time of need. Helblindi."

The Crown Prince was already taking note of the matter.

"So, only four were taken. This is a time for great rejoicing – that even a small outpost as this was able to defend itself at a moment's notice… but there must also be given a time for mourning, if it has not already started, for those who were taken and we pray may be returned."
"Yes, your Highness. Our Elder Skoll is managing those affairs."
"Elder Skoll, if you please, then."
"We have begun the period of mourning," Elder Skoll rose to his feet. His arms had been bandages and there was an as yet unhealed cut across his face, but he spoke with certainty and strength. "Two of the Jotun missing belonged to no kin and as such, a small service by the Mage of Snjarhamr will suffice. As for the other two…" With that, the Elder continued on, discussing the details of the ceremonies for those with family who were taken.
"And there is the, er, small matter of the ulfrbarn," Elder Skyne spoke up when Skoll had sat down and leaned back, report complete.

There was a round of dry, uneasy laughter and then an awkward silence.
"He was, after all, instrumental in the death of no less than three of the Slavers," Elder Skyne continued, voice even and firm.

"The… whom?" asked Laufey, raising an eyebrow.

"The wolf's child – a lagreinn."

"I am sorry…" Laufey cocked his head in disbelief. "A lagreinn? Fought the Slavers?"

"Yes… and killed three with his own hands – one by ice, one by fire and the third by a poisonous dagger."

"Fire and ice," the King leaned forward. "You sound as though you speak of magic."

An awkward pause ensued.

"We do not know to whom it belonged – nor from whence it came – but that it came from the plains of Utanheim some full-sun cycles ago… more than two centuries, for certain – and it bore with it the gifts of Heimsrsal herself."

"And it lived in Snjarhamr?" asked Helblindi, uneasily, remembering suddenly blue-black blood spread over white snow outside Utgard.

"Nay, it ran with the Great Utanheim Pack of thurblakulfr."

Laufey massaged the bridge of his nose, glad that Farbauti was not here – otherwise his mate would be beside himself at the loss of a chance to revive the kingdom's Rituals, runt or no. He has gotten sentimental in his old age... ever since...

Laufey froze at the distant memory of the touch of a fluttering thing in his belly. Shut his eyes and whispered to himself, "No."

"Father." It was Helblindi, for the first time looking worried. "I must speak with you –"

"It is a matter of jest in Thrymheim and Gastropnir that those of the Offaerdalr are riddled with superstition," Laufey ignored his son to give everyone at the table a displeased stare. "Still, I thought that in a time of crisis such as this a certain amount of level-headedness could be maintained."

"We are not lying, your Highness," Elder Skyne replied courteously. "Nor are we witless. Here... Urtr and Tekli, bring the ice block."

Two elders at the back rose and then after a moment, shuffled in with a block of ice – thick and square and the size of Laufey's chair seat. It was covered in runic engravings set in the ice – all of which spiralled from a pair of hands smaller in width than his dinner plate. Laufey's breath caught and then exhaled suddenly as though his heart had been hit by a blow.

"And its parents have not come forth –"

"Father-King," Helblindi was saying.

"We will discuss this in detail later," Laufey-King rose then and made to leave, before pausing at the door and turning back to stare at the others. "There will be no ceremony for it. For IT."

"My Lord –"

But Laufey was already gone.

-0-0-0-

Helblindi wisely said nothing until Farbauti and Byleistr had arrived. Only then, he sought out his father and drawing their family together in the spacious quarters provided them by the Elder Urtr, he stood before his parents, feet apart, shoulders back, braced for what he knew would follow. A storm the likes of which he had never seen.

Or perhaps not...

"It is about the ulfrbarn," he said.

"Ulfrbarn?" asked Farbauti. "Those stories are circulating around still?"
"It is no story, Mother Mine," Helbindi said. "Father saw it as well – the hands were small – and set in the ice and the runes running outward were those of magical might. The accounts are too many to be a falsehood. It fought for our people – and it fought bravely."

"It should have died. It should have been... put down," Laufey bit out. "A grave mistake on the part of the parents."

"Your mistake, perhaps," Helbindi said, steadily, voice tight, his red eyes searching his parents' open faces and watched as the lines about Farbauti's old eyes deepened and how Laufey's grip on the arms of his chair tightened. "The both of you." He stared down at his feet. "And mine as well."

"What are you speaking of, Helbindi?" Farbauti finally managed to speak into the following quiet, only broken by the crackle of the small fire and the sound of some metal creaking in the distance. "Speak quickly and plainly."

"When I first went to Utgard those many years ago, it was because of the untimely death of Mage Opna. That and another matter also – a lagreinn which had been raised within the walls of the Gothahus itself."

"Within the –" Farbauti's red eyes widened and Laufey looked thunderous.

"I did as you just wished for the ulfrbarn – I gave it death on the northern plains of Utgard, at the hand of a pack of thrublakulfr." A beat. He would not show grief, nor the self-contempt which had settled in his gut since that day - a burden he had willingly taken to bear. "I gave my own. Brother. Death."

Farbauti made a sound and sat up straight, his hand suddenly painfully clamped about Laufey's arm, while Laufey glanced up at his son, and seeing the seriousness and pained expression on his child's face, blinked in astonishment.

"You speak of a brother."

"There was one, was there not?" asked Helbindi unrelentingly.

"Your only brother is –"

"There was another, was there not?" Helbindi repeated with icy clearness, forcing down an increasing need to vomit.

"There was an unfortunate... thing..." Laufey finally admitted with distaste. "We got rid of it before the final battle at Utgard."

"And you saw it killed?" Helbindi asked carefully, setting aside the issue of when it happened.

"I was – we all were more concerned with the battle field – and Farbauti, you were... I believe I sent you with the boys to Dagaheim."

"You did – I was not there either... he could have – he could have –"

"It didn't."

"He did," Helbindi sighed then, shoulders drooping. "My hands traced the lines on his brow myself. A spindly, mistreated thing and better off dead – but the Eybjarg seemed too dangerous to me – and cruel to deprive him of a hope of being with our For-Eldra. I fed him to the wolves..." A pause. "At least, there was blood – but no body left – and if – if – the wolves spared him –"

"Thrublakulfr spare no Jotunn, much less a mouthful of a runt, for they do not suffer us lightly," Laufey said dismissively. "Think no more of it, Helbindi. You did well."

"Thrublakulfr spare no Jotunn," Farbauti whispered, "but... Laufey-mine, he was – he was gifted beyond all measure and hungry for power and if Heimsrsal were to be with him, then..."

"Heimsrsal was with him," Helbindi said. "We saw witness in the ice as well."

"IT. Is. Dead. Farbauti," Laufey said. "It is dead – whether it died at the hands of the Mages, or at the hands of the wolves or at the hands of some unknown master in the stars above our heads – it remains, as always, dead to us. We speak no more of it."

With that, Laufey jerked to his feet and left the room - but not before Helbindi glimpsed something unfamiliar and unfathomable cross his father's face. Farbauti was weeping now, silently and Byleistr, quiet as ever, crept into his mother's arms and comforted him. He thought of the cold stars that shone
down on them and his stomach clenched at the thought of a young brother beyond the voids of space, helpless and alone. Stories of Slavers and images of the monsters who would torment Little Brother until his long life was spent played in his mind.

*Little brother,* he thought, *may you embrace the arms of Heimsral and end your misery. May you join the For-Eldra so one day I may meet you,* he prayed. And deep down – *dear little brother, be safe.*

Oh, how he prayed.

And Farbauti wept. Bitterly.

[… fell…]

Chapter End Notes

Laufey is totes in denial - and just not wanting to accept... or maybe still waters run deep. But poor Farbauti! Poor guy. And of course, Helblindi is all torn up and Byleistr is like, "Wut?"

Next time - Loki and the Slavers. ANGST AHEAD!

Author's Note on another few GOOD QUESTIONS:

From lotr195 -

What languages are you using? For Jotunheim and Asgard (and basically the Nine Realms), I'm using Norse stuff. For anything else (ie. aliens from the rest of the Marvel universe), I'm using made up languages that sounds like it could fit with the names that are given on Marvel Wiki. I hope this makes sense! . Since I've also studied Old and Middle English, Latin, French, Chinese and Japanese, there might be syllables or stuff that sounds kinda... yeah... *trails off*

Can Loki have babies? Yes, like all other Jotun, Loki is totes biologically capable - if he can find DNA that will mesh well or another short Jotunn. Heh. But technically, like his people, Loki is hermaphroditic. This fic will not deal with that - but there is a general idea for a sequel which would deal with this kind of stuff. XD

From Double-Gemini:

What is Loki's age at this point of time? Loki is around 13 years old. Poor baby.
Thanks a lot to those who reviewed! You were really encouraging to me and that really helps me a lot when I work on smoothing this piece of work out. Taming the beast, as it were, can be overwhelming, so knowing there are people out there enjoying it really encourages me to keep hacking on through what I've got planned!

So, now I have a week of exam-giving... 2 days, really. And then I am FRRRRRRRRRRR!~~

Sort of.

Warning! Warning! Slavery! Forced feeding... and Abuse. Warning! Warning!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 21
Tied to the Stars

[... there are no skies here and no wind...]

[... only mechanized humming to hide the silence...]

So cramped. It was worse than the jarnvithr cupboard he had inhabited those long years when he had been so weak and ignorant as to believe he needed the aid of his betters to survive. When he had listened to those poisonous words and had taken them to heart. When he had considered himself Nothing, less than nothing. Never again, he had vowed to himself. Never again, he renewed that promise. This, this too I will overcome and if it means I meet my death, then Elska will greet me that much sooner.

The metal container they had slotted him into brought the old memories to the surface, as though his mind was the stew Elder Esaf loved to slowly simmer over the hot stones of his hearth. Hidden things rising to the surface as the ladle turned round and round and round... Thyrstr's iron hand wrapped around his thin wrists as his other rose to batter the young vaetki – ulfrbarn, he told himself, you belong with the Pack now. Reminded himself as the memory of Mage Opna swam to the surface – the band of heaviness which had weighed the young shoulders as his arm circled about the younger Jotun's shoulders or waist. No, panic rose then, no. It is not to happen again. No no no nonononono.

He thrashed and protested with a string of curses he had learned the hard way from the traders of Snjarhamr. The ulfrbarn twisted in the bonds which pinioned his arms tightly before him and bit at the broad hands which reached down to still his sharp movements. There was a stifled curse in response and he could hear some foreign language uttered over his head, but he could not make the words out. The new captive was less than pleased to learn that he would have to crane his head far back to catch the faces of the Slavers, which was impossible thanks to his confinement. All he could
see was the lip of his metal cocoon and tall giant legs which rose out of his view.

_I am in the flooring_, he thought rather incoherently as he growled up at them. Shadows wavered and fell as others moved about, the conversation was coming to a close and without warning, the broad hand reappeared to yank him upwards and for a moment, the ulfrbarn was lifted halfway out of his new prison. A glimpse of a broad room with a grating over the floor – and underneath the grating, he saw a field of slots such as his: some filled, some empty. It brought to mind a picture in a book of a natural home made by small creatures in Asgard. Elska had it called a 'honeycomb' – and the Aesir were fond of the sweet substance secreted therein. Or so the Jotunn had said, lips curling with disgust. 'Sweet' that was something he could only guess at, but there was nothing 'sweet' about these honeycombs. An uncomfortable stench rose in the air and the sensitive youngling reared back – or rather, tried to. Callused hands held him firmly and another hand forced his jaw and mouth open.

Something metallic was worked in by a second set of hands – a round bit which his teeth clashed uncomfortable against. Red eyes widening, the ulfrbarn tossed his head and tried to pull away. _No_. _What_ – Metal bands wrapped about his head and clipped on the back, keeping his tongue still and his mouth slightly parted. When a small tube appeared in the hand of the second set of hands, which he saw were attached to a smaller, slighter humanoid, the ulfrbarn's hands rose up – but the Slaver's now free hand easily stopped the ulfrbarn from harming the second being. _Is it a Slaver too? What is it? Why is it doing this to us when it clearly –_ All thoughts were suspended as the tube slid past his suppressed tongue and gently poked against the back of his throat. The ulfrbarn began to gag a little, but increased pressure, a gentle command which the Slaver responded to by angling the ulfrbarn a little better – and the tube continued to slide downward.

He whimpered, even when the tube stopped. A pause. The ulfrbarn was slotted back in his containment square, wrists this time attached the wall. Rubbing his face and slightly open mouth against the back of his hands, the ulfrbarn attempted to drag the tubing out. No chance. It was secured to the side of his cheek by a rough strip of some sticky substance and drifted upward and then attached to another tube which dangled from the edge of his small prison.

Then the ulfrbarn was left there, grating lowering down over his head and the his small world was shadowed with lines and crosses and filled with nothing but the hum of a mechanical engine and the noise of others walking over him with no thought or care concerning his misery.

_[... so time passed...]

_[... in this world where night and day are meaningless...]

_[... yet time passes...]

There was no routine to mark the days, to note the relentless march of time. Realization came slowly, as other prisoners, slaves, whatever they were, came and went. He stayed there, until bit by bit the fire within him died and flickered weakly. The reality of his helplessness sunk once again into his very bones – as old memories and nightmares revisited him. His whimpers and choked cries went unheard. Forced alive by the liquid which ran down the tube, down his throat to his unwilling stomach, the prisoner had no choice but to continue on his hated existence. His skin, thanks to his long-time imprisonment, was now an unhealthy shade of pale blue, untouched as it had been by Jotunheim's cool suns and fed with only the barest of nutrients. No longer did the stench of the slave ship bother him as his own stench surrounded him without relief.

One day, a broad hand opened the grating and stroked the long hair which hung in greasy tangles down his back. No violent response this time – merely the raising of dulled eyes revealing a fatigue of the soul. When the large fingers of the Slaver lingered on the thin cheek, the small creature leaned
into the touch, starved for a reminder: it was alive.

It was alive.

The Slaver's large wide mouth gaped open and black stone-like teeth showed. It mumbled something incomprehensible and nudged the collar around the slave's neck.

"Du-juh-ah-lay-ko," said the Slaver slowly, his forefinger and thumb lingering over the prisoner's sharp cheekbone. Something formed in the smaller creature's mind – a prompting. Your name, little one... Then, it repeated the syllables quicker now, tapping the slave on the forehead gently to avoid bruising. "D'jah-lay-ko."

After a moment, the slave nodded tiredly.

The ulfrbarn was no longer.

He was dZh-Aleiko. Number 495 of the dZh-Run.

-0-0-0-

"Hey – hey – Alei! Alei! You hear?"
"Hear what?" groaned the pale, green-eyed boy, raising his head from the grimy square of sacking he called a pillow to eye one of his Shaft Pack mates.
"The Slavers are coming – and Master jZ-Mahyulsa says there are some contract exchanges!"

Alei groaned and fell back on his pillow, rubbing his dark-ringed eyes slowly as he considered the matter. This was never new. Slavers came and went on their own schedules bearing the news of labour division throughout its large empire of misbegotten and misused assets. Dzh-Aleiko, the formerly blue-skinned worker in the Jog‘aln Mines, was just one among millions who were shuffled about from job to job. Mayultho, his Shaft Pack mate, was the optimistic type. Born into this life from a Shaft Pack elf-woman, Mayultho never knew the joys of the free-born. He merely dreams about leaving the rock, exploring beyond the horizon. Even as a slave. But... can you blame him? Aleiko grumbled to himself as his Pack mate blabbed on about 'cushy jobs waiting on rich people riding galaxy cruisers' and such like.

"Who knows?" Mayultho said. "Maybe you'll end up going somewhere else, Alei!"
"I would prefer to go home," Aleiko said mulishly, turning over to light a small red fire in his palm.
"But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you? You are home."

Awkward silence.

[... the silences of the blackened moon are empty...]
[... the spirits left this place a long time ago...]
[... such desolation...]

Looking up at the starlight of the universe, what do you see? And beyond, what lies? A large and wondrous place? A labyrinth of dangers? Nebulae and clouds of star dust mar the vision. Ancient light speaks of youthful days of worlds long past – and in between, nothing but grit and silence and unrelenting cold. This is space.

In a corner of the Nine Realms, on the edge of the nothingness which lies between galaxies, hangs a massive star system, of which Tarnax III is of middling size and of moderate population. Its third moon, an insignificant, gray thing which hangs motionless in the night sky, hovers pock-marked over
the pale green planet. Presenting a flat, serene face to Tarnax III, the third moon belies the furious activity taking place on its other side – the massive mining enterprise of the Jog'aln Corporation, a Skrull outfit which enjoyed the close patronage of the Skrull Emperor himself.

Forever cast in the shadow, the far side of Tarnax III Third was a twilight world, a dim, dark place with only a minimal amount of air. Atmosphere generators provided enough for the enslaved miners to work in, the threat of extinction keeping the masses in line. Shuffling through stuffy, closed in passageways hewn carefully into the rock, the "employees" of the Jog'aln Corporation hauled rock and precious ores and metals to the surface for processing and then eventual export.

Aleiko of the dZh-Run, sold to the Shaft Pack One Hundred and Eighty-Three, learned how to work silently and efficiently. Jotunn hardihood and a slight build allowed Aleiko to carry his allotted burdens easily enough – as well as move swiftly. His red eyes, used to the dim world of Jotunheim, served him well here – but the darkness of his skin did not. Easily missed in the shadows, the young Jotun was forever dodging flying carts and other larger workers who bumped and crashed into him as they lumbered down the narrow shafts.

That was until Master jZ-Mahyulsa had the collar adjusted, allowing a little magic to seep out, giving the slave an added dimension of worth in thanks for his careful service. Aleiko's skin shifted to a pale colour which glimmered in the dark a little better. Now Aleiko's jobs extended beyond the servile running of errands, carrying rocks, chipping at trenches and pushing the bins. With the gift of his partially returned magic came great responsibility to heat or to cool appropriate objects – metal, food, fires and stone. Small injuries were healed by his scrawny hands and each day ended with deep-seated exhaustion settling further into his bones as his magic drew on resources he could barely sustain.

With the news of the Slavers, the entire mining colony was on edge, making life even more difficult for the masses of slaves who waited for the unknown. The Masters were easily irritated and everyone scurried at the sound of their raised voices.

"Aleiko!" A snarl followed by a crackle of the guards dreaded Electro-staves. "Where is the boy? Ha – there you are. Skulking about, I daresay. Where have you bin then?"

Aleiko knew better than to reply. Instead, he shuffled his feet and held out the small datacard which he had just returned with.

"Great-Master Na'i'naifreima complaining again?" Master jZ-Mahyulsa snatched the datacard up. "The void-brain lump. Mind as empty as an asteroid that one – what he want now? Some of the kol-sava'atha? Or chi'iano? Probably doesn't even know what he wants, huh, that o'ma'auzha." He grumbled as the new datacard slotted into the machine which hung from his thick, rough-edged belt which hung, half-hidden, underneath his great, sagging belly. "Ha. Hm. As I thought. Word from on high... about those cursed Slavers, as usual, those o'ma'auzha, just popping in and popping out. Well, at least they're bringing some brawn with'em this time."

A pause as he scrolled through the data. Unlike other planets, the electrical surges brought on by solar flares often shorted the communication cables, leaving hand-carried datacard messages as the only reliable source of information on the small moon. Aleiko would be sent back with the Master's answer if the situation required. He waited patiently while Master jZ-Mahyulsa quickly typed up a short answer, acknowledging the message. The Master eyed the silent slave who stood by his side.

"Well, then, seems like it's your lucky day, Aleiko," he grunted. "You will pack your things and present yourself with this message at Great-Master Na'i'naifreima's Outer Office with the others. The Slavers have picked your number. Times up here." These last words ended with an ominous laugh. "You may regret it – not that I know where you'll end up."
With that, the datacard was handed back to the slave, so called Number 495, and ever busy Master jZ-Mahyulsa promptly forgot the quiet creature known as dZh-Aleiko. The moon of Tarnax III moved on.

-0-0-0-

Far from the heart of the Nine Realms, from the cold wastes of Jotunheim and the golden halls of Asgard, deep within the heart of a star nebula, there lies a stellar crossroads of some sort – a busy, glittering, metallic planet which pulses with sound and smell and grime. It is the Meeting Place, the Market and the primary planet of the Shamarxes System. The original inhabitants long extinct, it is the home of no one and everyone – where creatures from far and wide meet to share coin and stories. Tawdry, gaudy – these are the first things one thinks of at the mention of Sharda'aa, the Planet of Pleasures, Den of Vice and Counterfeit Gold.

Here, the long-legged girls kick their heels toward the stars and whisper sweet nothings in the ears of those willing. The long-legged girls and boys and everything in-between. Underneath their songs, their musicals and wondrous magical shows, there pulses the ever yawning pit of need – and greed. Feathers, metal bits, sequins, bone-carved trinkets, plastic under-suits and sensuous graces entice, sway, drag you under… And the unwary succumb to the clouds of perfume and drugs – submerge – and forget their dreams and hopes until even the memory of starlight is faint beneath the smoggy atmosphere. The foolish end as beggars, losing their money to cards, to dice, to the gambling halls and fighting pits which beckon at every street corner. Until one day they wake to their own demise. This is Sharda'aa, the Planet-City of Illusions.

And it was here that dZh-Aleiko was deposited next by the Slavers. Shoved through the dented, scratched, metallic back door of the self-styled "Poison Paradise".

DZh-Aleiko, ever a quick study, already knew the basic language of the quadrant and blinked at the paradoxical name. He was not entirely certain what to think or feel. Worry? Horror? Amusement? Aleiko kept his face blank nonetheless. It is not my place, he thought bitterly, to offer my opinion. But that will change – one day, he ended with the usual promise to himself. Already, his bright green eyes wandered about the back room as the Slavers lined up the row of five young men and extolled each of their virtues.

As he suspected, Aleiko's abilities were much valued – his hard-earned ability to read, write and wield magic, which he had honed within the mines. Pulled out of the ranks, Aleiko was shoved toward a lithe Lizard-Woman. A Skrull, he corrected himself. They call themselves Skrull.

"Well, then, little magical one," the green-skinned woman smiled down at him, shifting her stance on precarious heels. "You are scrawny…" Here, she sighed as she squeezed his thin biceps and then raised an eyebrow at the flash of annoyance which crossed his face and at the clenching of his fist, his wiry muscles bunched. "… but not without your own strength, I suppose. Not my type," she added then with a small laugh, her tongue running along her lower lip.

Aleiko suppressed a shudder. You hold no attraction for me either, he wished to say, but bit down on his tongue. One day, he vowed, one day. You will show them.

Today is not the day.

Chapter End Notes
So, slavery... SUCKS. This is not supposed to be exotic or anything. (ALTHOOOOOUUUUGGGHHHH... things to heat up later on. X.X Somehow a sex scene slipped into my story!... Craziness.)

NEXT UP: The creation of Silvertongue.

Update coming on Thursday/Friday.

Aleiko/Ulfribarn/Lagreinn is now around 15 or so.

Numbers (for this quadrant):

0 - nai
1 - sa
2 - tho
3 - frei
4 - ah
5 - ko
6 - yul
7 - vee
8 - mah
9 - lei

Alien Glossary:

kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
oma'aузha – mother-eff'er
A Thin Ray

Chapter Notes

SURVIVED! SURVIVED! EXAMS ARE OVER! YES! My students all did well - didn't have to fail any! Heeheehee~

Thanks to all who are faving and alerting this fic! It's encouraging to know that peeps are watching out for this story and I encourage you guys to not be afraid to chat! For those who reviewed the last chapter - A HEARTFELT THANK YOU! You guys are the best!

Thanks to Crazy_Cat_Lady, Danae, lotr195, Kai_Maciel, history, laSamtyr.

And also, be sure to check my warnings!

Warning! Warning! Slavery! References to prostitution and other nastiness. Warning! Warning!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 22
A Thin Ray

"What do you think? Pink? Purple?"
"I told you – that's not the one that he should be using –"
"Masser Ola'abratha said to me the other day that Kor'ani was looking a little paunchy – which you know, it's true, I mean – have you seen her lately?"
"It's the drugs, right?"
"Don't start them is what I say."
"Has anyone seen two black feathers –"
"Hey! You there! Another of these –"
"She can't zip it up –"
"Needs to lose some stones, I tell you – positively gargantuan. I'm talking the size of a Guarra – and you know that just doesn't cut it in this kind of biz. They always like'em slim and tiny – like little Kol'la here. Kol'la, dear, what is with the long face? Master Rara-dou'ma being silly again? Tell Glo-glo!"

Chaos reigned back stage. As usual. Girls ran back and forth, shoving on their costumes at the last minute as the stand-up comedian finished his routine to a good-natured roar of laughter. Laughter. That was a good sign. Bright moods passed back and forth between the client and entertainer and this night looked to be a pretty fair evening. The dancers were lining up, props boys dashing about, other aliens hydrating (or the opposite) in preparation for the long routine ahead.

Dancing girl Number 371 of the zGa Run, known as 'Glo-glo', pulled the slender form of young
Kol'la close in her usual comforting way, green hands squeezing his firm shoulders gently. Young Kol'la of Poison Paradise was now considered a veteran having worked there for a goodly number of years. With slowly earned experience, a knack for language, an athletic flexibility and sense of style, the slender boy grew and learned through experience. Thanks to his survival instincts, often compared to that of a dirt-side rodent, in a world in which the only constant was change, Kol'la built for himself a niche at the Poison Paradise. Kol'la's jobs were many – either he was waiting on customers – dashing between the kitchens and the many round tables which dotted the large first floor of the night club – or he was entertaining the masses in some fashion. Everyone entertained at Poison Paradise. Kol'la usually aided Master Rara with the magical show or the clowns and comedy performers with their tricks and comic reenactments. If there was no need for his serving or magical skills, Kol'la danced - something that he grew better at as his awkwardness vanished and as he grew into mastery of his slowly increasing height.

This evening, he was supposed to be helping Master Rara, but the temperamental showman had not only changed the programme at the last minute (without telling the stage master), but had slapped Kol'la when the young entertainer had suggested quietly to stick to the original plan. Then, the cranky half-Skrull, half…something… bid Kol'la return to the kitchen to wash dishes where ”all other pretentious, would-be magicians and shapeshifters belonged”.

"It is nothing," Kol'la finally said. "I must go to the kitchens."
"Kitchens?" Glo-glo tipped her head, pursing bright red lips. "Master Rara doesn't want you on the stage tonight, does he? Really, Kol'la, you should talk to Madame and see if you can do your own show."
"If I do that, then he will kill me," Kol'la tried to wriggle out of her shape-shifting hands which were creeping down his chest. "I had best get going."
"Kol'la," Glo-glo shook her head, laughing lightly and letting him go, yet tugging on his white shirt-sleeve and adjusted his collar and jerking his dark vest a little bit more so he looked more like a dapper waiter and less like a disgruntled magician's apprentice. "You are growing into a man, you know – and you have to fight for yourself and what you want as well. If you catch the eye of a client and they were to take fancy to you, you could – Have you no ambition?"
"We are –" Slaves, he wanted to remind her. Not even our names belong to us. Kol'la didn't finish his sentence, his pale lips forming a thin, hard line. "I will think on it."
"Hm."

Glo-glo watched him go with a sigh and shook her head. The boy was going to be trouble. She had a feeling. Despite his long time spent in Poison Paradise, there was something sharp and hard and wild underneath those cool green eyes – something untamed and powerful. A worrisome thing. She would speak to the Madame. Perhaps there was something she could do.

[... what can be done?]

[... these unfortunate souls...]

A moon cycle later (not that you could really see any of Sharda'aa's small, faint moons thanks to the pollution and bright lights), Kol'la stood before the rowdy, varied clientele of Poison Paradise. On his head, he wore a tight band of leather and bone – a half-helmet adorned with proudly mounted, curving horns bound to a vivid blue brow lined with his mysterious lineage symbols. As he had fitted the ornate head-gear over long dark hair, Kol'la had smirked with pride.

There had been no signs of his Jotunn heritage on his brow – until now. A false attainment, but
important to him nonetheless. Faint memories rose of Elska and Helblindi. He pushed them down viciously. This was his moment and whatever he drew on for strength would not belong to those long lost to him. *My first step to inventing who I am*, he thought as he adjusted the green short-cloak which fell back over slowly broadening shoulders. Underneath was his usual choice of a white tunic, dark green over-tunic and black, soft r'senk'ne leather pants which ended with sturdy n'ch'nka leather boots.

He was ready. It was his time. His chance to show his worth.

Sweeping outwards, his hands twisted downward, the lighting responded immediately to his unspoken command and the crowd fell silent as his light tenor swept over the room. He would begin – a tale of darkness and starlight and wild Titans before the creation of the universe. Stars blinked into existence with fury and sound, fire-red and orange flared and music flared and his voice rode as he swirled across the stage.

Lithe body bending and twisting athletically, Kol'la brought to bear his slowly hoarded talents – the memory of Elska's tales, Mage Opna's epic stories, Thyrr's bawdy humour, Lind and Ketill's sarcasm, the strength of miners and the sultry grace of this poisonous paradise's dancers and entertainers. There was the threat of wilderness – Utanheim – and cold – Jotunheim – and chains – a moon above Tarnax III – and illusions and dreams – Sharda'aa.

And when it ended –

[*... it always ends...*]

There was thunderous applause, scented blossoms tossed and blown kisses from the other entertainers who had come to see Kol'la fail – and instead found themselves caught up in a rare wonder.

"He's got raw talent, that one does," said a clown, shaking his head.
"A chunk of chi'iano inside a piece of lead," agreed another.
"Got a tongue inside his head –"  
"Magic to boot –"

"You see that explosion he summoned?"
"Illusions, idiot."
"Damn good'uns."

"Makes you wonder what he'd be up to with his magic all intact. Scary thought, huh. We'll have to watch him a bit more carefully, you think? Of course the girls are gonna be all over him now."
"Not that he'll pay them much mind, Olf."
"Y'think?"
"Yeah."

"That oma'auzha... He was hiding some ability like that..."
"Boss-man is going to want to get him a regular gig. You watch -"
"It's all about money with Boss-man."
"I can see him having a regular gig now. Although he's young..."
"Brilliant future that one has."

It was those last words – two of the club Skrull bouncers chatting by the stage door – that caught Master Rara's attention. The tall, elderly magician frowned as he contemplated the young stunted Jotunn savage (if you believed its blue skin and false horns) who now bowed his way graciously off the stage. There was an unsettling smirk on the boy's face.
A mere boy. A Jotunn runtling – if you go by the rumours, he grunted. The Boss-man would not possibly think – But then, Master Rara noticed that the Third Madame was making her way over to the slave boy and was talking with him. She was bending down and saying something and then drawing him away to the side – and back and around and up, he knew, up to the Boss-man's office.

Master Rara's stomach sank and he cursed to himself. Rubbing his chin, he considered the possibilities. Then he remembered. He grinned.

There is Flighty Fingers.

He chuckled.

That would just about do it.

-0-0-0-

Boss-Man was the Floor's nickname for the incredibly wealthy, tight-fisted, hard-hearted owner of the Poison Paradise. The alien club owner had a difficult life competing with the rest of the planet's entertainment options in the endless struggle for economic survival. As such, new and exciting forms of entertainment were always a must – and at the sight of Kol'la's epic story-telling show, the Boss-Man realized that the small investment he had made in serving boys was going to pay off in a way he had never imagined.

It made the Lizard-man salivate.

[... the call...]

[... the lure of greatness...]

When Kol'la was ushered into the Boss-man's office (divested of his costume and wearing his preferred disguise of pale skin and green eyes), the first thing he noticed was the breadth of the Boss-man's wood desk. It was wood – he could tell by the grains which ran along it from side to side. Genuine wood. In a world of plastic and metal, a thing of great price... Where did he get it from? Kol'la wondered to himself, green eyes fastened on it. Midgard? It is not iron wood...

Cluttered with writing implements, tablets, discs, plasti-sheets and other files, the desk stretched back into the large room. Behind the desk, sat the Boss-man himself, currently facing the large window which overlooked the main area of the club below. Lights flickered dimly through the frosted windows which Kol'la knew could change in transparency depending on what the Boss-man was doing inside.

Boss-man loved the dancing girls.

Kol'la shifted a little, betraying, he knew, his deep-seated nervousness. The Third Madame announced his arrival and then left, closing the door behind him. For a moment, silence. Then the chair turned.

"That was an interesting show..." Boss-man lifted up a tablet lazily. "Kol'la, is it?"
"Yes, sir, master, sir."
"Sir' is fine."
"Yes, sir."
"You seem to be a born story-teller. A real silvertongue. Kol'la Silvertongue. That has a nice ring, doesn't it?"
"Yes, sir."

"Smart boy."

Kol'la bit back protest at the word 'boy', but just nodded and stared at the Boss-man's hands – pink today. Midgardian flesh was Boss-man's preferred skin colour. Midgardian and Asgardian. A show of power... but, Kol'la thought, also frailty. And on the fingers were heavy metal rings and other similar tawdry nonsense.

Heavy and biting if the Boss-man hit him on the face. Those hands could deliver freedom or pain... Kol'la watched as the Boss-man scrolled through yet another flat tablet.

"Master Rara, bless his heart, has a magic show every other night – and... hmmm... a story-telling routine on the alternating days. Ahhh... Well, let us remove one night from his busy schedule. Allow his elderly heart some rest... What think you, Kol'la? It pleases you?"

"Yes, sir," Kol'la nodded eagerly, straightening his shoulders.

At last. Recognition for my talent!

"It's a tough business, Kol'la. You will still aid Master Rara when he wishes your help... and there will always be waiting on patrons and dancing... but an hour every week, I am sure will not tax your new-found storytelling skills."

"Yes, sir."

"Hm."

Pause. More scrolling.

"Next week this time, then," Boss-man decided and typed a few things into his tablet. "You will receive confirmation from Madame Iso'oo tomorrow morning. And discuss with her the next story you wish to tell."

"Yes, sir."

"This is exciting... Kol'la," Boss-man smiled then and Kol'la stared back, unwilling to allow himself the luxury of returning the favour. "I look forward to seeing what Kol'la Silvertongue has to show us."

"Thank you, sir."

"You may go then."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Hmph," Boss-man grunted, swivelled his chair about and waved negligently.

Kol'la fled, heart pounding – feeling as though he could fly to the sky – and yet, feeling even more aware of the expectations of the others around him.

Silvertongue was in the spotlight. This was his chance to shine.

Or fall.

Chapter End Notes

So the birth of Silvertongue has arrived. But not Loki. Not yet! Soon!

Coming up: Kol'la's drastic change in fortune! ANGST! (of course)
(why are you surprised?)
(It's me!)

Please review! Let's see if this fic can break 100! XDDD
Chapter Notes

WOW! Thanks guys! I'm glad you guys are still hanging in there... dark times ahead but also a promise of better times! We're so close to what you guys have been waiting for! SO CLOSE!

And um, thanks to all those who reviewed!

The beginning of this chapter wasn't originally there - but I wrote it as a teaser-gift for Immortal Sailor Cosmos (for being reviewer 100 on FF.net) and added it here. If it feels odd... SORRY!

Warning! Warning! Slavery! Rape! Sexual assault of a (sort of) minor! Warning! Warning!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 23
Moon Setting

[... our fates are intertwined - did you know?]

[... and the worlds are connected...]

[... they are calling to each other -]

[... do you hear them calling?]

Muspelheim is a land of red. Red and orange and yellow and heat. It is the land with the heart of a thousand suns. It is light.

From its warmth came power and combined with the ice of Niflheim, the rest of the Nine Realms had been birthed and so it and its fire-eating residents became, like other things in this cosmos, the stuff of legends.

To some, a dangerous land best left to the dragons, the drakes, the fire serpents, the Sons of Fire and the other exotic beasts which crawled its volcanic, cracked, red-veined surfaces.

Muspelheim. To some, a dangerous land. To others, the ultimate adventure. To Thor, all that and more: a chance for honour and glorious combat and something rejuvenating after the long, mind-numbing hours spent in court at his father's side.

And why not? The young warrior thought, pleased with himself as he reached the edge of the cliff face they had been aiming for. This is a worthy prize – the treasure of Hyrrfastr the Fire-Drake. The fabled Blarmenegg. A mighty conquest for Thor and Sif and the Warriors Three.
Looking down from his height, Thor took stock of his surroundings - the craggy, stark mountains which rose on his left from the cliff face upon which he stood, the ungentle slope which descended on his right to the valley before him. The valley which had been cut by ungentle rivers of fire (if the tales of witless aged men were to be believed) however was not as empty as he would have liked.

Already someone has come to lay claim – Thor's anger rose and his battle spirit rose at the sight of the Fire-Drake shrieking and swaying and roaring amongst a small group of alien warriors. Heat rose in waves, shimmering as though it could be seen with the naked eye and the lines of the far mountains swayed. Fire licked the walls of the valley – and the dark, promising door of Hyrrfastr's lair.

And on the far cliff opposite him, Thor eyed the unfamiliar metal vehicle from which poured even more of the strange warriors – a tall, block-like race wearing strange gear and hefting long pikes from which poured lightning. Mjolnir called. Thor smiled.

This was a good day.
His day.

[... the vagaries of Fate...]

Kol'la danced beneath the hidden stars. The world narrowed to the curves of the woman's skin beneath his fingertips and the beat of the music resounding from the sides of the wide stage. His slim hips dipped and swayed as he pulled in and then out, twirling the diminutive dancing girl who partnered with him during the opening sequence of that evening's entertainment set. Using her tall, pale-blue-skinned, shape-shifting partner more as a pole than as a fellow dancer, the more experienced female Thoran showed off her sizable assets and sexy tail for the appreciative male audience.

Then Kol'la was out front, arms swooping and feet moving with swift grace to the increasingly quickening rhythm. Red eyes glittered underneath the pulsing spotlights as the narrow waist and long legs displayed the entertainer's natural agility and flexibility. Long dark hair, neatly combed and perfumed swung across his face as his head turned swiftly to the well-learned choreography.

Then Hro'ti was back in his arms again and with strength belied by his slender frame, Kol'la lifted her and set her down, allowing her to twine about his spread legs and come out to the front again from between them.

Below, in the pit, eyes were fixed on the two stars of the evening – the ever lovely Cor'ra and Cha'veli. But some noticed and admired the exotic nature of the small, would-be Jotunn. One in particular, a hefty-sized Freszan. Black beady eyes fixed on the inviting low-riding leather pants which clung to the adolescent's neat hips.

Master Rara is right, the Freszan thought. This is a rare jewel of great price - even dressed in the skin of a savage. It should be mine.

It would be his.

[... the wheel turns slowly...]

[... it turns slowly...]

It was one of those nights when Kol'la Silvertongue was on the floor serving drinks and food that a regular patron of Poison Paradise, eyeing the lithe figure and the remote look, laid hand on Kol'la's leather clad thigh invitingly. A common enough sight in such a world – an unspoken invitation to
Ordinarily, there would be a slight shake of the head in dismissal or an alluring smile and a return nod which would signal an invitation. Then, the entertainer would slip out with said customer and gain a few more cred pieces in hopes that one day, their stock pile would be large enough to free them.

Kol'la had himself dismissed many such advantages before and this occasion was like any other - a firm shake of the head and with that he turned away, carrying his empty tray tucked neatly up underneath his arm. A large hand from behind jerked him back suddenly, forcing him onto a broad lap and for a moment, his legs flew out as his rump bumped up against a hard muscular thigh of the Freszan.

This evening, Kol'la had been forced to don low-riding soft-leather pants with an open, sleeveless vest top - and the Freszan's large, four-fingered hand ran down the youth's chest easily as warm breath ghosted over his neck and a chuckle resounded through his back and into his ear.

The young Jotunn understood immediately as the stench of risen-ale wafted past him. A drunk customer. A Freszan. Easily belligerent. Saying no will not be so simple, he gritted his teeth. Up until now... Breathing through his nose while attempting to keep his calm, Kol'la attempted to twist up and away from the heavy fingers which ghosted over his neck, collarbone and then back down to his chest. The Freszan - what was his name? Kol'la tried to remember. Something unpronounceable. Lovey had nicknamed him Flighty Fingers. Irony. Sarcasm. Kol'la had learned those things within the first moon cycle of his stay on Poison Paradise.

"I will make it worth your while, Silvertongue," said Flighty Fingers, his rock-like voice rumbled underneath the loud flashes of song and dance emanating from the first stage. No one paid attention to Kol'la's abortive movements. "Play along."

"I do not play," huffed Kol'la, trying to get some space between himself and the massive chest pressed up against him. "And truthfully, I do not know the rules enough to -- it would suit you better, sir, to ask Ta'ko or Shin'yi."

"But none have such lovely changeable skin or such fine hands, Kol'la. And that silver tongue of yours... Come now --"

Kol'la's shoulders were twisted painfully round about and his cry of annoyance and protest were muffled by a suffocating weight of lips on his own. The youth bit down hard, drawing blood and his fingers twirled in an intricate sigil as he whispered a small illusion - snakes which crawled out of the half empty cups of ale on the table beside them. At the sight of the twisting dark things, several female patrons leaped up shrieking. Flighty Fingers jerked back instinctively and Kol'la took the slight shift as an opportunity to ram the tray he had held onto (as a possible shield or weapon) into the Freszan's throat. As Flighty Fingers choked, Kol'la pulled away -- and bumped into the intimidating personage of the Boss-Man himself.

"Kol'la," he grabbed the youth by the back of his collar and hauled him off the lap of the choking Freszan. "My apologies, kind sir -- Ta'ko! Attend to this patron immediately!" The ever obsequious Ta'ko scurried over. "Bring this gentleman to the medic and see to his injuries. Have Master Ako'a'na'i present him some vouchers and if he begs your company, you know what to do." The Bossman's grip on Kol'la's neck tightened ominously. "I have some training to do."

With that, Kol'la was jerked past the other tables as a few of the clients, understanding what had happened and what was to follow, whistled appreciatively. Kol'la knew better than to raise a hand against his master - but a part of him, the suicidal part, the wild child would not let him bend so easily to the wishes of others. And so he fought silently, mulishly, and dragged his feet as he was forced into a secluded room in the far back of the building. Kol'la knew. He knew what this would lead to...
Training took all night long and the next week. It began with the Boss-man and Masters Ako-a'nai and L'Iku. Others, equally courageous or fond of rough sport, came as well to the dark room and the uncomfortable, grimy bed that Kol'la found himself tethered to. As if he were a goat or a mare or some such animal – as if they could tame him as Mage Opna had attempted to so many years ago. Kol'la knew better and yet...

The harsh lesson he learned underneath the flooring of the Slavers' ship and on the dark side of a barren moon was only too fresh within his mind. Bitter disappointment and hate seethed, but without light, without company, without food and water, Kol'la found it difficult to continue the fight. He lived alone. He lived alone in the dark, with his magic removed entirely. Kol'la's skin was now as pale as a gorm-flo worms which crawled in the unseen dirt of the planet (or so they said) and marked with bruising prints of hands on his ribs and hips and thighs. The dark-haired, green-eyed youth did not weep. He fought. He fought tooth and nail – and when he showed no sign of breaking, with a sigh Boss-man lectured him on what waited for Kol'la.

"He is a feral thing," the Boss-man told his tall friend two days later – the proprietor of The Battle House franchise down the road. "More suited to your place, I think, Shax. You can deal with the Slavers when they come round next. Good lot, I think, and will compensate you well."
"Feral?" Shax rubbed his pointy chin and raised a busy eyebrow at the Boss-man. "A feral child?"
"Jotunn, I believe. That's what they told me – and he can fake the markings, thanks to his shape-shifting abilities. But who really knows, eh? He's small for one. Never heard of a runt Jotunn like that before." He snorted then. "But he has magic. The magic collar can be adjusted. If you want a blue warrior –"
"The child has no muscle –"
"It is strong," the Boss-man grinned then. "A wiry kind of strength. Don't let his looks fool you – and besides – I think he would do well for showmanship and magical duelling. With the proper incentive..." He paused.
"Uh-huh?"
"He is a whirlwind of chaos is Silvertongue –"
"Just because he won't make a good whore doesn't mean he'll make a better warrior –" Shax shook his head and bent down from his greater height to eye the quivering slave who looked back at him with fiery green eyes. "He seems rather biddable –"

The thin lips tightened and as Shax's hand descended, a slender hand rose and within its palm a small dagger of ice formed and stabbed into the black alien's tough skin. Ice splintered everywhere against Shax's iron skin, but Shax drew back and grunted to himself.

"Yes, I see."
"Told you."
"He commands ice?"
"And fire and other things as well. You'd need a magician to set the adjustments properly – or no doubt you'd lose a slave."
"Well," Shax rose then and nodded, hands on his non-existent hips. "If you are certain –"
"I am. I've tried this whole moon cycle. You can tell with these kinds. It's in the eyes."
"Yes, you always say that, hmph. Well."
"I was right last time with Roc'co."
"You were," Shax agreed a shake of his head. "Very well. I will take him off your hands. Standard regulations apply."
"As always."
"My pleasure."
"No, no," Boss-man smiled, relaxing for the first time in a long while. A wide smile crossed his crooked lizard's face. "It is mine – come, I've got a nice stash of risen-ale for you to sample. And you can send a man round tonight to fetch the creature."
"Risen-ale? Well. That sounds grand," Shax bent down to pass through the door into an equally low-ceilinged hall (for him). "A toast to another bargain well-struck does not sound amiss."
"What you think you'll do with him anyways?"
"Hm. I'll have him serving at first. See what he can do in the ring. Don't want him to die on the first day." A harsh laugh. "Remember O'tho?"
"Do I remember!" Boss-man was chuckling now as well. Their voices faded leaving the slave still chained to the bed. "Purple blood, right – getting it out of the sand was such a –" The far door closed.

Kol'la pulled himself up to the headboard of the large bed and huddled there, shivering at the prospect of The Battle-House. He remembered Mayultha's dreams. If I had kept my tongue in my head – if I – if I could – He squeezed his eyes shut even more tightly. I would be free so easily. But I cannot. Why can I not?

Biting his lip, Kol'la gulped, trying to keep the small meal they had fed him several hours earlier down. Mage Opna's hands... the weight of the Boss-man on his back... the laughter of the dancing girls who had teased him... cries of pain and something else they called passion in the small cubicles... what he saw in passing as he walked down the halls at night... He had always turned his eyes away, but Kol'la had learned exactly what Mage Opna had done those many years ago.

The hard pit in his stomach tightened and roiled unpleasantly as he remembered their eyes – Mage Opna's eyes, Boss-man's eyes... and the others. The many, many others who had talked above him, hands stripping away the privacy and respect he had attempted to hoard. That which he had lost so easily. Commenting on the strangeness of his biology and praising his beauty and other attributes – as if he were nothing more than an animal or rare stone.

And now he was fodder. Fodder for the play of war.

Kol'la did not cry. But he wanted to. Oh, how he wanted to.

[... and many more larger sun cycles passed...]
[... such is relentless nature of time...]
[... and what it brings...]
[... what does it bring?]
"Kol'la," Shax beckoned the now wiry serving boy over. The young slave was a fighter-in-training, not having been blooded yet in the proper way. However, Shax was a patient man and knew that Kol'la, while lacking experience, did have potential. This seemed like a good opportunity to Shax - to test Kol'la and develop some rare opportunities. "Slavers are coming round tomorrow – the, uh, usual thing. Your contract is renewed – but they’ll be bringing us fresh ones – so you’ll need to report into Master Klo'a'aa. He'll need help airing out the east wing, second floor dormitories. If it works out well, I want you to try your hand as a Handler. You hear?"
"Yes," Kol'la replied obediently, face blank, and made his way immediately for the staff entrance behind the long bar and disappeared into the kitchens and beyond.

Shax nodded and smiled as he looked over the Slavers' manifests. This was going to be interesting.

New slaves. Youths. He grinned as he eyed the races and home worlds from which they had been torn. Elves, Chitauri, Kree, mortals... cannon fodder mosta them... His eyes lit on a few others. Asgardians.

He grinned. A rare opportunity - but worth the investment, worth the pain. Now there's a fight worth seeing.

Chapter End Notes

Now, when I say 'youth', I use it in the sense that Kol'la is more or less a teen - around 15 years old. So... biologically, totes capable of having and enjoying sex. Historically (I mean Earth history), rich young boys (between 12 - 14) would be introduced to the arts of sex with the help of their father's favoured courtesan. Also, considering the place he's working in, this shouldn't be a shocking thing for you, the reader. It isn't to Kol'la! But he's obviously got some hang ups - which we will explore later... poor guy. And of course, things just got worse and worse... (until he got to Shax's Battle-House).

Thanks again for reading! Please comment! It is like how coffee is to our beloved Hiddleston - the gas in my engine!

Update is coming round on Friday, or thereabouts!

-KI

Numbers (for this quadrant):

0 - nai
1 - sa
2 - tho
3 - frei
4 - ah
5 - ko
6 - yul
7 - vee
8 - mah
9 - lei

Alien Glossary:
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
oma'auzha – mother-ffer
Sun's Dawn

Chapter Notes

So... thanks to all who have reviewed! To all who are faving this monster! Thanks so much!

Also - take heed of my warnings. They are for real... XD

Warning! Warning! Slavery! Warning! Warning! Gladiator stuffs and violence! Warning! Warning!

Now... onward to the moment we are all waiting for!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 24
Sun's Dawn

[... the music of the spheres ring out…]

[... eternal harmony…]

[... the spirits of the realms sing…]

[... can you hear them calling?]

Everyday began the same way – the raucous, metallic drone of the slave quarters' alarms. Where there had been muffled whispers and rustling, there was now loud shouting and taunting and joking and other such morning sounds. Black shutters were slid back to reveal the grey skyscrapers and domed towers which reached above them to an equally grey-black sky. Synth-lights and flashing bulbs flared, lighting the rooms and shower stalls with blue and red and purple and other colours through slits someone might have called windows.

Kol'la rose silently, as was his wont, and managed to elbow his way to a shower. Pressed up against two Skrulls and a heavy-set, slick R'Svthinn, he scrubbed his body swiftly, pushing away prying hands and ignoring the barbed jokes aimed his way. Everyone treated him as his skin demanded – a kind of Midgardian, they supposed him. His pale skin, after all, did not exude the healthy glow of Asgard naturally. And after the collar's magic level was adjusted, his hair remained in its natural state – black.

Knowing how the others would treat him if he admitted his background, Kol'la had long ago decided to hide his Jotunn heritage, presenting it only as a trick for those fools who thought savages to be wild exotic things. It is not like they would believe me at any rate, he thought sourly, eyeing his height in the cracked mirror available across from the showers. I still show no sign of being a giant. No horns. No gargantuan height. He sighed. Regardless... they would just take that as permission to treat me like a savage.
The shower was a quick one, easily accomplished now that his hair was cut shorter than he had ever experienced before in his long life. It laid neatly combed back to the nape of his neck. Slipping on his usual black breeches, green tunic, black leather vest and worn boots, Kol'la made his way to the Allotment Room, also named the 'Employee Lounge'. Not that slaves were allowed to utilize the room. Once he was told his duties for the day – serving, washing dishes, running errands, dancing or fighting (really just training) – Kol'la made his way swiftly to his station.

Dawdling was forbidden. Talking sedition was forbidden. Using magic without strict control was forbidden. Romancing others in a serious fashion (if Kol'la had had an interest) was forbidden. Using weaponry outside the ring or training rooms was forbidden.

Forbidden. Forbidden. Forbidden.

More than ever, the bonds of his existence bore deeply into the Jotun's soul. Kol'la itched for chaos, for wide spaces, for wildernesses and for the stars.

 [...] Heimsrsal's split soul keened [...] 
 [...] Asgard's spirit stirred uneasily [...] 
 [...] wanderlust awoke [...] 

Asgard. The Realm Eternal. Golden and unchanging, it stands head and shoulders, literally, above the other realms, the other worlds and civilizations housed in the broad embrace of Yggdrasil. Yggdrasil, the World Tree, the broad expanse of stars which hang together within the Void... birthed from what? Only the Ancients and the Titans could say.

Yes. It stands head and shoulders above the rest – literally, they say, for this Realm hangs above the others – broad and vast. Its solid foundations were birthed out of fire, ice and magic, they say, and this magical Realm is the bridge between what is and what is not. In this, Asgard stands not alone, for the other Eight Realms hold their office as well – their spirits still strong and vital, if not as powerful as Asgard's Heart. With the destruction of prideful Jotunheim, Asgard now reigns alone above the rest – a bridge between the physical and the raw materials of unseen power – the ultimate technology, the strongest monopoly on magic.

If the tales of drunk space sailors and heartless bandits are to be believed, Asgard is a treasure trove, a bright place, second only to the fabled Valhalla itself. Filled with fertile lands, golden fields of produce, orchards blessed with Ithunn's power herself, Asgard is a fair land. Its inhabitants, known as the Aesir, are tall, brawny, powerful immortals who answer to no creature save Odin Allfather. Often given to adventure, Asgardians are a capricious lot, the stories tell, fond of brawling, subjugating, feasting and leaving destruction in their wake.

Remembering Elska's and Opna's tales of the Long War, Kol'la was not so impressed by the Bossman's new catch.

_They will bring nothing but trouble_, he thought as the Fourth Madame adjusted the magic on his collar to allow him enough ability for defence should the young Aesir captives take umbridge to Kol'la's services. _Most of all to myself..._ he eyed his pale skin and thought of the tell-tale markings hidden within. _If they discovered..._ Kol'la grimaced and then frowned determination. _They will never find out_. He grinned then bitterly. _A splendid trick indeed_.

Upon arrival, the Slavers had recommended the high security detainment all for the three Asgardian
youths. Kol'la, watching the forcibly subdued – chained and sedated – warriors be wheeled off, strapped down to broad metal frames, approved of the Boss-man's decision to follow the Slavers' advice. However, Kol'la, known for his ability to speak various languages fluently and his ability to mediate, was not so pleased to discover that he was the Boss-man's primary candidate for working as Liaison and Handler.

As it was, a full day and a half passed before the largest of the captives stirred. The blonde, husky Asgardian, judging by his short scruff and still round face, looked rather young, which no doubt explained why he had been captured. His two fellow warriors – a shorter, slighter, fair-looking young man and a black-haired, taciturn looking fellow – still lay unconscious further down the room. Kol'la, who had been adjusting the nutrition bags ordered by the Boss-man (which trickled through feeding tubes inserted down their throats), turned at the sound of arms suddenly jerking and legs twisting and the unpleasant sound of gagging.

"Hey now," he glared at the blue eyes which were wildly roaming about the room sightlessly – obviously bewildered and disoriented. "Just a minute... Breathe deep and then we can talk." Deftly but carefully, as he had been taught, Kol'la pulled the tube out and let the new slave breathe in deeply. "Where am I? Where is this? Who are you? Speak quickly!"

The slave's deep voice (now a little hoarse) barked out as large fists clenched and well-defined muscles jumped. Metal clinked against metal as the wrist and ankle restraints rattled from the Asgardian's attempts to escape. Kol'la, face smirking with the cynicism of long experience, stood back and watched.

"I have no idea who you are, numbskull, as we have just met," he finally said. "No doubt you will deliver some meaningless deception –"

"I am Prince Thor of Asgard, Kol'la of the Silvertongue – and I do not LIE!"

"Prince... pardon?" Kol'la laughed. "Now that is some tale –"

"I am Prince Thor – son of Odin –"

"Yes, yes, I know of whom you speak. The only son of Odin Allfather. His pride and joy – a feted warrior of some note, they say," Kol'la smirked. "Spoiled and brainless, it is told, and ever courts destruction and endangerment with the reckless abandon of the foolhardy. But I see no hammer about you." Here, the Jotunn tipped his head eyeing his people's enemy with amusement. "Perhaps you mislaid it?"

"Mjolnir – Mjolnir –" The blonde, would-be prince looked about as if to expect something to be there, when it was not. "It is not near? Where – where – where am I?"

"Sharda'aa," Kol'la repeated, annoyance rising. He folded his arms and glared down at the renewed
struggles of the captive. "I said that before. You do seem to be as witless as the Prince is said to be."
"You will pay for this —"
"Now you blame me?"
"Well... No..." A pause. The warrior eyed the slight, tall figure of the young man before him – noting
the collar around the long pale neck and the tired age behind the green eyes. "You are a slave too, aren't you?"

Kol'la's slender hands unfolded from his arms and he clapped long and slow, an empty smile crossing his face.

"You have finally established a solid fact in your thick skull, I see," Kol'la smirked. "How did you
guess? Was it the collar around my neck? My poor clothing? Or the fact that a well-spoken person
such as myself can be found in an establishment such as this?"

The warrior relaxed back on the flat pillow behind his head, his blue eye still trained on the green
ones before him, taking note of the roughly cut, dark hair and the cheap clothing on the slave's back.

"It was in your eyes," the Asgardian said quietly. A pause, during which Kol'la blinked, face still
carefully blank. The warrior shrugged. "You all look the same. In the eyes."

"We all look the same," Kol'la said, in a flash bending over the new slave, his long hand jerking on
the metal collar now securely bound about the warrior's broad neck. White teeth bared in a wordless
snarl before he continued. "It is we now. Prince. Thor. Although I still find that hard to believe —"

"When my father comes to get me," the warrior interrupted Kol'la's vitriolic speech, "and he will
come, he will destroy this world and everyone on it should they deny him. Help me – and I will
personally guarantee your safety - and freedom."

"Help you? Help – help –" Kol'la nearly keeled over laughing, his face wracked with mirth and
disbelief and anger all in one. A chaotic jumble of emotion. "And how would I be able to help the oh
so awesome and powerful Prince Thor of Asgard?" He asked sarcastically.

"You could aid me in learning the weaknesses of these people and prepare for the coming of the
rest," replied the supposed-prince simply. "You would become a fellow ally and in the moment
when Asgard arrives, you would aid me to overcome my bonds and I would repay you in kind."

"That is my job, moron."

"Pardon?"

"My job is to help you... adjust to your life and... employment... in this lovely garden of vice,"
Kol'la's voice dripped with sarcasm. "To aid you to escape, that seems a fine trick and within my...
interests, given you say you will do the same for me." Green eyes narrowed sharply, pinning the blue
ones, as the long-time slave drew back a little. "And how do I know you will keep your promise,
supposed-Odinsson?"

"You have my word," Thor replied. "The word of an Odinsson is always true."

Kol'la searched for any lie in the young warrior's eyes – and found none. It was as the rumours told –
Prince Thor was a beast, a handsome warrior, an idiot and the powerful son of the most powerful
immortal in the universe, excepting the Titans themselves. Prince Thor was beloved and golden, and
as the stories went, honest and true to those who came underneath the protection of his shield. The
Jotunn smirked. The son of Odin in my debt. What better chance than this? And if he lies... the lie
will show itself soon enough and I can play it both ways to save my skin. Unlike this fool.

He nodded and Thor's face broke into a broad smile – powerful and beaming like a warm sun.

"Then you have my aid." Kol'la's return smile was broad and wolfish and cold. "And if you have
any sense within you, dou'ma, lose the name."
Not long after, the other two Asgardians awoke – just as disoriented and displeased as the Prince had been. It seemed like the rumours of All-Speech were true after all – all of the Asgardians were able to communicate with him easily. Kol'la couldn't consider the mysterious matter any longer, however, since the two shorter warriors were rather upset. There was the usual initial struggle followed by belaboured explanations from Kol'la, made even more difficult thanks to Thor's constant interruptions. Then, disgruntled acceptance – once reality settled in.

The slighter, fair-headed one, more cheerful and prone to run off at the mouth, was apparently named Fandral, whilst the dour, more clear-headed and intelligent one was so named Hogun. More intelligent? That is not saying much, Kol'la's lip curled up at that. On the other hand, he is not your ordinary Asgardian specimen... More than likely one of the descendents of some race brought captive to Asgard long, long ago...

Once he explained their situation to the three warriors ("you will be fighting the brawniest and most dangerous champions of this corner of the galaxy"), the rules ("there are a list of things forbidden here, as you may have guessed - and they are the following...") and punishments ("that collar can fell a Jotunn"), Kol'la left the three to contemplate their existence.

Before he exited the windowless room, Kol'la turned at the door and eyed Hogun who was silently once again testing his bonds. The three will do so all night, he supposed. Go ahead, the dark-haired slave grinned again sharply then, waste those hours of rest... and realize your new position. As we have all had to do.

"I will discuss what your first duties will be tomorrow morning," Kol'la finally said, breaking the silence as the three pairs of eyes watched him stand in the door, in the supposed gateway to freedom – the only opening to their cell. "And your names."
"You know our names," Thor said bewildered.
"Your new names," repeated Kol'la coldly. "It is supposed to strip you of your identity and prepare you for the new life of a slave... but in this case, accept it gracefully – at least for your own protection. Otherwise we will have more than the usual witless scum volunteering their bodies to pit against you –"
"Let them come," Thor laughed then. "I will tear them apart and crush them like the fragile –"
"Without Mjolnir? I think it would not be so easy," Kol'la sighed, wishing his charges did not lack so much commonsense. "At any rate, there is no ifs, ands or buts. You will be gifted new names. Of a sort. You will forget your old ones."
"Have you forgotten yours?" Hogun asked quietly.

Kol'la did not reply. He left, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Have you forgotten yours?

Something familiar welled up within him. He had felt it before. Once again, he was standing before his brother – nononono, Kol'la gritted his teeth, attempting to force the memory back down into that box of horrors in the back of his mind – no. It did not work - he was back in the great hall. He was standing before his brother and he knew his shame – measured and found wanting. Always found wanting.

How could I have forgotten – he thought bitterly, flinging open the door to his shared dormitory room and stalking to his bed, jerking off his clothing, seeing nothing but what he could not be, could not have.

How could I have forgotten what I never had?
So a couple of things...

1. Let me know what you think! Please review! It helps me know what to tweak and fix up! I do love concrit! And of course ranting about Loki is always fun to read!

2. This conversation was really hard for me to write. Let me know what you thought about it! Did I miss the mark totally? Was it OK?

3. Some of you might think... a) how as Thor caught and b) Thor was CAUGHT? A moment then to explain. First, more on how he was caught will be revealed. In a way. It's kinda peripheral to the real reason for the story, but it will be discussed later on (literally). Secondly, Thor is not some sort of freakish invulnerable person. He is powerful - but at this point in time, he's only 17 or 18. He's young. He's stupid. He's got no Loki and strategies at his back. Also, even with Mjolnir and everything, Thor isn't the most powerful being in the universe. There's always a bigger fish. So yes, in a way, the Slavers are definitely deus ex machina but in a way it should be totally believable to have species equally or more powerful than an Asgardian teen. I hope this make sense/is OK with you guys!

Let me know either way!

Thanks so much for reading! I love you all!

Numbers (for this quadrant):

0 - nai
1 - sa
2 - tho
3 - frei
4 - ah
5 - ko
6 - yul
7 - vee
8 - mah
9 - lei

Alien Glossary:

Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
oma'auzha – mother-effet
Chapter Notes

Thanks a ton everyone! More people are favoring and alerting this - which is so encouraging to me! And a huge thank you and round of applause for those who were kind enough to give me a shout out and chat!

Thanks to: Filigree, laSamtyr, lemomina, YellowWomanontheBrink, Kai_Maciel, history, Danea, lotr195, Nebelkind, Crazy_Cat_Lady, iBlameGlobalWarming.

So I was replanning some of my plot stuff and it seems like it is going to be a bit longer than I thought... more like 65 chapters! So I hope you guys can hang in there with me!

Warning! Slavery! Warning! Gladiator stuffs and violence! Warning! A WHIPPING! Warning!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 25
Day By Day I

Voices were rising from the back of the training room – a tall, lithe, slightly scaled youthful Phantolaxamene was nose to nose (yet again) with the ever vocal slave known as "Exon the Powerful", also playfully nicknamed "the Busty Blonde". Prince Thor in disguise. Not for long, however, Kol'la judged, moving down the room to the warriors he was in charge of. It is only his fifth day here, and he keeps flapping his brainless tongue. The idiotic oaf.

"Rok'ka," the lithe youth inserted himself between the Enforcer and the slave and raised his hands in appeasement. "I apologize for this idiot's tongue. You must understand he has the wits of a child -"
"You could have fooled me," Kol'la replied sharply. "You have not entered the Pits yet and already you have raised your fists seventeen times – perhaps you were born for battle after all."
"You dare speak to me this way? I am –"
"Exon the Powerful. The Busty Blonde," Kol'la reminded the tall warrior and he nudged his sharp elbow into a sensitive spot between Thor's ribs which caused a short 'oof' to come out of the prince-in-disguise. "I might as well call you Muscled Moron for all the sense in you –" Here, Kol'la turned back to the Enforcer and smiled appeasingly. "We apologize –"
"The man insulted the great Phantolaxa. Reparation…"
"Speak with Master Shax if you wish for a legitimate challenge –"
"I do not need any authority to protect my honour," Thor said.
"He appears to agree with me –"
"The both of you –"
"Get out of the way, boy –"
"Our fists shall meet in glorious combat –"
"STOP! Please!" Kol'la green magic shot out and unpleasantly zapped the two quarrelling warriors. "Exon, this is an Enforcer. A freed Slave who works as a fighter – and you must pay him respect. Furthermore, to disrespect Phantolaxa is tantamount to calling Odin All-Father a One-Eyed –"
"You dare call my –"
"See? You see how that is infuriating? How do you think Rok'ka feels?" A pause. Kol'la shot Thor the evil eye before turning back to the Phantolaxamene. "Now, let us part ways and –"

Kol'la never saw Rok'ka's fist coming. One second he was standing before Thor's broad chest, next he was sent tumbling to the floor, nearly blacking out from the pain which spread up sharply from his jaw into his head. Light flared – dimmed – flared – and sound disappeared and then descended with a roar. A literal roar since Thor's ever booming voice was lifted in a familiar war cry, joined by the other fighters also exercising in the large work out room – now all viciously clawing and wrestling each other to the ground. Thor hurled himself at the Phantolaxamene, cursing the alien's parentage and emperor of said planetary system.

Below, Kol'la had an impression of shadows shifting as Thor's bulk moved over him protectively, fists rising to land two hard blows on the Rok'ka's sensitive snout.

No, no, nononono – Master Shax will have my head for this – unless...

Wildly, he looked about. The others were being herded efficiently by the guards out of the room. The two Asgardians were yelling at Thor – to no avail. As usual, when the battle called, the prince of Asgard became rather single-minded.

Kol'la cursed and summoning as much magic as his collar would allow, he let the green seep out and then at a muttered command and twisting sigils, the magic materialized and light green ropes snaked forward at lightning speed to pull at the combatants feet. Sweeping both arms to the sides, Kol'la pulled the Phantolaxamene and Asgardian apart. Another blast of magic knocked the scaly alien unconscious. Thor picked himself up and dusted himself off, blue eyes wide as the green magic disappeared.

"Kol'la! You did not tell me that you were a noble warrior!"
"I am not –"
"Well, magic is usually something for old men and women, but with some training, you seem as though you would be a fair match against –"
"Silence, fool!" hissed Kol'la.

More guards were pouring into the room, bundling the Phantolaxamene out and "subduing" the wild Asgardian warrior and his Handler. Kol'la said nothing – his green eyes burning holes into Thor's relaxed profile. Obviously, the warrior was not worried about his immediate future.

Of course not, Kol'la grumbled to himself. He is Master Shax's newest prize, but you, Kol'la, are not so lucky.

You never were.

-0-0-0-

Twenty minutes later found Kol'la and his charge in Master Shax's Operational Office still getting a nasty dressing down from the very irate Battle-House owner, who paced back and forth and loomed over the tall, thin Handler and his equally tall, brawny Fighter. Apparently Rok'ka had been slated for a fight earlier that evening – and now they would have to find a replacement for him. Behind him, Thor stood, silent. No doubt realizing our true positions for the first time in his life, Kol'la
thought bitterly, his fists curling and uncurling with barely contained rage. And of course we both get into trouble because of his short temper, spoiled nature and inability to control his tongue.

"Exon, you appear to have no interest in listening to your Handler, your Liaison," Shax ended, frowning at the two. "No respect, but some care, I hear..." The iron-skinned alien tapped his lip. Pressed a button and called for the Third Madame. "I have an idea which will, I hope, teach you both a lesson. Kol'la, that you may learn to nip things earlier in the bud and use your abilities with due diligence. Exon, that you may better protect the ones who can protect you. Madame," here, the tall alien turned to the stoic woman. "We have a lesson we need taught today. The Vasha'anas, I think, will do."

Kol'la's throat suddenly felt rather dry – and he wet his lips, unconsciously gulping – green eyes wide. But his mouth and chin firmed as the Madame crossed over to Master Shax's private cabinets, opened a thin drawer and carefully withdrew the electro-whip curled up neatly inside. The electro-whip was what Master Shax enjoyed using when needing to make a point. Kol'la's back stiffened even as Thor behind him raised a muted protest. Shax whipped around then and raised an eyebrow at his newest piece of property. Thor fell silent again – practically sulking like a little child.

The Vasha'anas...

In a world filled with hollow promises and fleeting illusions, there were no real memories of the people who had once roamed the small, once-green planet. Bands of nomads, the space pirates say, who worshipped the stars and trees and rivers and smoked the blossoms of the purple-speckled white leaves of the Vasha'ana plant. So named after the Goddess of Oblivion, for within its fragrant clouds, one could look, it was said, into the World That Is Not, the World that lies beyond What Is. A mythic place – The World That Is Not and it is ruled, the nomads taught before they disappeared along with the last of their planet's kind, by the Goddess of Oblivion. Some say Vasha'ana is Valhalla, others believe it is pure bliss, others think it is a tale for comfort alone and no less delusional than the ramblings of drug-addled minds in the udji'oo dens. Yet others believe that it is the Ultimate of Nothing – a state of existence that is non-existence. A beautiful paradox.

[... embrace it...]

Obeying the clipped instructions of the Third Madame – a hefty Skrull with a sure hand, deft eye and long experience – Kol'la stripped to the waist, mutely placed his palms on the left wall of the Boss's office (expressly left bare for this purpose), legs placed slightly apart. The Madame's fingers drifted along his neck as she adjusted his metallic collar's settings, removing most of his magic abilities, hindering Kol'la's abilities to heal right away.

Now, he was ready. He waited. And braced himself for the pain.

[... The eventual Nothingness...]

[... It is Vasha'anas...]

[... some call it the Void...]

[... and worship it...]


[... no one can be ready for the first lash...]
The long-whip's crack barely gave him enough time – and the long, rough, cutting woven wires laid the first fierce red weal across his shoulders. Lightly muscled arms nearly buckled as the whip dragged across pale skin, tearing away at muscle and skin.

One.

The air crackled. The Visha'anas crackled with energy – it vibrated and howled in the atomic spaces – and the electricity ran along the core of the whip, giving the young slave a nasty shock as it cut again – this time only a little below the first lash.

Two.

*How long will this last?* Kol'la thought wildly, biting hard on his lip, attempting to keep down any cries attempting to vocalize themselves.

Three.

He would not cry. He would not cry. He would not break. He would show no fear. He was Jotunn. He was Ulfrbarn. He was Kol'la.

Four.

Nails scratched on the wall as his back arched a little – a vain, automatic attempt to escape – aborted by fear that Master Shax would add to this –

Five.

Ahhhh... A whimper rose then. He could feel something trickling down his chin, and his mouth filled with the now familiar taste of iron. *Blood.* Kol'la must have bitten through his lip –

Six. Seven. Eight.

By the eighth, Kol'la was crying silently, steadily, his breath coming in ragged gasps – but he did not beg. Nor did he squirm, flinch away or fall. Digging his feet in, the young man forced himself to remain upright and moderately conscious. He would not dishonour –

Nine.

*Oh. By the Norns, by the Eybjarg – the Eybjarg* – he could see it now. A darkness. An empty, hungry dark place ever haunting his dreams. Nightmares of his childhood and returning to this living dark dream. Would that be what he saw until the end of time – until his death?

No. Dear heart...

*Little Lagreinn. We are waiting. Always-*

_Elska,* Kol'la thought for the first time in many winters. *Elska... Please...*

[... perhaps, in the end, that is what it is...]

[... Visha'anas...]

[... it is our loved ones gone before...]
But the soft voices were so faint. So faint. He was alone. *Perhaps*, a dark part of him mocked the young boy crying the cupboard, *perhaps you were always alone*. Kol'la was alone. There was only him and pain and blinding dark and fire and a far away voice ending the count.

*Ten.*

What was Visha'anas?

*Perhaps*, he thought dizzily, *it is only what we make it. Or it is everything* – Mage Opna's cruel smirk, Thyrstr's fists, Boss-man's taunts and Shax's indifference – *everything that is dark in us* – *and we will never overcome the Void. It will always be there...*

*Join it. Embrace. Accept. You are alone.*

**No, dear heart, not alone. Never alone** -

Kol'la found himself falling forward, still mute, happily mute – but oh, the pain! Green eyes lifted disoriented and groggy to meet blue and gold and garish red.


- you are not alone –

"No, I am not," he mumbled in rather incoherent agreement to himself. "Unfortunately. You are surrounded by fools. Again."

Kol'la fainted.

-0-0-0-

It was Thor who took him to the Medic room on the seventh floor for a rough patch-up job and then Kol'la's bed for much needed rest. At some point, Kol'la woke thirsty and as dry as a mountain ice-desert – but large, warm hands raised his head and held a cup close by and, with great patience, helped him drink his fill. Kol'la fell asleep again on his side – too drugged to visit his nightmare lands that night.

When he woke the next time, the first thing Kol'la saw was Thor – sprawled in the rickety chair by his bed, snoring. *Snoring as loudly as an aged jarnkotr*. Kol'la glared at the brawny warrior. By slow degrees, Kol'la pried himself upward, choking back sharp cries of pain – managed to edge one leg off the bed to kick Thor hard enough, knocking the sleeping prince off his precarious seat. Thor woke with a rather nasty thud on the floor.

"You snore," Kol'la snarked, trying to find a more comfortable position on his hard bed and failing. "Oaf."

Thor just grinned.

-0-0-0-

"I am truly sorry," Thor finally said much later that day, sometime after supper. He shifted awkwardly in the bent, metal chair – obviously not used to making apologies. "I was not thinking." "When do you ever?"
Thor laughed then.

"You sound like my mother."

A pause.

"I miss her."
"Hm. Well. No use whining about it. Good night," Kol'la grunted, not certain how to answer to Thor's words. He turned awkwardly onto his side, back to Thor and wished the warrior would return to his own bed which was further down the room by the door. Perhaps Thor would take the hint and leave him alone...

No such luck.

"Do you have a mother, Kol'la?"

The lights were turned off – for which Kol'la was glad. He did not wish Thor to see any trace of the envy he carried within. A mother who scolded him. A father who would obliterate planets for him. That seemed too good to be true. Too good to be true for one such as him, certainly.

*It does not bear thinking on,* the abandoned Jotun told himself, willing his eyes to remain empty of tears. *You are lucky enough to be alive. Be grateful for the time you have been given.*

"I am truly, truely sorry, Kol'la. I will attempt to control what I say and not get us into trouble."

Thor still there. Still attempting to make awkward apologies. And Kol'la found that within the flower of annoyance there was a small seed of relief. He was not alone. Against all reason, a supposed-Prince sat by him and reached out a hand time and again. Six days ago, he would not have believed it.

"I know," Kol'la sighed. A pause. Then he added: "This time, consider us even. But do not make a habit of it."

But of course Thor did. They both did.

[... this is how brothers are born...]

[... through adversity...]

Chapter End Notes

Ha! Thor! Idiot man! But he means well - but he's totally not learning his lesson as quickly as he ought! (In relation to Thor maturing.. it's gonna take a LONG while!)

Please let me know what you think!

-KI

Numbers (for this quadrant):

0 - nai
Alien Glossary:

Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'inka – a kind of cow
chi’iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
oma'auzha – mother-effer
udji’oo – a drug, like opium
Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 26
Day By Day II

In the light-dark world of Space, approaching Sharda'aa, all you see at first is grey. Streaks of black and white clouds swirl together in an endless slow-moving mass of pollution... and beneath – a grey block of sentient life in concrete and metal and glass and plastic piled up on top of each other, lit with colours and filled with a scented haze. In between, some green still lingers from the Old Days. Hardy trees now potted or protected in small translucent domes. The Battle House of Shax, Franchise Number Fourty-Three (of fifty) was located in the same mega-block as Poison Paradise. This megablock was located in a middling section of the planet's large mega-metropolis located several miles away from the northern pole. As such, it was neither incredibly wealthy nor as poor as the dirt-side ghettos below. An in-between world, perfect within which to hide human contraband.

About eight floors in entirety, the Battle House was a very busy place. The top floor belonged to the "Tough-As-Nails" Shax (his 'Promotional Office') and a couple VIP lounges which overlooked the expansive dance-hall floor below. The second floor, what the clients and audiences saw most, was huge and held many chairs and lounges as well as mega-bars and dance stages. Various stairs – large and small – led downwards to the sizable stadiums below. The largest stadium could seat around three thousand, although most nights the crowd was about two thousand. The smaller battle pits closer to the four corners of the Battle House allowed for audiences of fifteen hundred maximum. A piece.

The Battle House was good business.

Standing before the metallic grill, breathing in the smell of hot sand and oils, the tang of blood, the stink of sweat and bile and piss, Kol'la stared forward jaw set. Beside him, Thor – Exon – shifted eagerly from foot to foot.
Kol'la remembered with sudden clarity the day he had "discussed" with Master Shax and the Five Madames the issue of Thor. It had been two days after his punishment and he had felt light-headed and rather uncertain, but had held his tongue.

"He needs to be blooded," Shax stated bluntly. "That much is clear. Kol'la. Five nights from now, he will battle the Half-Breed and Golan."
"By himself?" Madame Trab'ba had asked.
"With Kol'la here. Two on two." Shax had smirked then, bushy eyebrows quirking upward, as he bent to eye Kol'la's carefully blank face.
"As you wish, Master Shax," Kol'la had replied evenly, inwardly cursing the tall, skeletal, half-Cyborg to the Void and back.
"Hmmm..." A smile then cracked the ancient alien's face. "You are not pleased?"

Kol'la knew better than to reply to the not-question. He had learned this dance well – had played this game too many times before. So he held his tongue.

"It will teach you something of responsibility..." Shax grinned then. "And, who knows, you may come to enjoy it. Kol'la Silvertongue, I am sure, has some surprises for us all." The man tapped Kol'la's collar. "Magician Suppressor Aga'no will be by today. Make certain to see him."
"Yes, Master Shax."

[... always say yes...]

[... but inside...]

[... inside...]

So here he was. Far behind them, guards hustled and bustled. Two stood by the door of the cage they had been placed within – hulking Boulder-People with bones the consistency of stone. Faces set in stone. Just as silent. Definitely living up to their names and reputations.

Thor did not speak either.

Small mercies.

Attempting to speak was futile at any rate – thanks to the head-splitting, mind-numbing, ever-increasing roar of beings who filled the stadiums. It was a busy night, according to the Fourth Madame, and the audience was more than ready to taste blood in the air. Hypnotic bass drums pounded, lights flashed and flared over the empty, tan arena which was surrounded by the steeply rising stadium seats of the smaller Pit Three.


White light.

It faded and memory returned full force.

He was on the mats, groaning on his back as Thor stood above him, laughing at Kol'las obvious inexperience with the wide blade which had been in his hands and had just now skittered across the floor from a well-timed blow to the slighter slave's wrist.

"Perhaps a spear would suit you better."
"If I had my magic, any weapon would be merely –"
"Tricks have no place in battle," Thor looked disapprovingly down at Kol'la who rolled to his feet, suppressing a moan.

At Thor's words, the slighter, leanly muscled slave glared at the man who was attempting to call him 'shieldmate' and 'good fellow' and other meaningless Asgardian nonsense, while at the same time demeaning his abilities.

"Say one more word, Brainless Lout, and you will taste the force of my will with an easily conjured dagger in your back –"
"Fighting words," the prince grinned back, unrepentant. "Let us see how effectively you can enforce your will – or not."

Kol'la had launched himself then, calling on the magic the Suppressor had allowed him. The two battled through the early evening until both were sore. Thor did not lose – but neither did he win precisely.

-0-0-0-

As the two of them stepped out onto the newly raked sands of the arena, the roar increased if possible – a raucous noise of boos and taunts and curses. As their opposing combatants stepped out, everyone cheered. Kol'la glared sourly at their opponents. Thor and he were not the favourites tonight. We are facing Death. He grinned wolfishly then. Or so they think.

Dark, smooth, metallic walls rose up around them in a large circle – indestructible and daunting. Offering no easy escape, the inner edges along the top were lined with live wire, Kol'la knew. The only way out of the arena was either on one's own two feet or in a coffin. Sometimes mercy was shown – and Kol'la knew that this battle was not intended to be a fight to the death. However, judging by the tense stances of his two opponents, the lithe slave-boy had a feeling that the ever annoying, brash prince-in-disguise had somehow managed to irritate the two fighters.

Kol'la sighed. Things are never easy...

The Half-Breed – Toh, the Half-Breed – was an infamous fighter, known for her feral attacks – using claw and tooth and nail to bring down her opponents. Tall and bony, Toh's appearance did not promise much, particular as her skeletal frame appeared to take more after her Ananuki genetics. However, the short black fur which covered her body spoke of Tsatatohalun blood and the small magicks she wielded appeared to be Elven in nature. Pitch black eyes glinted from a bone-white skull-shaped face and a grin widened, baring long canines.

Kol'la winced at Toh's obvious excitement. Shifting from foot to foot, Toh looked energetic – definitely spoiling for a fight. Dressed in a roughly weaved standard one-piece cut high upon her thighs and a bandolier of bone, teeth and beads which slung low across her hip, holding a short dagger, Toh definitely looked ready to win.

Beside her, clad in a simple leather kirtle and armed with a sturdy belt, broad sword and buckler, Toh's usual partner, the Golan, appeared to be more calm – but his dark, beady eyes were a shade more intense than usual. Thor was already sizing up the muscles and Kol'la decided for his own preservation to let the two hulking beasts at it. He would have to be up for the task of dealing with Toh's blood-lust, magicks and cruel morning-star.

Somewhere overhead, the bright voice of one of the Announcers was whipping the crowd up into a frenzy. The starting bell blared – and without any further ado, the Golan and Thor leaped for each other, leaving Kol'la to face off Toh.
Thor’s sword clashed and rang as it met the Golan’s blade time and time again. Bucklers bashed against each other and their forearms bruised with the pull of steel and the pounding of the broad swords. Sweat and blood flew, the sounds of the audience faded to a dull roar.

There was only sand and dust and the tang of metal and blood and the weight of armour and the ring of steel against steel. There was only the brushing of leather against leather as Thor's back met Kol'la's for a few brief seconds. There was only exhilaration, excitement and the song of war which hummed through his veins.

This was what he lived for. This was what he breathed for air. This was the fuel he needed.

This was war.

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Toh was all cat. Thin muscle, but muscle none the less, athletic flexibility and a wicked sense of humour combined with a sharp tongue. In so many ways, a mirror of Kol'la – a picture of Kol'la many years in the future: experienced, cynical, talented and bitter.

"Well, little Kol'la," she hissed, black eyes glittering and her long tail flicking from side to side. "This is a long way from Poison Paradise now, isn't it?"

He did not reply, but kept his gaze fixed on her entirely – on her eyes, her neck and shoulders, her hips and feet. When she pounced, he raised his own weapon of choice – a long spear – and swept the long chain of the flying mace aside, forcing it off its trajectory as he ducked. Toh's other hand swept out, flinging three fireballs his way. Dodging them easily, Kol'la sent two ice daggers her way, which she evaded, while moving closer into his first ring of defence.

Thickly spiked boots kicked him roughly in the stomach and Kol'la found himself flung rather heavily against the wall of arena. A cry rose – of encouragement for Toh and he hissed back at her, growling with annoyance and dodged a second kick which would have buried his head in the grey metal and stone. One-two, one-two three-four, Kol'la just barely managed to fend off a following volley of blows from Toh's fists – his forearms and feet meeting hers.

From a ways away, he could hear Thor – Exon – yelling his name in concern, but Kol'la did not reply, focusing instead on the warrior before him. Toh had entered the blood frenzy so popular amongst the thrill-seekers above who watched them scrabble for their lives. The young slave cursed them, cursed Toh's heedlessness, cursed Thor – Exon's – the dou'ma's misplaced worry.

I can take care of myself, thank you, Kol'la glared, jaw set, eye twitching and fists clenching, ignoring a trickle of blood which ran down his right temple. His return blows, kicks and fire-power increased as anger flared up within him. I am no babe in the arms – I have survived worse – The runtling remembered his battles against the grarulfr upon the white plains of the Utanheim, the combat he had met against his first real foes (... those hateful Slavers...) within the now, so distant town of Snjarhamr... and all the training he had been forcefully put through in the barely padded rooms below his feet. She will regret –

That was his last thought as his shoulders widened, as he spun with his spear to place several well-placed, powerful kicks along Toh's forearms and stomach. The heavy mace whistled as it passed over his head – Kol'la had bent backwards to avoid it and a following foot. Then he was turning down, round and about to hit her on the side with his own sturdy boots.
This time, she could not miss the well-aimed ice daggers which hit the firm padding on her back – dark purple blood seeped through and Kol'la grinned wolfishly as his opponent whipped about, clearly angered beyond all reason.

Fireballs now sped toward him at an increasing pace – all of which he countered with insouciant grace. Kol'la laughed then – a hard, sharp laugh like glass and he darted forward, allowing his magic to take shape once again, lending him speed – and a clone. Toh did not pause – but stepped forward, her mace already arcing toward his clone's head – and passing through air with no resistance. His trick had worked.

With Toh attempting to shift her stance, Kol'la planted one hand on the ground and ice sprang up along the ground in a straight path toward his opponent. Toh turned in enough time to see it coming – but by then it was too late. The ice, trapping her feet, slowed her down enough for him to catch her by tangling cords of green.

The Half-Breed went down with an 'oof'! And the crowd roared as the Golan sailed overhead the two slighter combatants and thudded into the metal wall beyond them. Thor followed in hot pursuit, and the Golan found himself only to be increasingly buried into the arena's wall (dents spread outward from the green alien's body and Kol'la had to wince) thanks to repeated blows of Thor's fist and then elbow.

The Golan slumped forward and Toh spat and hissed threats as she struggled against the tightening bonds.

"You think you are so brave, Kol'la Silver tongue? That this is the place for you to shine – as you had once thought upon the stage to strut and tease – but there will only be ruin and I will laugh as you are reminded of your place once again -"

"Remind me now, if you dare, witch," Kol'la drew himself up, testing the strength of his spear within his grip, "but it does not change the truth of the matter. I have bested you and I will do so yet again. Another day. Call forfeit now, Toh."

Toh laughed then and continued to pull at the living green rope, if in vain. "Forfeit to you? On your first time out? I would rather die than surrender to a high-priced whore of a slave like you - a babe in the arts of war."

"It may be my first time in the Ring," spat back the young fighter, "but that does not mean I cannot win."

"Drunken already on your own power, little Kol'la?" Toh snarled and cruel words poured out, ably translated for the audience who jeered and roared happily at the ensuing drama. "This crowd which chants for you. For me – one day, they will cheer as I tear you apart... unless I spare you in mercy and give you what you deserve and remind you of where you belong, beneath another with your legs spread, crying mercy – that's what they say you do best – Silverto –"

Kol'la spear shifted, turned – plunged down – pale fingers tightened. Thor's voice broke out in horror as his new-found shieldmate's face tightened and a terrible blankness spread over it. There was an emptiness in those brilliant green eyes – and the spear plunged down and found its mark with surety. The crowd cried out. The Announcers were going wild. Guards spilled in. The Golan, woozily rising to his feet, was bellowing like a wounded n'ch'nka – and the spear plunged down and finding its mark, stilled. Toh's body jerked as the metal pierced her between her breasts through hard leather and even harder bone – the spear plunged down, driven by madness and despair and memory and white skin which hid a darker secret. And behind those green eyes was memory which burned like fire.

Kol'la did not feel anything, not the push and pull of the guards as they forced him to his knees and
bound his hands behind his back and then fastened them with a chain to his collar, nor when the Fourth Madame and the Auxiliary Magician Suppressor hurried over to temporarily induce unconsciousness. He did not see them. All he could see was Toh's blank eyes now dull and the spear – the spear in her now still chest.

That was all he saw.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there you go. Kol'la is a bit of a vindictive type - but a bit understandable, I think.

Let me know what you think!

Please review! It's really encouraging and helps me keep pumped about writing! XD

Numbers (for this quadrant):

0 - nai
1 - sa
2 - tho
3 - frei
4 - ah
5 - ko
6 - yul
7 - vee
8 - mah
9 - lei

Alien Glossary:

Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-eff er
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
Rising

Chapter Notes

Thanks to all who reviewed! Those faithful few! (feels like Henry Vth at Agincourt)

Thanks to: lotr195, merichuel, Crazy_Cat_Lady, lemomina, Nebelkind, Danea, iBlameGlobalWarming, YellowWomanOnTheBrink

And also a great shoutout to everyone who has fav'd this fic or is on alert or fav'd me. Thanks so much - and don't be shy~! I don't bite... much.

For those who want to see pictures that I've drawn for this fic (since there don't seem to be any fanartists out there)... visit my profile. There is a picture of Toh (sorta) and the Battlehouse layouts and a few other things. XD Or you can visit my tumblr - kakashidiot. Particularly if you wanna read a cheery Tom Hiddleston & Loki friendship fic. :D

Warning! Slavery! Warning! Angst! Warning!

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 27
Rising

Silence.

[... in the gaps between the pounding bass and whining strains of brass...]

[... there it is...]

He lay there, eyes closed, content to just be and listened to the unfamiliar silence of the room he was now in. No sound. Nothing. An empty silence.

Kol'la shifted uneasily. Stirred. This was not the same after all. Not the same not the same not the same not the same not the same not the same not the same not the same not the same not the same not the same – No place could ever be home, be icy, dim wastelands under pale, grey moons, be towering black mountains blanketed in eternal snows, be the edges of existence, be the rim of the worlds, be open to the ebb and flow of the stars' magical tides, be filled with the voices of Realms and the song of Jotunheim's Heimrsal herself – be – just be –

[... in these gaps...]

[... there it is...]

[... Nothingness...]

Kol'la came to his senses in the dark. Darkness was an old friend. It was the Void which haunted his childhood dreams and called to him with deep whispers. It was Nothingness – or it was the hope of
peace. It was the medium of all things light and magical and it was the hunger of all things dark and meaningless. It was him.

"Kol'la?"

A voice spoke out into the darkness and then there was light. The small head-lamp jutting out from the wall beside the bed he was lying on flared with an electric hum. Kol'la's eyes flew around the bare room instantly. A bare room with grey walls. The High-Security Containment facilities then, he thought tiredly. Ignoring the aches of his body, Kol'la attempted to pry himself upward, only to find that his wrists and neck had been tethered to the bed's side rails. He sank back with a heavy sigh. Turned his head to find Thor – Exon, he reminded himself for the umpteenth time, Exon, you dou'ma – sitting there beside him.

Why is he here? Kol'la wondered to himself. Why are you here, he wanted to ask. What is it that draws you to my side time and time again?

Silence.

Then Th – Exon drew breath: "Toh is dead."

A pebble falling into a still pond. The first cracks of a thawing mountain stream. Kol'la did not say anything. Merely grimaced, his pale lips tightening into a hard thin line.

"I did not think it was in you to do such a thing."

You know nothing –

Silence.

You know nothing, repeated Kol'la coldly in his mind. You come to this world. You live a short time here and think to know us all when we can barely know ourselves. You place us in the box of your imaginings and expect us to perform – I will. Not. Perform. I will do as I please. As I want. As much as I may with the power that is given to me.

"This was your first time to kill?" Thor asked after another long moment.

"No," Kol'la sighed and then frowned at the memory of the Slaver smoking with the heat of his fire. An innocent kill in a way during more innocent days.

"Then –"

"I do not wish to discuss it."

A pause. Thor's big feet shuffled and then the brawny, young warrior heaved a gusty sigh.

"Toh was saying that you –"


"But –"

"Silence!" Kol'la's rose with pitch and intensity as he attempted to hit the oaf and failed, wrists and ankles aching with his sudden thrashing. He fell back panting, eyes wild and promising Thor pain should the young warrior ask again. "I have no wish to speak of it – what part of this do you not understand? Or is your understanding that of a dumb beast? It is none of your business and I have no wish to speak of it!"

"It is my business!" roared Thor in response. "Particularly when my good friend and shield-mate strikes out so – and is imprisoned for it! You are in trouble, Kol'la. More trouble than before. What if – what if –" Thor faltered then. "Do you remember that time you were beaten for my misdeeds –"

"Which time was that?" Kol'la rolled his eyes. "There have been so many –"
"The day Shax had the Third Madame whip you with the Visha'anás – and what if they decide to inflict you with that punishment again – but longer? Thoza said that it drives men mad when –" "You can't believe anything that comes out of Thoza's mouth, that oma'auzha. Wait –" Kol'la raised his head again to glare at Thor better. "Why are you even talking to that piece of dirt-side trash anyways?"
"Well I –"
"Thor," Kol'la dropped his head back to ease his aching throat. "You will be the death of me – what now?" He had caught a glimpse of delight on the warrior's face.
"You called me Thor!"
"A mistake, Exon. A mistake!"
"You never make mistakes. That is what you told me –"
"Aha. Aha," Kol'la said dryly. "My first mistake was to let you live –"
"As if you could bring me down with those little tricks of yours," laughed Thor easily.
"You always fall for it," Kol'la sniffed, "and you always will."

They spoke no more of Toh, no more of Toh's cutting words and dark promises, no more of their tainted first victory. Instead, the two young slaves talked of weaponry and strategies and armour and the weak spots of the Skrull and Kree – and other lighter things until both were too tired to speak anymore – but Kol'la did not mind. Such banter, mindless as it was, filled up the empty spaces and the gathering dark.

In those precious moments, he felt he could hold it off at bay – the voices and the emptiness – hold the Void off until he discovered how to destroy it. Even if it meant destroying himself.

-0-0-0-

In the end, Kol'la was gifted with ten lashes of the Visha'anás and a short commendation from Master Shax on his abilities within the ring. As punishment and reward, Kol'la found himself on the sand at Thor's side from that time forward. As Shax predicted, Kol'la learned to find some joy in combat, even though it was not his preferred way to spend time. There was a sense of accomplishment to be gained from a good victory – a sense of style, a sense of growth. It isn't a difficult life, Kol'la had to own. It could be worse.

And so, another week passed.

[... and time however short or quick bound the two...]
[... it was Fated perhaps...]
[... for all time...]

Beneath the perpetually grey sky and gaudy lights, beneath the thick stone and metal struts, Kol'la slept and ate and fought. Side by side, the two young warriors found a kind of rhythm between them and striding forward to their doom, Kol'la and Thor wielded whatever the Norns would give them. Halfway through the second week of fighting, the third week of Thor's captivity, the two were in their dormitories nursing their bruises and discussing their next strategy to astound their growing and adoring followers, when Kol'la asked the question that had been haunting him since day one of Thor's arrival.

"You say you are Prince Thor," he said, green eyes darting about to make doubly certain that no other slave was lurking about to catch some gossip or rumour.
"I am Prince Thor." Indignant. "I told you so already."
"Yes, yes," Kol'la flapped a hand. "That makes you son of Odin – Odin Allfather, who is perhaps the most powerful being in the galaxy."
"Of course."
"So... why isn't he here yet?"

Thor shook his head and glared at his broad, callused, warrior's hands. His leather-clad foot moved forward to nudge at Kol'la's shin annoyingly, teasingly. He glanced up at his fighting partner, blue eyes calculating – and just as he was about to speak, Fandral (now known as Skorax the Fair) and Hogun (renamed as Tuan the Dour) entered the room arguing over the merits of tempered steel, iron and the titanium ore found on Tarnax III. Kol'la's face tightened at the memory of the planet and said nothing when they sat themselves uninvited on either side of Thor on said warrior's bed. Kol'la sitting opposite glared at the intruders. The two men were far from his favourites, for Kol'la thought that Thor's brashness and overconfidence were bad enough without flap-tongued encouragement from the side-lines in the form of Fandral and passively silent agreement in the form of Hogun.

"What were you speaking of so seriously?" laughed Fandral. "You two look as generals do before an army gives battle. Come, are you planning some adventure?"

How he keeps his idiotic optimism is beyond me, Kol'la thought eyes wide with disbelief. It must have something to do with his low intelligence or maybe they put something in Asgard's water...

"Kol'la and I were talking of how we came to be at this place – and how that might affect the search for us."
"Ah," Hogun nodded, calmly. "That is a fair question indeed."
"It was Muspelheim," Fandral said without further ado.
"Muspelheim," repeated Kol'la dryly.
"Muspelheim. You know it? Have you been there?"
"Slow down, Fandral," Hogun chuckled then.
"I have heard of it, of course. And read about it," Kol'la frowned, "but I have never been there."
"It is a hot place," Thor put in then. "A very strange and wild land – and full of fiery creatures who thrive in such an environment. You may not know it - but even now in Asgard few things can provide me much challenge -"
"That, I somehow can believe," Kol'la mumbled.
"- and so I travel many places to find the unjust or the beasts with whom I may do battle. For this purpose, I have traveled far and wide."
"You can say that again," sighed Fandral. "I have worn through six boots on the strength of it. Although we have not traveled everywhere."
"Well," Thor agreed, "not everywhere, but that is my desire: to traverse all Nine Realms and beyond, to show Asgard's might and power and to provide justice for those who deserve my hammer's wrath -"
"Creatures from Muspelheim, for example," Kol'la interjected here with barely concealed disgust at Thor's unrepentant superiority.
"Indeed, dark creatures who prey on travelers - and one day, I will deal with Jotunheim -"
"Oh no," Hogun groaned, rolling his eyes, "here we go."
"Thor is very focused on Jotunheim," Fandral explained further at Kol'la's confused look. "It is true that we cannot trust them -"
"But the war is over," Kol'la replied blankly. "A long time ago."
"Not so long ago, really - and can you really trust a Frost Giant?" Thor laughed heartily. "Indeed not. So when they reveal their true colours, as the savage beasts we know them all to be, I will be waiting. Asgard will be prepared and waiting."

A stark wasteland rose in Kol'la's mind at Thor's words - devastated and empty. The empty Gothahus, the faithless inhabitants driven into empty, mindless fear. The treacherous yet superior Older Brother... the shadowy, unknown forms of parents who had abandoned him a long time ago. All that he knew of his Father was that the Lord King of Jotunheim was tall, for the statue bearing
his father's resemblance had taken damage and the lordly visage of King Laufey had long since crumbled away. Lying, uncaring folk - but no different, he thought, no different than these. And yet, the chasm between the Jotunn and Asgard remains wide and unsurpassable. Kol'la wondered if he should feel sad.

"Muspelheim, Thor, Muspelheim," Hogun interrupted Thor, shaking his friend out of what was clearly a very strong topic for the Prince. "At any rate, I thought it the perfect challenge for the son of Odin –"
"You would," Kol'la snorted, "since you consistently fail to think things through."
"Thor knows what he is doing," Fandral said, defensively.
"Not all the time," Hogun disagreed. "Remember Helheim –"
"That was hardly –"
"Helheim was interesting," grimaced Thor. "Father and Mother did not agree, however –"
"You attacked Helheim?" Kol'la asked, stunned – and also surprised that he could still be surprised by new discoveries of Thor's various levels of stupidity. "Are they not – well – not allies, surely, but neutral citizens of the Nine Realms?"
"It is an army of the undead!" Thor protested, obviously still not wholly repentant about the matter. "Perfect for practice."
"Thor," hissed Kol'la, "The Army of the Undead are not mere snakes to poke at and enjoy for a short time – it is their duty to protect the borders of Death's Kingdom and as such, your little... jaunt... may have caused damage and –"
"He seems to be getting quite worked up over this," Fandral said in awe, noticing how Kol'la's shoulders were already tense. "Your Mother would love him. Let us hope they never meet lest they collude and attempt to hold us back from –"
"Well, that is because as a seithr user, he has less a spirit of adventure and of the warrior and no doubt would be happier occupied with the interests of old men – OW!" Thor broke off as the hard tread of Kol'la's boot met his shin.
"That is a lie – my magicks and workings have saved our lives time and again in the Rings," Kol'la said fiercely. "An idiotic 'auzha such as you would never understand –"
"Yes, yes," Fandral flapped a hand as Thor nursed his shin petulantly.
"And as for Helheim, what souls could have escaped the borders and returned to their homes in a vain attempt to see the ones they loved again?" Kol'la shook his head. "Attacking Helheim? That is a new kind of stupidity, even for you."
"It was stupid," agreed Hogun quietly. "We should not have been there. But at any rate, the Prince and we, as the Warriors Three –"
"And Sif, don't forget her," added Thor.
"And Sif," Hogun sighed, "we have a habit of seeking out quests. As you may have heard."
"Yes," Kol'la said sourly. "The Realms and all that lie beyond sing in praise of it. Foolishness."
"Come now –"
"Be quiet, Fandral," Hogun glared at his blonde friend. "With Volstagg and Sif, we three journeyed to Muspelheim to make battle with such things as the fire drake and lava serpents. It was a quiet part of Muspelheim that we landed on – with the aid of a Court Mage's apprentice – and no inhabitant was in sight, but just as we were on the trail of a fire drake, we came upon some strange beings –"
"Ugly as Helheim."
"Come now –"
"I had heard of them before," Hogun continued, ignoring Fandral and Thor's interjections. "Slavers, we call them – and we attempted to do battle – for the fire drake of course. Yet, in the end, the fire drake scorched Lady Sif and Volstagg took her off and we three fell to the Slavers' might. Therefore, it may depend on how quickly Volstagg may find aide for Sif and how quickly they may find a means of returning home - if Heimdall hasn't already noticed what had happened... Kyr, you know - Mage Flarathir's apprentice who hid our presence from Heimdall and opened the pathway to Muspelheim, is a cautious man and would most likely alert the Guard if we were too long gone.
Otherwise, alarm may not be raised for some time. From now on, I think Asgard will treat the Slavers' might with -" "Might?" Thor scoffed. "It was those strange weapons they held in their hands –" "Superior technology," sniffed Kol'lla, "and superior intelligence. Those can be a form of might as well. Muscled Moron. They capture great creatures all the time – picking up a few youths of Asgard would be no challenge to them –" "I AM PRINCE –"

Kol'lla snorted. Thor lunged forward and there was a breathless moment as the four of them tussled – and accidentally broke some other fighter's bed, which is when things became a little less unfriendly and Kol'lla managed to wriggle out from the Asgardian pile on top of him. Only to turn about and poke at Thor's lower back with mischievous glee. More fighting ensued and after fifteen more minutes resulting in several bruises and a cracked rib on the part of Fandral, they lay back, panting and Kol'lla said impudently:

"Well, then, Prince Thor, the matter is clear then. Your father no doubt had thought you would return and when you did not, he will search for you –" "Heimdall has no doubt found us," Thor said, "then Father will muster the men and wage war on this planet." "So, he will arrive soon." "Yes," Thor glanced at Kol'lla, "I should think so." A pause. "You are worried." "What if he does not come?"
"He will," was the prompt reply. "But... what if he does not come?"
"But he will," Thor repeated blankly.
"Of course he will," Fandral agreed easily, poking at his sore rib with a quiet grunt.

Hogun said nothing, glancing at Kol'lla's hard mouth and cold green eye speculatively. Kol'lla refused to meet the quiet warrior's perceptive eyes and kept his focus on Thor who stared back at him in bewilderment from his seat on the rough floor. Fandral was laughing now at Kol'lla's stupidity, but eventually his lone laughter petered off as he realized that Kol'lla was entirely serious.

"He will come," Thor repeated softly.
"We shall see," Kol'lla sighed, rising then and stretching, enjoying the crack of bone and tight stretch of muscle. Ah. Yes. "We shall see."
"I don't understand," Kol'lla could hear the puzzled quality of Thor's voice as he left the room.
"No, you wouldn't," Hogun agreed. "You wouldn't."

[... but the day came when...]

[... the skies filled with pure, crackling light...]

So distant and yet so close, destruction reigns. Every moment, there is birth and life in this endless cosmos - and Frei'thovee of the Empire of the MahKo'nai found itself once again caught up in eternal dance. Bathed in fire and blood, the planet lay smoking and silent as its warriors lay thickly upon the ground mourned by the women folk and children - and the survivors easily paid the price with the information which the Aesir sought.

The destination of the Nu'Mahvee'sako captained by Thoko and his dare-devil crew. Nu'Mahvee'sako which had borne Lei'satho, Lei'safrei, and Lei'sa'a of the Nu-Run to Sharda'aa.

[... on Sharda'aa, the Planet of Pleasures, Den of Vice and Counterfeit Gold...]
[... when they came to the Shamarxes System...]

[... when Asgard descended...]

Chapter End Notes

Be sure to chat and leave a review! I love hanging with my readers!

Author's Note: There is a sense in the films and other ‘verses that Loki lives and operates very much "under wraps". That is a horse term to say that Loki often fakes failure for other reasons. He pulls his punches physically and metaphorically when it comes to Thor – until he is pushed to the very end. I feel like this Loki, unhindered by filial love, would not be so socially incumbent to pay respect to Thor and as a result can spew his full ire upon Thor.

Update in five days or so.
-KI

Fanart for "Distortions in Time"
Little Loki by TheEverhearted.

by me:
Jotunheim Map
Vaetki and Ulfrbarn
Battlehouse of Shax #1
Battlehouse of Shax #2 - Pits Detail
Battlehouse of Shax #3 - Side Cross-section
Toh the Half-breed and the Golan
Distortions In Time banner
Asgard Map

More to come! (I hope!)
Chapter Notes

Thanks to my awesome reviewers! To: lemomina, Uriko, matchynishi, lotr195, Nebelkind, iBlameGlobalWarming, Kai_Maciel, Danea. Thanks you guys! You rock!

SO WHO WATCHED TOM HIDDLESTON AT HALL H? I YOUTUBED IT TO DEATH! DEATH! AND MY OVARIES DIED! AND MY BRAINS!

AND HOW CAN I WRITE, MR. HIDDLESTON, WHEN YOU DISTRACT ME SO? You and your face and your deep commanding voice and your gorgeousness...
(sigh)

Warning! Slavery! Warning! Angst! Warning!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 28
Gathering Light I

[... Where is magic found –]

[... but here...]

Magic is everywhere. It is in the multitudinous voices of the wind. It is in the chatter of water. It is in the rumble of earth – and the crackle of fire. It is the flashes of lightning and the song of thunder. It is in the roar of a thousand burning suns. It is everything. It is everywhere.

It is Us.

That is what the Mages averred time and again, speaking the Rites to the youths of Jotunheim who could never understand the Truth of Tradition. One day, the younglings would be the future Mages of Jotunheim, but their Office, like the Aldinn Stathr, was empty – and meaningless. Motion without meaning.

However, the magic was still there – faint to the senses and growing fainter still since the removal of the Out-Pouring, the Gap Between What Is and What Is Not, the Kero Fornvetr, the Casket of Ancient Winters. And now – and now – weaker and growing more so by the century, the spirit of Jotunheim struggled on. Heimsrsal was there, but no one could hear her voice for the Sithr Efingi had been stolen away. A double-blow, an unknown double-blow, to Jotunheim.

Yet, Magic is everywhere. What Is and What Is Not – these make up what is seen and what is not seen and all the spaces in between. Even far away on the desolate planet of Sharda'aa, there was a thread easily tapped into, for no place part of the cosmos and What Is can ever be separated from What Is Not.

On Sharda'aa, there is no honour, no respect given to the Powers That Be. It is a matter of utility and
ability, stringently calculated into varying levels as science continued (continues) to attempt full understanding of the Unknowable. A crass attempt, but understandable considering what dangers the cosmos held.

[... and they are many indeed...]

These sorcerers, these would-be magicians dabbled in the lower levels. Within their own rating system, they could only achieve Eno’vee or Eno’yul – and above them, ensconced within their blessed Realm, the Mages of Asgard worked at Eno’ko. Beyond (Eno’ah), the elves stood with Odin Allfather.

Kol'la, the Jotun-in-disguise, the fighting and entertainment slave, knew what his limits were. They had been beaten into him at the hands of the Boss-man and later Shax's Enforcers. From his lofty height of Prince and Warrior Extraordinaire, Thor let Kol'la know how weak he stood and the hopelessness of his situation. *As if I need reminding*, the young man thought sourly. Even now, after another bloody battle within the third week of Thor's captivity, Kol'la's abilities were once again reassessed.

*Even if I were to be freed*, he thought, watching the Magician Suppressor Aga'no tote up the requisite calculations, nodding and shaking his dark-blue-purple head and scratching the bizarre white fur which grew off the tip of his ears and in tufts above his eyes. The Third Madam's eyes were also narrowed. *Even if I were to be freed, would I have the power to fend for myself on this world?*

"His power grows," Aga'no muttered. "Daily. The boy is a natural –"
"And that is why Shax keeps him, despite his effeminate ways and sharp tongue," the Third Madame cut him off, eyeing the dark-haired slave suspiciously.
"It will take longer, at any rate," Aga'no clucked, "this time around. Bleed some of it off – good thing I brought the Atraxia crystals with me today."

Kol'la glared at the two mutinously. *Talking as if I am not there*, he bit down on the vitriol which threatened to spill from his lips. *As if I were... nothing.* When the pudgy Mage finished setting the crystals into their various slots in a square machine at one end of the table, the Third Madame pressed Kol'la's head down onto the table, the better for Aga'no to attach long lines and wires to the box at the opposite end. For a few minutes, he tinkered with the settings and Kol'la squeezed his eyes shut, preparing himself for the usual uncomfortable feelings of pressure which resulted from increased restriction of his magic. *As I were stuffed and inflated*, he thought wryly. *Unable to breathe... but not as bad as the opposite.*

Releasing restrictions was a delicate process and much more painful. There was fire. Burning in the veins, and in unfortunate cases unable to channel the excess built-up energy elsewhere – explosion. Bursting at the seams, the joyous, wonderful light within could tear you apart on the most basic, fundamental level. More powerful mage's self-immolating in this way had taken out entire megablocks and small moons, leaving only shadows of those too close to the blast zone.

Fifteen minutes passed but Kol'la said nothing, ignoring the uncomfortable shooting pains racing up his spine from his unnatural low bow. And then it was done – and he felt more lethargic than usual, which was not surprising judging by the healthy glow of Aga'no's Atraxia crystals. *The tight feeling isn't so bad this time*, Kol'la sighed, keeping his eyes down and away from the stones which held his power. His. Power. *Mine. Stolen like everything else.*

[... this is the way of blasphemy...]

[... this is the hunger of those who carry in the Void in their hearts...]
That night, Kol'la was less inclined to speak. It was obvious now, to him, what he needed to do in order to uphold his bargain with Thor. To get rid of the collar, he thought, I will need a boost. Aga'no is easily Eno'yul. And if his calculations are right, then I am merely a level below him – uncollared. I will need to rise two levels temporarily then, if I am to break free of these bonds set by him.

Kol'la sighed. But to gather that much power is impossible. He steered his mind away from a mental picture of what a devastated mega-block would look like. Steered his mind away to the glorious row of glowing, sparkling stones. Atraxia crystals – not unlike the Healing Stones of Jotunheim, except that these crystals lasted longer, being used for storage and not just for healing or concentration.

If I could place the stones in my staff disguised as decorative jewels, then I would be able to store my energy over time. Channel the power to them. In a matter of days, I will have the requisite amount needed. And then it is a matter of waiting.

There is the matter of gaining the stones... Kol'la fell asleep considering the matter.

[... as the old saying goes...]

[... where the water flows, a path is carved...]

[... the will makes all things possible...]

Over the following days, Kol'la made discreet inquiries and discovered that as the rumours had promised, one of the regular cooks in the slave-fighter canteen was open for negotiations. What Kol'la needed was very particular – and the cook shook his head slowly as he read through Kol'la's specifications.

"I can't get this kind of thing..." he murmured. "Not my level of clearance... but..." The Skrull paused in thought. "I do know someone who might know someone. Let me ask about."

In the end, the other 'someone' did indeed know 'someone' who would cut the crystals – for a price: Kol'la's services. Over the period of the third week of Thor's "stay", Kol'la be-spelled armour and potions, created time-lapse attack spells encased in various objects, and paid for the crystals with other similar, magic-related services.

During the fourth week, news came that his order was ready for delivery – and would be brought by an innocuous dancer from his old workplace.

"A friend visiting a friend," the cook said, "much easier achieved than me attempting to slip you something during mid-day meal."

He winked at Kol'la who rolled his eyes and nodded, mildly annoyed. "Whatever you think best. When will it get here?"

"Tonight – maybe. Hallway Ko'ah. You know the one. My friend will be at the far end."
"And this... courier. How much will they demand in payment for their services?"
"Depends," the cook laughed then. "Payment may not as difficult as you fear, fiery one."

Kol'la scowled at the cook's laughter and mysterious words. The last thing he needed right now was a contest in riddles.

"Now, now, I must go," the Skrull cook flicked a long tongue at Kol'la. "Be patient, Silvertongue. It will come in time."
"Time is something I am short on," Kol'la bit out – and swept off, knowing that the Skrull was
enjoying his discomfiture.

Later on that evening, Kol'la wandered down Hallway Ko'ah, forcing himself to keep a calm pace at the sight of a vague figure not easily seen in the flickering, dim lights of the lower hall. It was rarely frequented and therefore the favoured spot for such illegal transactions as this. And in the small storage rooms along the far end, perfect spots for slaking one's passions. Or so they said. If you believed the staff’s gossip.

Beyond two shelving units, he stopped and eyed the being before him, wondering for a split-second if there had been some mix-up.

She was not very short, but not as tall as he. Her green skin, obviously illusory purple-black hair and wide, glittering eyes pronounced her Skrull. A short skirt and tight top – all in shades of purple and black – revealed her background easily enough: dancer. There was the swaying grace and the collar of an indentured servant hung about her slender neck. Gaudy accessories – a thick silver necklace falling over a plenteous swell of breast, several thick bangles on her wrists and ankles plus a heavily studded belt, spoke of a fair attempt at high fashion. Perhaps, in the end, it was her confidence which spoke volumes. Confidence and a wide smile which spoke of good-will and a modicum of hard-earned happiness.

Contentment. Green eyes widened as they met dark ones. Widened in recognition, for there was no doubting that he knew her. Had known her well – as a friend, some might have said, so long ago. It feels so long ago, Kol'la thought dazedly.

"Kol'la! It is you!" She said, eyes lighting up.

He did not move as she moved forward to draw him into a hug before pulling back to look him up and down.

"Don't tell me that you have forgotten already!"
"Of course not," he replied automatically. "I am just... surprised."
"Now, why is that?" She pouted. "I follow your exploits, you know. We all do. Boss-man is very pleased. You proved him right after all."
"Indeed?" A pause then he smiled. "I am sure he is, Glo-Glo."

Glo-Glo. Dancing girl Number 371 of the zGa Run.

Kol'la smiled.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the length. I'll update sooner! I promise!

Review! It's a great encouragement and helps keep me focussed! (bats eyelashes)

Be sure to chat and let me know what you thot of smexy Hiddlesloki at Hall H!

Ja~!KI

Information on Levels of Mage/Magical Abilities
Level 1 – Eno'sa
Level 2 – Eno'tho – Thanos
Level 3 – Eno'frei
Level 4 – Eno'ah – Elven Mages/Odin
Level 5 – Eno'ko – Asgard/Jotun/Any Other Healthy Realm Mage
Level 6 – Eno'yul – Sharda'aa/Regular Mage
Level 7 – Eno'vee – Uncollared Kol'la
Level 8 – Eno'mah – Collared Kol'la
Level 9 – Eno'lei
Level 10 – Eno'sanai

Numbers (for this quadrant):

0 - nai
1 - sa
2 - tho
3 - frei
4 - ah
5 - ko
6 - yul
7 - vee
8 - mah
9 - lei

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effer
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
Well, I apologize for the short chapter last time. I hope I can make up for it with a bit of a doozy chapter this time around! Thanks to all who are reviewing and favoring and alerting! Particularly a heartfelt thanks to my reviewers who are so awesome and let me know that people want to see more of this and that this isn't a waste of precious lifetime hours!

To: iBlameGlobalWarming, Crazy_Cat_Lady, Danea

And of course, having awesome San Diego Comic Con stuff to see... Nerd HQ and all that... that was amazing! Tumblr is all gaga about it... and I love it.

Warning! Slavery! Warning! Angst! Warning! A SORT OF SEX SCENE! OH MY! Warning!

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 29
Gathering Light II

"It has been a while since we have been able to speak properly," she said drawing closer as his posture relaxed a little.

Glo-Glo had always been perceptive, he thought. A small hand rose to trail its way up his arm to rest on a strong, yet delicate collarbone.

"You have grown."

Kol'la didn't back away, but for a moment, he did not respond. His back stiffened a little again in response to her words and touch, feet placed apart in a strong stance. Kol'la looked down at the woman he had never thought to see again and considered her words. He guessed now, what kind of price he would have to pay. Suppressing his immediate response of amused and slightly mocking laughter (really, their vanity is so predictable and easy to manipulate) – then paused as he considered what he had been initially expecting.

Glo-Glo was a gift – and her unspoken request did not seem such a burden. No. And yet... and yet...

You have grown...

"I have." It wasn't quite a question, yet not quite a statement. "Mmm... you are taller for certain."

He huffed then lightly – a short brief laugh and glanced down, noticing that the lithe dancer was right. Now a good head and a half taller than Glo-glo, Kol'la was able to enjoy the line of muscle that ran down her neck to her shoulders and plentiful bosom. A generous woman, he thought lazily,
"Yes, I suppose I have gained some height," Kol'la agreed mildly. "I am more... mature now, I should think —"

"Ahhhh..." Glo-Glo swayed forward, allowing her weight to rest slightly on him, and her fingers rose to trace his lean muscles up to a well-chiseled jaw. "Very mature, Kol'la." At the slight pressure of painted blue nails, Kol'la's head turned downward and his lips brushed suddenly across the top of her nose. Teasingly. She shuddered at the soft touch. "And I think... there can only be good improvements, knowing you."

"Thank you."

Kol'la's reply was muffled a little as her nose slid along the side of his cheek, cool skin against cool, and her lips met his briefly. Plucked eyebrows over painted eyelids. Eyelids bedecked with small, stick-on jewels and light yellow pencilling, hiding her luminous eyes in ecstasy.

There was nothing but silence at the end of the long, dim hallway – but not true silence. Not empty silence. There was the hum of ancient lighting, the distant clatter of a cleaner's broom and a not-so-distant creak of an occupied bed down the way. There was the rustle of light fabrics moving against his heavier leathers and rough cotton. There was the sound of breath and a stifled moan. There was the slight hiss as his lips trailed across hers again briefly.

The tall young man pulled away then and for a moment, he blinked and then looked down, noticing how different Glo-Glo looked. Her rapid breath caused the tender swell of breasts to rise up and down rather erratically. A long dark tongue ran over reddened, swollen lips and the natural yellow of her eyes were nearly swallowed by the black of her pupils. Kol'la smiled then – a quick smile (what would you think of me now?). To whom was that thought sent, he wondered. He did not know.

"I used to think of you as oto'oa," he admitted, drawing her hand down in his, watching how she held on fiercely, her smaller fingers twining around his longer, thinner ones. "As a big sister —"

Glo-Glo laughed then.

"You were a small boy," she said. "This is different – because we are different. Because we can change. Kol'la," she smiled at him gently. "People can always change – and is that not a beautiful thing?"

He raised his bent head and quirked an eyebrow up at her, giving her the patent 'I'm-a-poor-cute-confused-lil'-boy' look which he had long since perfected for moments such as these. Glo-Glo even laughed more and kissed him on the nose.

Kol'la blushed, nodded and then he said, eyes suddenly sharp, "You brought it with you?"

"Ah, suddenly the businessman, Kol'la," Glo-Glo shook her head. "Well, I deserved it – letting you sucker me in like that. Here it is." The dancer pulled her side-satchel around and unbuckled it, unzipped an inner pocket and then a second pocket inside that one before carefully easing out a velvet bag. It filled the palm of her hand quite easily and she allowed him to take it. "As you ordered. Troaz made it just as you specified – and the payment you sent was adequate."

Deftly, Kol'la opened the black, velvety bag, revealing the stone, cut as he had ordered – glowing green eerily in the dim lighting, flashing an inner power – ready to accept his. If all goes well, he reminded himself. This is a first time. But then, he added philosophically, there is a first time for everything. There were four other smaller stones as well. All of them well-cut and varying shades of green and blue-green.

"You are pleased?"
"Very," he replied, carefully slipping the smaller stones inside to nestle with the large one inside. "I am glad."

"Now there is the question of what you wish for your help in this matter."

Kol'la pocketed the stones away in his own side-satchel and looked back down at Glo-Glo, who smiled up at him again. She had always smiled for him, he remembered suddenly. *Glo-Glo had been the kindest. Why?* He did not know. Perhaps, he would never know. She rose up on her tip-toes and tugging at his neck a little, drew him in for another kiss. Or perhaps he did know... either way, it did not make sense.

*These matters never did have much to do with sense, however,* Kol'la reminded himself and shivered. Memories rose at her tender kiss and when her hands roamed over his shirt and down to his waist, Kol'la couldn't help but think of a mage's wandering hands, the thoughtless groping of drunk customers and those last few terrible weeks in the dark chained to a bed.

This thing – this gentle thing – this soft thing – Kol'la did not understand, but he would do his best. He pulled her to a small adjoining room which branched off the hallway. This was the usual place for secretive liaisons. A cleaning supplies closet complete with an appropriate pull-down bed for any workers exhausted from mucking blood in the infirmary or shat in the bathrooms. It would suffice.

In the half-dark, the room barely lit by a small wall-light, the two tugged off each others' clothing and found their way to the bed, caught in a small frenzy of touching and kissing. There was a fire within Glo-Glo and Kol'la began to catch it as well – the flame within his belly burning brighter with each passing second, with each bestowed touch and kiss – it was so hot and heady – and when he came up for air, the slender slave-boy (*man, he was a man now*) discovered that he had somehow manoeuvred himself on top of her. The *natural way of things*, he supposed, and for a moment, he considered her as he lay there, braced on his elbows and forearms. Her face was now glowing and slightly greener with the infusion of blood. Her lips were bussed and a little slick – and Kol'la wondered what she saw.

Glo-Glo drew back a little and watched him in return. Green fingers rose to run through his shorter, black hair and then to his shoulders now bunching with developed muscle – and then his lean biceps and forearms.

"Kol'la..." Her flatter nose crinkled a little.
"Hm."
"This isn't..." A pause, then she kissed his chin quickly before the experienced dancer pressed on.
"This isn't your... first time, is it?"

Kol'la laughed then, a short, hard, bitter thing. A cutting thing. *So old.* He was so old – that is what he thought some days. *So, so tired and old.*

"No," he finally said. "Boss-man had thought to –"
"That is one way," Glo-Glo's finger pressed on Kol'la's lips gently, silencing him. "I speak of another."
"You mean the art of making love, then." Kol'la frowned. "Glo-Glo, I can create many things but this is –"
"We are not in love," she hastened to assure him, "but that does not mean there is no care... or – or joy. To delight in each other, that is the measure. Do you understand?"
"It's – I have experienced many things and I – I know... how it is done... seen it and I, know the basic rules, er, mechanics," Kol'la mumbled a little incoherently, feeling more inadequate than usual. "What if I cannot –" He could not meet her eyes. "I fear you have chosen the wrong... partner and will receive poor repayment –"
It was difficult to admit. She did not laugh and it helped. Gentle hands soothed tense back muscles as Glo-Glo's eyes caught his again in reassurance.

"No, Kol'la," she kissed him then on lips and cocked her head as if considering him. The light in her eyes was warm as if she had found some kind of treasure within the fineness of his pale flesh – as if she sensed the hidden power beneath. "No, cho'ai." A whisper in his ear and her long tongue darted out to run along the edge of a thin lobe, enjoying the catch of breath in response and the quivering of muscles underneath her palms. "It is my... delight... and honour."

And she drew him down.

[... here...]

[... another kind of magic is born...]

At some point, Kol'la began to gain an inkling of what Glo-Glo had meant. It was a different kind of energy and nothing like the fire and power of magic running through his veins. Not the same at all, he thought wildly at one point. At a soft murmur of instruction, Kol'la lowered his lips and discovered yet another new thing – happiness in the expression of another's rapture.

He would never forget this. Never forget...

[... birthed not out of the fires of a thousand suns...]

[... but the flames of two hearts meeting...]

They said nothing for a long time afterwards. Soft breath and a long embrace was all the communion they needed. At some point, the two fell asleep.

-0-0-0-

After Glo-Glo left out the back staff door, thanks to a smiling, winking cook who poked Kol'la and insinuated a variety of things (much to Kol'la's disgust), the young slave darted up to the dorm and slipped in silently. Stashing his treasure underneath his pillow, Kol'la laid down and stared up into the darkness, unable to see the ceiling, unable to see anything really. For a moment, all he could see was Glo-Glo's flushed face and glittering eyes. The warmth of Glo-Glo's arms about him.

Snorting in disgust, the Jotun-in-disguise rolled onto his side and tried to wrestle his thoughts back into submission. He pondered the Atraxia crystals behind his head and how he would fit them into his preferred weapon of choice – the spear. Kol'la considered the shape and size and then, after a moment, he took out the largest stone and channelled some magic into it as an experiment. It was easier done than he had thought - and his collar did not raise any kind of warning. As he had expected.

When the waking alarm bell rang, Kol'la was ready. The crystals were stashed in his side-satchel which he toted with him all day most of the time – the only secure location for them at the moment. Ignoring Thor and the others' jibes and guesses as to why he had risked punishment (something Kol'la rarely did without much forethought) and crept out after curfew, the magic user instead focused on getting to his spear and setting up the modifications as necessary.

He had much work to do.

[... they were coming...]
It was Master Shax. Kol'la stopped obediently and looked at Shax's chin – the safest place to stare without looking cowed. Watching the alien's slit mouth move, Kol'la imagined blowing the wealthy owner's head off with a particularly vicious blast of magic, or watching it flattening beneath the legendary Mjolnir. The mental exercise helped Kol'la keep his temper even as he listened to the rest of his master's words.

"I noticed you weren't in your bed last night."
"Ah –"
"No need to deny it - Hawa'o double-checked. Hm. Well, frankly, 'it's about time' is what I thought, initially," Master Shax cuffed his slave not unkindly. "I was beginning to wonder."

Kol'la did not reply.

"Was she worth it?"

*Cool skin, supple flesh, amazing flexibility and the experience of many decades. A kind heart, a contented spirit, a generous soul.* Kol'la had no desire to speak of such things to a man with a heart of coinage.

"Yes, sir." Kol'la replied dutifully, allowing himself to blush a little.
"Hm, well, just make certain it doesn't become something more – you know, what I am talking about. Regulation and all."
"Yes, sir."

*No romance.* Kol'la had told her that he was not able to make love, and that was still true in a way. For the first time, he felt regret, felt a hole where something was missing.

"Although, if it does become something regular, let me know who it is," grunted Shax. "I am sure your offspring would be inherit some of your better qualities as well."

Kol'la's skin crawled. A sudden urge to vomit overwhelmed him, but he merely nodded and, being released from Shax with a peremptory wave of the hand, the young Jotun moved onward to the training room. However, suddenly he had no stomach for working magic.

... your offspring, Shax had said...

*As if I would inflict this life on another being.* Kol'la vowed to himself, remembering Mayultha. *Never.* Then he paused and remembered the cruel words of the Jotunn youth from long ago.

... they are deformed? That they are even unable to bear children...
... The last thing Jotunheim needs is some kind of weakling breed leeching from its soil...
... Have you seen the others with child? The size of a Jotun babe would split its body in two...
... Forget the act of getting with child...

Kol'la paused, leaned back against another grey wall and stared up at the ceiling, trying to forget the memory – but it would not stop replaying in his mind. *They had never believed that I would be able to sire children,* he thought. *I may never be able to sire children.*

*It does not matter,* he told himself. *It does not matter it does not matter it does not matter...*

Later on that evening in the training gym, when Thor and Fandral teased Kol'la about the rumoured
girl he had spent the night with, Kol'la snapped back, said a few choice words and got himself well beaten for it. As Thor trounced him on the mats, ending up with sitting on Kol'la's chest until he cried 'forfeit', the only thing the young Jotun could think of was the family he would never have, the children he would never hold. Not unless he was willing to inflict his runt-ish life on another Jotun babe, and should they be half-breeds -

- Toh's dark eyes -

- the spear descended -

And should they be half-breeds, he thought, what kind of monsters would they become then? Something savage as my people are considered or feral and deranged as Toh? Kol'la felt the weight ease off his chest and Thor was calling his name as if from far away, concern now lacing his usual booming voice.

... your offspring would inherit some of your better qualities as well, Shax had said...

He would never know.

Chapter End Notes

Wow. Sudden sex scene and sudden angst... Depressing. On the other hand, plot is moving along! Odin is on his way, we know, and it seems like Loki and Thor will be ready for when he comes. When he comes.

I'm going on a trip, kinda business trip, for about 5 days, so my next update will be around this time next week. Or so. Maybe next Wednesday. I will be updating them a longer intervals since the school year will be starting up again. Once a week - and if I write a short chapter, twice.

Thanks a ton for tuning in!
Please review and let me know what you think!-KI

Information on Levels of Mage/Magical Abilities

Level 1 – Eno'sa (highest)
Level 2 – Eno'tho – Thanos
Level 3 – Eno'frei
Level 4 – Eno'ah – Elven Mages/ Odin
Level 5 – Eno'ko – Asgard/Jotun/Any Other Healthy Realm Mage
Level 6 – Eno'yul – Sharda'aa/Regular Mage
Level 7 – Eno'veec – Uncollared Kol'la
Level 8 – Eno'mah – Collared Kol'la
Level 9 – Eno'le'i
Level 10 – Eno'sanai (lowest)

Numbers (for this quadrant):

0 - nai
1 - sa
2 - tho
3 - frei
4 - ah
5 - ko
6 - yul
7 - vee
8 - mah
9 - lei

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iiano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effer
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
Chapter Notes

Back from my trip! I went to an anime convention in Malaysia! It just happened to be running and I was able to drift and take pictures! It was soooo awesome! I love cosplay.

Thanks to all my lovely reviewers old and new! You are the awesome - Kai_Maciel, iBlameGlobalWarming, lemomina, lotr195, Crazy_Cat_Lady, Danea, SnakeCharmed79, Dragonanzar! You guys have mentioned some interesting things and be sure to check out author's notes at the end where I'll discuss some things that came up over the last couple of chapters or so. XD

Warning! Slavery! Warning! Angst! Warning! OH MY! Warning!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 30
Sun's Ascension I

[... are you ready?]

[... the drums of war are beating...]

There was no warning: no omens to be read for the fate of Sharda'aa, the Planet of Pleasures, Den of Vice and Counterfeit Gold, no klaxons to be heard, no bell to be rung, no premonition to rouse them from the illusions of their world.

[... they will never wake...]

One minute, the perpetually grey-black skies of Sharda'aa showed the usual long traffic lines of hover-cars and shuttles. Above in the higher stratospheres, smaller spaceships zoomed about and beyond, hanging in closer orbit, the eternal debris of space garbage, larger space-cruisers and freighters. Further out, three pale moons hung – on most nights unseen by those below, unless the eternal smog thinned a little – and lesser man-made satellites with high-powered signalling stations for the holocam broadcasts.

One minute – business as usual.

[... the skies of Sharda'aa are filled with ships and waste and rock and metallic moons...]

[... the skies of Sharda'aa are filled with Nothing...]

[... and empty winds without a Voice whistle through the crevices of brick and stone and metal and glass...]

The next minute, there was the roar of a thousand waterfalls, the crackle of millions of volts, the cry
of countless voices – it was the Bifrost, ripping its brilliant multi-coloured path through time and space. Ripping through the atmosphere of Sharda’aa. It hit the surface of a megablock's roof in the northern quadrant of the planet with reverberating pressure. Then, just as quickly, it disappeared, leaving behind it an increased wind, whipped up clouds and two large companies of Aesir. Fifty tall, muscular, clear-skinned, bright eyed warriors.

[... they came...]

No sooner had the Bifrost disappeared, several security alarms began to ring loudly, but it was too late. Already the surge had begun again with greater winds rising and the clouds gathering as the Bifrost disturbed the planet's atmosphere a second time, releasing another two companies of warriors further down the megablock's flat roof-top.

[... without warning...]

Sirens wailed and alarms rang out. Security details and various warriors poured out of the surrounding buildings, hopping onto their hover-cars, shuttles or aero-scooters as coordinates flashed across various screens, showing where the warriors had landed. Another flash of the Bifrost. More Aesir.

Civilians on foot who traversed the flat megablock paths on their way to work or leisure fanned out, diving towards the lifts in a massive effort to get off the higher levels and further down toward relative safety. Womenfolk yelling, children screaming, men hollering – warriors shoving their way out of the lifts only to meet their death almost instantly thanks to arrows, throwing knives and blades.

The roofs of the megablocks were now vast empty deserts of flat concrete only covered by the dark-clad, blaster-armed planet security and the variously decked free-lance warriors and indentured fighters who were allowed to roam the planet for hire. This moment, however, was not a matter of entertainment for across from them faced the strong, rowdy, confident companies of Aesir warriors.

This was war.

[... suddenly...]

[... they came...]

[... without warning...]

[... they will never wake...]

Unstoppable, the Bifrost opened, closed, opened and closed again, leaving behind even more of the tall, brawny, blond-haired race known (and feared) as the Aesir. In the centre of one particularly regal looking group, an older man bearing a crown stood, surrounded by generals and other scholarly-looking folk. Already, the Aesir had taken up positions about him, radiating outward, fearless eyes facing outward, weapons at the ready.

For a moment, no one moved – and then on the far side, heads turned and feet shifted as three warriors made their way toward the tall, regal King, dragging along a weedy-looking, un-shaven individual. With distaste, they threw the babbling half-breed before their lord and nodded, leaving the King with his top-ranking officials.

"An idiot," the battle-hardened General Tyr spat. "That is all they can find these days. Witless creatures, addled by their herbs and toxins."

"Peace, Tyr," Odin Allfather smiled down at the trembling green-yellow scaled humanoid. "Addled,
 maybe but every bit of news will aid us.
"I will question him," Mage Flarathir stepped boldly forward. "The bite of a soldier may strike fear
 too deeply in such a weak one's heart. We would not wish for it to pass on before it tells us what it
 may."
"And the tender caress of would-be men such as you—"
"Peace, Tyr," Odin repeated, this time his voice a tad bit harsh. "Ask if he has heard of Captain
 Thoko and his ship and his crew and his... cargo."
"Worm," Mage Flarathir tipped his head and two soldiers raised the alien to his feet roughly. "What
 is your name?"
"K-K-Krav."

The blow came swiftly.

"Show some kind of respect to your superiors, worm."
"Ah... ah..." The green-yellow half-breed Skrull bowed then and licked his lips, eyeing the other
 lords and the man whom everyone bowed to. Surely it was not Allfather himself come to Sharda'aa?
"Your... Lordships?" He hazarded. "I am... I have never..."
"You will address me as Your Honour." A pause, and Krav nodded. Then Mage Flarathir continued.
"We are on a quest to discover the whereabouts of this man, and with this, the Mage flicked open a
 wide picture bearing the likeness of a Slaver. Below, there was another image of a Slaver's ship.
"Captain Thoko and his ship Nu'Mahvee'sako. Have you any knowledge of this being?"
"It is a – a – a – a large planet, Your Lordships and, uh, Your Honours, sirs, Honour, uh – ah – but –
 but – butbutbut," Krav twitched then and nearly prostrated himself as everyone about him ominously
 tensed. "But I do know a way to find out – we could – I mean, Your Lordships, uh, Your Honours
 could – I could – there is the Air Controller Offices who would know –"
"And how to find this Office?"
"Well – on this – on my, uh ah, here..." With that, Krav scrabbled into his pocket and drew out a
 small hand-held pad and flipped through the small screen with his quivering fingers before finding
 the number he needed. "I can – if I may – if your Lordships – that is –"
"Speak with them."
"Right – right – very well – uh ah – let's see..." Krav twitched again and began his call.

-0-0-0-

It was about 28:45 SST when Sharda'aa Air Controller Offices got a panicked call from Krav. Given
that he was speaking for the ruler of the Realm Eternal, he was transferred immediately to the "Big
Woman Herself" - a pale-skinned, politically-savvy female Shi'ar going by the name Lisha'o Cormo.
Within moments, she had a reply for the invading Aesir while simultaneously sending out a warning
 to the Planet Governor (an equally politically-savvy Skrull by the name of Jylla) that this concerned a
 shipment of three Aesir.

Captain Thoko and the Nu'Mahvee'sako had unfortunately left Sharda'aa only three weeks ago.
However, there was good news – the three, er, captives had been left on Sharda'aa and were even
 now being located for the Aesir.

Krav, the udjioo junkie, had moved beyond 'this is merely a bad trip' to 'this is reality and the entirety
of this planet's well-being depends upon my non-existent diplomatic skills' – which made him six
times as jittery. By the time the designation for the three slaves, er, captives were unearthed in the
 ever-capacious files of the International Employment Bureau, the half-Skrull was literally vibrating.
No one had shot each other yet – but if the missing Aesir are not located...

Krav felt ill.
"From now on," Mage Flarathir stepped back to allow Krav to half-faint against the metal struts of an aerial tower, "I think these... people... will think twice before accepting trade of our kind."

"Indeed," the Allfather shook his head, blue eye hard and yet sorrowful. "It is unfortunate that this kind of thing should encroach upon our borders." He turned. "And they developed such abilities as to hide our own from us. Worrying, think you not?"

"Yes," the High-Mage Agaeti moved to the Allfather's side reassuringly, "but no longer. Our message to the Slavers was clearly received – and it will only be matter of time before our magicks and workings and their... removal of the magic barriers will allow Heimdall to see as our Prince as he ought."

"And perhaps, this Krav, this Daughter of Cormo will bring him to us before then," Odin smiled grimly. "It would be prudent for them to make haste."

"We have given them but a short time, your Highness," Mage Agaeti replied calmly, "but I feel that they will meet our demands. See, Krav has heard some news."

With that, the generals and mages, the Allfather and the junkie Krav gathered to hear the news.

The Allfather's son (Prince Thor himself!) - and Krav knew better than to question the Aesir's veracity on this matter - apparently, was apparently stashed away in a mega-block a half an hour over to the west. Sending a good company of scouts and foot soldiers in that direction, Odin made camp on the megablock upon which they now rested. Paying no heed to the growing number of opposing warriors (a mixed crowd of blood-thirsty volunteers, criminals, Enforcers and actual Planet Security officials), the rest of the camp set up an orderly watch, commandeered a goodly row of seats and a few tables, erected a neat array of tents and then began to, more or less, make themselves more comfortable.

Several curious (and slightly foolhardy) denizens of Sharda'aa passed by or approached the golden Aesir, taking images of the tall, muscled warriors on strange metallic devices. The women in particular sidled up with easy grins and attempted to make small talk. However, a certain grimness hung in the air and the warriors smiled broadly but made no move from their allotted posts.

Yes, the Aesir were definitely on the alert.

A half hour later, the Bifrost opened again leaving behind a tall, lithe, dark-haired girl who looked excited – and announced that she bore information from Heimdall himself. Within moments, she was escorted into the King's presence and paying homage by a formal kneeling stance with a fist on her heart, the beautiful warrior princess (Krav supposed that was what she must have been, she was so gorgeous and terrifying) relayed the message given to her.

"Speak, Sif," Odin nodded easing back in his high-backed, padded chair. "What news from Heimdall?"

"Heimdall's eyes have penetrated the barriers of the Mahko'nai, your Highness," Sif nodded and added tersely. "Their shields have lowered as per the treaty and her Highness the Queen is currently overseeing the return of the Emperor's sons and the other hostages." She paused. "Heimdall has told me that Thor – that the Prince – he is currently imprisoned several levels down in a place that is known as..." And here she repeated the words dutifully but not fluently as the words did not seem right to her - "The Battle-House of Shax."

"The Battle-House of Shax!" Krav sighed with relief. "I – I – I know that! That I know! I mean –
I've been there once or twice and you know what – yes – yes – yesyesyes – now you mention but – but, uh, but I've not been there recently – busy you know and what with -" Krav caught sight of the Mage's lowering gazes and Odin's stony look. "Right – uh – I did hear tell of some mighty warrior there with blonde hair as golden as the sun and blue eyes like Midgard's sky. Rumours, I thought, but perhaps –"

"You know where this place is?" Odin asked, beckoning several messengers over with a peremptory finger. "You would be able to lead us to it?"

"Yes, yes, of course, absolutely."

"Our reward will be great, if you do not lead us astray," Odin smiled a small smile then, but it was still unnerving to the junkie. His blue eyes fell heavily on Krav and for a moment, Krav felt like there was a planet lowering down on his shoulders. "And should you attempt to deceive us..."

"No no nononono," Krav babbled, wondering if this would be the first time he would be caught sweating. "I, uh, no deception here – come come –" And he twitched and scuttled off, followed by the girl called Sif and two messengers who sent off hawks, no doubt bearing messages to the companies out scouting, and they were off.

[... the planet drew its breath...]

[... perhaps...]

The Battle-House of Shax, according to Krav's pad was three megablocks to the north and west, which meant a good half an hour of running. At one point, the slender, unfit alien found himself slung over the back of one of the Aesir warriors. Part of him wished it could have been the girl, part of him was glad it wasn't. He would never be able to face his friends dirt-side again.

Then, the megablock was in sight and Krav nearly sobbed in relief – and then froze as a massive explosion ripped through the roof, blowing concrete and metal and plastic and glass sky high in a massive plume of black. The companies, converging on the megablock paused as smoke drifted and hung in the air ominously – as a wild wailing of something metallic filled the air. An alarm of some sort. Various customers who had not left for the safety of the lower levels were straggling out on catwalks and ramps, coughing and yelling.

For a moment, dread filled Krav's heart and then he saw it – a hulking silhouette surrounded by three others. A glimpse of gold hair and a broad sword.

[... Sharda'aa would be blessed with Asgardian mercy...]

[... to live to die another day...]

[... yes, one day...]

One day, Sharda'aa will burn with the fires of unrest and war and slowly give way to the hunger of the Void.

But this is not that day.

Chapter End Notes

Annddd... how is Thor? Where is Kol'la? Dun dun dun...

Author's Note 1 - On Loki and His Thoughts On His Kids
One thing to be wary of is the author's power to present only one point of view on information. Loki is not infallible - and his ideas about his kids may not be correct. They may be. In this fic, Loki will be biologically able to have kids - as in sire them and bear them. He will also be able to procreate with certain other humanoid species (ie. Jotunn, humans, Aesir, elves). Whether he will successfully have a long-term relationship (much less have kids) remains to be seen. My encouragement to readers is to think critically and read between the lines in regards to any character sharing an opinion. LOL. I like to mess with you guys! XD

Author's Note 2 - On Loki and Glo-Glo

There is a possible spectrum of approach to Loki and Glo-Glo's relationship. You may read it however you like - but I'd like to point out the possibilities for interpreting the relationship and my personal point of view as an author. On one end (point A) is a very cynical reading of the pairing - they are both using each other. Glo-Glo wants sex with a hot, cute, new celebrity and Loki wants his stuff. On the other end (point B), they are in love with each other. My personal opinion lies somewhere in between - which is, IMO, sad and poignant without being depressing. That is, Glo-Glo is NOT Loki's choice - but neither is she a burden. Against his expectations, she gives him a gift - a positive memory to hold on to and a sense of getting back on the horse (as it were) for sex. HOWEVER! This is not love, as Loki repeated. So don't expect a Loki/Glo-Glo ending. LOL.

Thank you for reading~!
Thank you for reviewing~! (I'd love it if you did~~~!)
See you on... Saturday or Sunday or something. XD
-KI

Numbers (for this quadrant):

0 - nai
1 - sa
2 - tho
3 - frei
4 - ah
5 - ko
6 - yul
7 - vee
8 - mah
9 - lei

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effers
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
THANK YOU GUYS FOR REVIEWING! SO AWESOME - AND ENCOURAGING!

A big shoutout to: raye, Nebelkind, miravisu, Kai_Maciel, Ophite, lemomina, Sinisterf, Danea!

In other news... THE THOR 2 TRAILER IS TOTALLY AWESOME! I HAVE TUMBLED IT TO DEATH! LOKI'S EYES ARE SO GREEN! HE IS SO AWESOME! HIS SMILE! HIS EYES! HIS MAGIC! HIS FACE!

HIS FACE!

*spasms and flails and dies*
*ded*

Warning! Slavery! Warning! Angst! Warning! OH MY! Warning!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 31
Sun's Ascension II

Thor was in the middles of putting a young insect-humanoid hybrid Ugaro Enforcer, known as Ko'en of the Southern Gates, into a rather embarrassing headlock when the first alarm rang out – barely heard beneath the usual rhythmic, pulsing dance music, screaming spectators and boisterous announcers who hadn't stopped talking. Kol'la, a few paces away, turned his head, caught Thor's eye, nodded, flipped and easily turned his opponent, knocking the poor, young Kree off her feet and flinging her to the hard-packed dirt. Thor sighed.

Once again, he toys with his prey, Thor thought, eyeing his sneaky shieldmate. Kol'la always enjoys letting them think they have won. The blonde warrior winced as Kol'la coolly brought his heavily spiked boot down on his opponent's sternum, jamming the metal breastplate downward in a rather painful way. A vicious, underhanded way to fight – and entirely without honour.

Yet another part of him, sounding much like Kol'la added, but it is effective.

"Ah... now... Exon," Kol'la sauntered over easily, a smirk on his face. His tall, bejeweled spear glittered dangerously – a wicked thing like its incorrigible, heartless owner. It was made of dark metal – with various coils engraved into it – designs of sea serpents and magic runes to entrance its uses. Near the keen blade, which curved gracefully at the top, four gems of varying shapes and sizes. A slender weapon – yet, Thor knew, strong and able to strike from up close and also from far away. The bottom came to rest before Thor and Kol'la peered down at the blonde warrior with a small arrogant smile.
"You do realize this battle was to submission – not death, right... Exon?"
"Or course," Thor replied with a frown. "I would not forget -"
"Well," Kol'la shifted onto one foot, a fist on leather clad hip. "I often wonder how you keep any kind of information in that vacuous mind of yours. It is a veritable miracle."
"Now, Kol'la -"
"And it is a necessary question," Kol'la continued on ignoring and running over Thor's objection, "since you appear to be bringing Ko'en to an unglorious end. Strangulation. Did the warrior's code transform during the interval of this hour, I wonder. Not that it matters what I think –"

Thor glanced down and realized with a start that the young Ugaro was wildly flailing now. Easing back, Thor let his now very defeated opponent fall forward, gasping 'forfeit! Forfeit!'

"I apologize – " Thor paused, scratching his head as he eyed the coughing Enforcer. "Kol'la says I do not know my own strength."
"Indeed," Kol'la interjected repressively.
"- but it is indeed difficult to remember in the heat of battle –"
"An alarm sounded – ah –" Kol'la sighed, eased back, hands raised disarmingly as the security detail for Ring Two swarmed in. "We will come along – No -"

His calming words were cut off as the guards jerked the beaten Ugaro and wounded Kree to their feet and dragged them off through one grill passage way. A slight pause and then other guards from the second set of doors poured in and uneasily prodded the two victorious fighters into the dim hallway which led to various rooms underneath the stadium. Usually, there was a cool off period in one of the side rooms. Armour was divested, weapons were "locked" away (but easily enough retrieved Kol'la knew, especially for any self-respecting Mage) and then there was a half hour of drinking water and taking refreshments before heading back upstairs to meet the excited masses who had cheered them on (or booed them).

During such events, Thor's easy-going, come-what-may nature and Kol'la soothing, yet sharp and witty silvertongue garnered much attention – to their competing warriors' dismay and Shax's delight. The hearts of the crowd was the heart of coins.

Today, however, it was different.

_Something has happened, that much is certain_, Thor thought as he allowed himself to be herded through the short halls to waiting elevators and then downwards to a waiting High-Security facility room in which stood a rather puzzled Fandral and Hogun, dressed casually for a night of servicing tables.

"What happened?" Fandral asked, blue eyes flashing with worry. He scratched nervously at his weedy attempt of a goatee. "You did not kill someone, Thor, did you?" He turned to Hogun and shook his head. "He never did know his own strength."
"Or know restraint," Hogun shrugged.
"Same difference, do you not think?" Fandral rolled his eyes at his monosyllabic friend. "Always splitting hairs, Hogun."

Kol'la turned and raised an eyebrow meaningfully at Thor who laughed sheepishly in confession.

"Something happened," Thor shook his head. "What I know not. I merely put Ko'en into a particular hand-fast hold -"
"A smothering one – you nearly killed him."
"So speaks the man who broke the breastbone of a woman needlessly!" Thor glared at Kol'la. "No honour as usual."
"Ha. She is no more woman than I am," snorted Kol'la. "And we are slaves, remember? Who speaks
of the honour of slaves?" A pause, then he answered himself bitterly. "Only fools."

Hogun stared at Kol'la thoughtfully and stepped on Fandral's toes hard just as the vivacious blonde was about to give the usual quick rebuttal to Kol'la's quiet cynicism. It was the usual game between the two and Hogun had no time for it. Not today.

Thor shook his head, "I am no slave -"
"Oh, sorry, I do apologize," Kol'la snorted. "I must be faint from battle for I thought I saw a collar on you and a prison around you. My mistake."
"I am no slave," Thor repeated mulishly, fingering his collar and then paused. Stopped. Cocked his head and eyed his friend – the pale-skin, dark-haired, green-eyed young man he now counted as a shield mate.

*All his life, no doubt, he has belonged to someone – but Kol'la does not speak of his past. And his eyes...* Thor did not know what to call it. Instinct however told him that behind Kol'la's cool gaze there was only pain.

"I am no slave – and neither," Thor sighed, stepping forward to grab Kol'la's shoulder reassuringly. "And neither are you."

---

... I am no slave – and neither are you...

... neither are you...

For a moment, Kol'la did not move, allowing the weight of Thor's large, warm hand to steady him, almost calming him down and Kol'la bridled at the thought. I am no beast to be tamed by such simple, trite words - With that, Kol'la moved away, shrugging off Thor's hand and words.

"At any rate, the alarm was not due to Thor and his usual foolishness," Kol'la switched the subject. "Not us. This time," he added darkly.
"They did not even let you undress," Fandral mused. "Nor did they remove your weapons!"
"Did not the Madames at least lock away your weapons?" Hogun gestured at Thor's blade still clutched in his fist.
"This is most unusual," Thor agreed.
"I believe we covered that already," Kol'la replied dryly. "Glad to see you catching up."
"Has this happened before?" Hogun interjected quickly before another flying battle spouted between Kol'la and the other two.
"Hm, yes," Kol'la nodded, looking speculatively toward the ceiling. "there was that one time a mage detonated two megablocks away..." A pause. "And there was a leak that needed to be 'locked down' – a radiation leak – not that your kind would be worried about such small things like radiation," Kol'la went on with no small amount of sarcasm lacing his words. "Hm... and there was that other time a fiber-fusion cable failed and there was no electricity for half an hour. That was next door – I mean, the megablock to the south. I was locked into the dorms with the rest for three hours... oh... and that time two Kree went mad with battle-rage and there was a disturbance thanks to some visiting Chitauri – two clubs down. I was on the dance stage when blaster fire erupted across the street..."

Kol'la trailed off at Fandral's, Hogun's and Thor's blank expressions and resisted the urge to smack them on the head.

"Did they ever bundle you into this prison even with your armour and -"
"No," Kol'la cut Thor off. "But that is under -"
"Wait, wait," Fandral burst out. "Then something very dangerous must have happened – perhaps an invasion -"
"Hm, yes, you could call it an invasion," Kol'la agreed calmly. "It is time."
"Sorry, pardon?" Thor blinked.

Hogun's eyebrows rose and a small smile formed on his lips as he realized what Kol'la had been holding back on them. In response to Thor's question, Kol'la sighed, shook his head and glanced at his fighting partner. An eyebrow twitched with annoyance as he thumped his spear's end rather heavily on the concrete flooring.

"Seriously, Thor, you were there – the announcers were mentioning sightings."
"I did not hear them because you were talking on and on."
"You have ears and they can work for a variety of purposes, can they not? I swear, Thor."
"And if I do not pay attention to you."
"One track mind, I see."
"Sightings of what?" Hogun asked, realizing that his hard-earned patience was slipping from his grasp.
"Aesir."
"Why did you not say so before?" Fandral's exasperated exclamation clashed with Thor's "Father has come!"

The husky young warrior's face lit up immediately and Kol'la's face soured in response.

"As I said he would. Admit it, Kol'la, I was right."
"You were right," Kol'la admitted grudgingly.
"And we did not have to wait so long!"
"Indeed."
"Come now, Kol'la. Why the long face?" Thor's arms widened and his face split with a great smile.
"This is your chance to come to Asgard and taste the sweet delights of freedom! Quests! Honourable combat!"
"Fresh fruits and vegetables," Hogun added.
"Beautiful maids," Fandral sighed dreamily. "Enough to whet any man's appetite."
"Yes! Eating! Drinking! Feasts which last all night long! Wenching! A glorious life of."
"I am to go with you to Asgard?" Kol'la asked, green eyes carefully blank.
"Of course," Thor drew back, disconcerted. "I thought you wanted to come. Where else do you have to go?"

An awkward pause ensued and Hogun grimaced, rubbing his eyes. Kol'la's face hardened in response as he contemplated Thor's thoughtless words.

Where do you have to go?

That familiar ache spread throughout his chest – the hurt he had lived with so long it was as natural to him as the air he breathed. And yet, and yet, it was as if the knife of Truth could still twist itself deeper within Kol'la's dead heart and give him grief.

Where do you have to go?

*He is right, Kol'la. There is nothing for you on Sharda'aa... and only the wilderness of Jotunheim waits for you if you wished... but on Asgard, the Glorious Realm Eternal – there is much knowledge and magic to learn. And this offer comes freely from the Prince himself. Kol'la hesitated. Not that he may keep his promise, such is the way of those in power. Still...*

With that thought, Kol'la's right hand rose to his collar, pressing his long slender fingers along it in a
row while his left hand clasped the staff tightly. Closing his eyes and ignoring the questions which spewed out of his comrade's, the young mage inhaled – exhaled –

Inhaled.

Air and power and memory and life.

Exhaled.

Power tenfold – running through his staff and his arm, feeding into and growing with the other energies about him. He could feel it – the additional power he had stored over time and everything he could use within and without himself. So much power – Kol'la could taste it on his tongue and feel it expand within his lungs. It burst outward in every direction, barely controllable, a mighty avalanche roaring down a mountain, a reckless river plunging over a waterfall to its new path miles below, a brilliant comet burning its way through the Void itself.

Attempting to collar it, bridle it seemed nearly an impossible thing, but Kol'la –

Inhaled.

Exhaled.

- rode the storm, bursting through his layers of power to a new level of understanding and sight. Ah – what heady release it was – no longer there in body and yet feeling so one with his world.

Inhaled.

Exhaled.

All those years in the dark, dim light of Tarnax and among the gaudy delights of Poison Paradise and wrecking havoc in the training halls of the Battle-House. I was right, he thought, laughter slipping out – wild and dark and free. I was right, the world is so much bigger outside and inside than I knew. Blinkered and bridled, but certain there was more – so much more –

And Kol'la knew that Asgard would have to be – must be the next place for him –

He could not go back. Breaking free and soaring above his plateau, power vibrating through him, Kol'la was certain his destiny would not be bound to some lower kind of pursuit.

Inhaled.

Exhaled.

It hummed within him now and bursting out and up, the green magic poured from his fingertips engulfing the collar, overwhelming the inlaid sorcery within. With an ominous cracking, snapping sound, the rune-engraved metal blew apart in four pieces. As the rest of Kol'la's natural magic began to return, the young mage began to pant as he attempted to bring the rest of his burgeoning magic back into control.

The spear, now emptied of its hidden prize, fell out of his grasp and clattered to the ground. Kol'la opened his eyes, raised his hand and touched Thor's collar. His eyes were nothing natural now – a living green flame and when his mouth opened the usually soft voice seemed even more ominous than usual. Before Thor could say anything a shock of energy and magic ran through his collar, overriding the circuits and inlaid magical charms, burning away the runes right off the metal and blasting it apart.
Fandral and Hogun were similarly released – but just as Fandral was about to say something about getting the door open, Kol'la raised his hand upwards. A short verbal command issued from pale lips, his right hand formed a sigil and a beam of energy blasted upward, destroying the ceiling.

"Very well," Fandral nodded, stunned. "That works."
"Indeed," Hogun said dryly.
"Impressive trickery," Thor smiled at Kol'la. "Ah, not a trick, I know. Perhaps we should leave now – since I have my sword with me and daggers."

Kol'la picked up his spear and extended his hand.

"Hold on tightly to my arm," he said. "It has been a long time since I attempted this – and never with companions."

Unhesitatingly, Thor took hold of Kol'la's thin arm. After a moment and a glare from Kol'la's flaming green eyes, Hogun and Fandral also took hold. Then they were gone. Barely one second passed before all four found themselves six floors above in Shax's office, where the stunned businessman sat, clearly in the middle of a comm call. Everyone froze – but Shax moved first, hand darting out to press his security button – Thor ran forward to the door and batted down the hulking guards who hustled in, allowing Hogun and Fandral to seize the fallen guard's weapons. Kol'la loomed over Shax with an impish smile.

"Well, Master Shax," he said politely, fingers running along the edge of the fine, imported wood. "I am afraid that this is goodbye -"
"Kol'la -"
"Hush," Kol'la laughed then, mockingly. "Do not ruin your moment with something so pitiful as begging."
"I do not beg," Shax replied equally calm.
"You should." Kol'la's smile was wide and wolfish and sharp as glass. "You should."

The ensuing explosion took the roof off.

[... there are some things which, once lost, can never be found...]

[... some things that can never be forgiven...]

"Speaking of showing no restraint," Thor sighed, kicking away some rubble and helping a steadily swearing Fandral to his feet.
"We needed access to the roof -" Kol'la pointed upward.

He easily leaped onto the desk and jumped up, snagged a crumbling edge of roof and a few bent metal struts and then heaved himself up. Thor followed suit, shaking his head – helping Fandral and Hogun up as well. Below the guards were attempting to get past the badly bent iron office door.

"Access to the roof, yes," Thor agreed, coughing as the smoke and dust rained about him. He squinted as he looked through the gloom about them. "But this is madness -"
"Effective. The explosion will have caught the eye of your -"
"SIF!"

Fandral and Hogun's voices rose at the sight of someone slender running toward them in the smoke, yelling something rather incoherent. Kol'la gripped his spear tightly and then, noticing Thor's returning smile, relaxed.

"SIF!" Fandral was saying again, drawing a dark-haired woman into his arms and kissing her
brazenly on the cheek. "You came to rescue us? But we did not need it truly – Where is Volstagg?"
"Back at the camp," said the dark-haired warrior women shortly. She clasped Thor briefly and drew
back with a smile.
"The camp?" Thor asked confused.
"Your father, the King, Odin Allfather brought a mighty force to this Norn-forsaken planet when we
finally traced you here. We had waged war on the slavers and their kingdom, bringing their emperor
to his knees and taking his family hostage. Thus peace was forged - and the Mahko'nai released the
spells of protection and concealment upon you three just now and Heimdall located you. But
enough, we must go and at great speed, should a war break out – well, I feel that His Highness
would not approve of making war yet another day."

With that, the companies gathered around and there was much back-slapping and congratulations
and a variety of explanations and short stories which did not make much sense thanks to the
overlapping conversations and a weedy, looking native of Sharda'aa was released (apparently) with a
small bag of gold – and then they were all off, running breakneck back over the flat megablock roofs
toward the camp of the Aesir. At the approach of their group, the rest of the Aesir raised a voice of
victory – and Thor marched up to his father in an impromptu parade which he led with great panache
and style, raising a fist now and then.

Lady Sif, the dark-haired woman warrior, shook her head and sighed, muttering something like,"Here we go again..." Fandral and Hogun on either side of a very fat, incredibly bearded, jolly
warrior laughed and Kol'la, standing on the fringe of the crowd, felt even more out of place than
usual. There were hard stares sent his way, which he met with equal (if not more) venom, unwilling
to budge from his place. Kol'la would hold Thor to his word if that was the last thing he would do.

Odin welcomed his son with great formality, but underneath, Kol'la could read anger,
disappointment, sorrow, fatigue – and beneath all of that, joy and love. A son returning to home to
the open arms of his father, Kol'la swallowed and glared at the stone beneath his feet. Laufey-King of
Jotunheim would never accept me like that. And it does not matter. It never matter. It never did.

But it did.

Then the great King drew his son in for a small embrace and, pulling away, they conversed for a few
minutes. Odin's single blue eye fell then on Kol'la's dark head. A blue eye met a pair of green – and
for a few seconds, their gazes were caught - then after a moment, Odin nodded wearily. No one
could hear the exchange between father and son, but Kol'la's heart grew a little lighter. Thor had kept
his promise.

After that, there was a flurry of activity. Ordered chaos and not a little bit of confusion as armour and
weapons were double and triple-checked. The temporary camp was brought down efficiently. Thor
was bundled off in one direction, the three warriors in another – leaving Kol'la to stand, at the
command of a suspicious, darkly-tanned one-handed general, with a company of soldiers until called
for. Eventually, the Bifrost opened – again and again, drawing the golden people of the golden land
back to bosom of Asgard.

... darkness fell on Sharda'aa...

... blessed with Asgardian mercy...

... to live to die another day...

... yes, one day...

Kol'la did not look back. He did not need to, even though he had never seen the topside of Sharda'aa
before, the now ex-slave had no desire to know more of the place he had called 'not-home' for so long. It was a desolate grey place, a desolate grey sky and beyond, the hungry Void leeched from it, feeding on the minds of its soulless inhabitants. Underneath the dirty, monochromatic crust was another world – equally empty. Illusions and mists of dreams and drugs and brassy music and the girls, like Glo-Glo, and the boys, Silvertongue once upon a time, kicked their heels towards the stars.

So, Kol'la looked forward. There was only the Road of What Is Not ahead.

[... magic tearing through the Void...]

[... triumphant...]

Travelling along the Bifrost was like pressing oneself against the window panes of existence, Kol'la thought, so close to What Is and What Is Not – screaming with magic, both beautiful and destructive.

Then there was a rich dome, gilt and carved with ancient pictures and a stern-faced dark man who stood facing the stars, sword in hand – and beyond, the Bridge of Many Colours. The Bifrost itself. And beyond it – beyond it –

The eternally youthful sunlight of Asgard broke across Kol'la's face.

[... a golden place...]

[... a golden cage...]

Chapter End Notes

AND KOL'LA IS IN ASGARD! YES!

Thank you so much guys for reading! I hope you continue to enjoy - and if you do, please review!

Author's Note: On Odin

I love reading fics with Odin in all forms - evil!Odin, bad-parent!Odin, awesome!Odin... but when it comes to Distortions in Time, I prefer to try to keep to what I see in the MCU-verse (not Earth-616 or Ultimate Avengers), which is a father who isn't perfect but isn't the worst piece of crap. He is a King who is attempting to keep peace, although he does give his sons mixed-messages. He is, mainly, tired. So, in this fic, the only planet the Aesir smack down is the Mahkonai Empire (the Slavers) and NOT Sharda'aa which is a messed up planet but not the real problem. I don't think Odin is really the genocidal type, really. I kinda read a lot of political stuff into Odin's character - and that should make him a little more complicated than just being a mindless, war-hungry dude. Also, this hopefully explains why there is more pomp and ceremony for when he receives Thor back - instead of publicly reaming out his son, Odin maintains his image. I hope this makes sense and doesn't seem too out of character for you guys... this is just my interpretation of a movie character...

Thanks for reading and for being such troopers hanging in there!-KI

Numbers (for this quadrant):
0 - nai
1 - sa
2 - tho
3 - frei
4 - ah
5 - ko
6 - yul
7 - vee
8 - mah
9 - lei

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-efffer
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
Alright - first up, THANK YOU WONDERFUL REVIEWERS! YOU ARE THE AWESOME! I GOT THE HIGHEST AMOUNT OF REVIEWS FOR THE LAST CHAPTER! *foams at mouth from excitement and passes out*

To: Dragonanzar, history, miravisu, Uriko, Kai_Maciel, lemomina, Crazy_Cat_Lady, iBlameGlobalWarming, Danea, YellowWomanontheBrink

Also, I made a silly meme thing for Loki's Army if you wanna see on my tumblr: dappled-things.tumblr.com/post/57698828996/enlist

So here it goes. Kol'la's first day in Asgard... Don't get too excited.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 32
Golden Light Breaks

At the sight of his people, Thor felt his heart swell with pride and joy and relief – they had come just as he had said they would and he no longer looked the fool before Kol'la, the sharp-tongued. Kol'la, he thought, remembering Hogun's soft reply.

No, you wouldn't... You wouldn't.

You never share your past, never speak of it, Kol'la, Thor thought. Yet I can feel it sometimes – smoky, dark and bitter on my tongue in a rare moment – A door closing between us. And on those days... A sharp look. Just those days - there is a certain stillness. There is a darkness which lies upon you.

As Thor's eyes rose to meet Odin's, he decided to consider the matter further at a later time. I am no man of words – but perhaps I may help my friend a little and this is the first step to show him the power of constancy... and the promises of Thor.

"Father."
"Thor," Odin's blue eye lingered on the Prince's cheery, unrepentant face. There was no trace of pain or sorrow on his strong son's face – only barely contained pride and glee. Once again, Prince Thor had survived a mighty trial wits and health in tact. "So you have returned to us, my son – unharmed, I think, and whole..."
"Father," Thor's smile remained undimmed. "But of course - as your son, could I return in any other way?" He looked about. "You brought many for a mere expedition! Are we to battle? Although... without Mjolnir -" Thor looked about uneasily.
"There is no need for war when our objective has been so easily obtained," Odin shook his head curtly, lips tighttining with obvious anger sparking in his eye, promising Thor a scolding later on.
"No need for battle or Mjolnir, and so at home it remains, having returned at my call. Still," the old King clasped his son's shoulder firmly, blue eye pinning Thor with a hard glance. "Your mother will be relieved – she was worried. To say the least." Odin paused. "It will ease her mind to see you safe and sound in Asgard."

Thor shuffled his feet and for a bare second, a look of remorse flitted across his face – but then he brightened and said, "She will see that I have come to no harm, and have proved my honour in glorious combat! It has been a great day, for Asgard has shown its true strength - and if we are to return home now, then Kol'la will be able to end his fretting."
"Kol'la?" Odin repeated slowly.

At Odin's frown, Thor hesitated, then nodded jerked his head a little, blue eyes glancing to the side in unspoken gesture.

"The dark-haired, tall, thin one. Like Hogun, but not. He's strong, Father -"
"We do not make a habit of bringing strays home, Thor," Odin's voice was even more tired than before and his son pressed his advantage.
"But Father -"
"Let him return to the place from whence he came."
"He has no home – please, Father. I promised him this thing – freedom – and freedom on this world is no freedom at all. Kol'la is strong. He could – he could work. And his magicks -"
"He practises seithr?" Odin asked sharply, his blue eye rising to look past Thor, no doubt trying to analyze the willowy warrior-mage more intently.
"Yes – but he is no old man, nor given to witless superstition and his grasp of the elements and strategy are strong. You know how I never think things through, Father, but when Kol'la is at my side, he is a great aid in battle and reads the enemy well. I have learned to listen to him -"
"Indeed?"
"Even though he scolds me with no respect and he has a sharp tongue on him – just as keen as a fisherman's wife at market. His turn of phrase can be quite smooth as well, I know."
"He can come then."
"I know we do not take captives. See him as an ally. A useful future citizen of Asgard. He could work on a farm – or on the field in our reserves or at the Mage's Court or in the -"
"Thor. He can come, this Kol'la of yours," Odin repeated a little more forcefully.
"- palace. Mother would like him. He -" Thor stopped. "He can come? Truly?"
"Asgard may have some use for him," Odin finally said. "And," he paused as a ghost of a memory that had never been flittered through his mind. "I feel as though..." He shook his head slowly and then raised a hand at Thor's questioning look. "Never mind, Thor - just bring him along."
"Thank you, Father!" Thor gripped his father's forearms fiercely. "You will not regret it."
"Hm," Odin replied noncommittally. "Let us hope not."

And with that they were off to Asgard.

[... the skies are blue...]

[... Asgard teems with life...]

[... the Golden City...]

[... the Realm Eternal...]

Above Asgard, white clouds leisurely drifted across a clear blue sky, the like of which Kol'la had never seen before, even in his wildest dreams. A blue – paler than his hidden skin and more delicate – and the gentle white strands of clouds. Rising upward majestically into the clouds, behind the great
Golden City of Asgard's capital, the City of Asgard, grey mountains with snow above, grey in between and green below, loomed. Such mountains! And the forests which clothed the lower regions of the spurs which spread outward and down to the great city also were neither stark and black nor small and protected. The great trunks and branches, bearing golden fruit and green leaves, stood tall and proud as the natives of the land.

Asgard smelled of green and soil and rich earth and hard rock. Kol'la lifted his face into the clean crisp air and breathed deeply. Inhaled. It was a warm wind and was neither silent as Sharda'aa's nor wild like that of Jotunheim. Filled with warning and dark promise.

... who are you, young one, to stand on these golden shores...

And Kol'la stiffened his back, green eyes fixed on the capital and strode forward, undeterred. This was his chance – and he would not be moved from his goal: the promise of knowledge and the call of magic.

Striding down after the company of soldiers who marched smartly down the famous Bifrost bridge after the main pack of generals and mages who accompanied the two Royals, Kol'la kept pace with the rest, not wishing to get lost in what looked to be a complicated and large city.

The City of Asgard was a golden place. It shone, literally, like a treasure, the rarest jewel of the Nine Realms – and Kol'la could understand now the envy of all those who had gazed upon her from afar, knowing that this was no home for them. No place for them to stay. A golden realm – and in the centre, more gleaming and fantastical than the rest (if possible), rose the Palace. Even though he had not seen it before, Kol'la could tell with a short glance that it was the principal part of the capital. It was the seat of King Odin, the All-Father.

Yes. A blinding place. The Bridge beneath his feet, the Bifrost, the Rainbow Bridge, flared with colour. The greenery overwhelmed the senses with spices and the scent of fresh fruit. Gold, of course, everywhere. Intricately carved stone. Obelisks. Statues. Ancient and yet looking so new as if they had been carved yesterday. Sinuous lines and martial edges combining into a balance of art and utility. Above one part of the city, revolving pieces of stone hovered and turned slowly.

"What is that place?" Kol'la asked the soldier next to him.
"Mage's Court," the soldier replied shortly.

Another laughed and added, "Where those who are gifted in the lesser arts of seithr study their books, perfect their workings and pass on the tales of witless men and superstitious hearts. It is also where our women study the healing arts – and there are men also, those faint of heart and ill-suited for glorious combat."

Kol'la did not reply to that, but his eyes went back to the far glimpse of Thor's golden head bobbing alongside Odin's and frowned, remembering the warrior's dismissive attitude about Kol'la's abilities.

It seems Asgard has no respect for its own power? A strange state of affairs, considering the All-Father's abilities. Lips pinching together in distaste, Kol'la shook his head.

They walked onward – winding through streets lined with tall, husky, blonde-haired and sometimes dark-haired folk, all dressed well and looking cheery and excited as they hung from windows and balconies, lounged in front of their businesses and on their homes' doorsteps. Flowers were scattered on the soft breeze, drifting downward to light on Thor's blonde hair and Odin's cape, the Mage's cloaks and the intricately linked cobblestones underneath the horses' hoofs.

Raising his hand, Kol'la caught a soft gold-white petal and held it to his nose with a swift inhale. The scent of a flower. Stronger than tungblom and sweeter. There is nothing sweet on Jotunheim, he
thought bitterly and dropped the petal, feeling as though his very touch would burn the fair and delicate thing.

Then, they were before the Palace proper and trooping into the main courtyard. Thor and Odin and the rest were escorted inside, the companies were divvied up as was custom (apparently) and scattered for various duties. Kol'la found himself standing before a tough-looking Aesir who glared down at him from a rather crooked nose.

"So, you are the stray the Prince picked up," the craggy old commander spat at the ground roughly by Kol'la's left foot.

Kol'la's back stiffened, his chin rose and his green eyes met blue squarely – and he did not budge. For a moment there was silence and then the taller, much older man nodded curtly with approval.

"The name is Farfin. Farfin of the King's First Company. You will refer to me as 'sir', from this day on."
"Yes, sir," Kol'la nodded.
"Now, according to his Honoured Lord Tyr, his Majesty wished you to first try your hands out in the stables and see how you go about things."

A sharp look – but Kol'la stared back dutifully, keeping any angry or annoyance from his face. Anger was a tool – but to wield it, you also ran the risk of being manipulated in turn. Experience had taught him this lesson – it had taught him well: indifference is the wall that can never be broken as it thickens over time. Kol'la's silence was rewarded by another grunt and Farfin spat again onto the straw, jerking his head toward a row of splendidly bricked houses with rows of well-tended, intricately carved wood doors. The stables.

"I will show you your quarters then – and the horses which you will be caring for," Farfin strode off, with Kol'la falling beside (and just slightly behind) him. "Each stable boy, and you are now one, cares for five horses. A stallion or two and a few mares. Every day, there will be regular times for feeding, of course, and grooming and the necessary daily exercise about our Royal Stableyards – and readying any for the use of the Court. You ever work in a stable, boy?"
"No, sir."
"Hmph. Thought as much."
"But I have cared for animals before," Kol'la hastened to add.
"Hm," was all Farfin said in reply, obviously not entirely convinced. The rest of the journey around the side of the stables to the back, where the yards and sheds laid, was spent in silence with the occasional muttering on the part of Farfin. Something along the lines of "never worked a horse in his life, I warrant" and "useless strays" and "what was the All-Father thinking?"

What was he thinking? Kol'la thought to himself in agreement. A part of him wanted to rage against the injustice of it all. Thor had promised – promised freedom. And other things. Not that those mattered... Yet another side of him had to point out that it was freedom – of a sort. You could walk away from this, but at the cost of a chance to learn what you always wished to know all your life.

... who are you, young one, to stand on these golden shores...

... why have you come, Other-Soul...

Kol'la shivered and quickened his pace. Asgard fears you. They will fear you and hate you as well. It was that dark part of him again. It whispered those hated truths. Not truths, Kol'la shook his head firmly, remembering Thor's face sharpening as Kol'la woke from the call of the Visha'anas. There are some... some who brought you here out of hope for you. And you will overcome this – Yes, Kol'la told himself. This is, after all, a test. He smirked to himself, envisioning Odin's surprised face.
I am no fool, Odin All-Father.

... who are you, young one, to stand on these golden shores...

... why have you come, Other-Soul...

... you should not have come...

That night, lying on his new bed of straw and rough canvas, three new outfits hanging ready for him in the small chest at the foot of his bed, a string of horse names to memorize by the morning, and a comfortably full belly, Kol'la stared up at the wood ceiling above his head – the underside of the well-thatched roof of the stables. On either side of him, five other stable boys, all of them tall, well-fed, red-cheeked and tan skinned, slept. Soft sounds of breathing and one stable boy's harsh snoring filled the silences. Below, the horses whickered softly and various wild birds swooped in and out of the barns. Kol'la's sharp ears could pick out the soft winnow of their wings and the sleepy chirps of baby birds nestled in the straw, mud and twig nests clinging to the corners of the barns.

A different kind of night compared to Sharda'aa and Tarnax and Jotunheim – a welcome change, in a way. But not my home, Kolla reminded himself sleepily. This is not home.

But he was there. Almost.

He could feel it.

Chapter End Notes

OK. So there we go. Kol'la is now installed... in a way... in Asgard. Is he going to go for the top? Is he going to scratch and claw his way to power? We'll see...

Some people were mentioning a few things... so here they are.

Q: What is the current relative age of Thor and Loki here? (which is when they first meet)
Thor is about 19 or so here and Kol'la around 17 or so. XD Therefore Kol'la's first positive sex experience was the relative age of 17.

Q: When is the name "Loki" going to show up?
A: Not for another 8-9 chapters, I'm afraid.

Q: Frigga greeting Thor when he gets back will be awesome.
A: It would be, but I didn't write it... but there are a growing list of "side-stories" or "anecdotes" which I'm feeling an increasing need to write. Let me know if you guys want side stories which I would post in a side-fic called "Distortions In Time [insert something here I don't know what]". Some of the side stories would be: A Day with Elska (self-evident), The Jotunn Brothers (on Helblindi and Byleistr), Kayra (Loki and the Apprentice Healer - which is something mentioned up ahead), Welcome Home (Frigga welcoming Thor back, first reaction to the unknown Kol'la), Fingers In Many Pies (a prank Kol'la pulls on one of the Asgardian Mages as a way to get back for something), Here We Go Again (a quest initiated by Thor goes wrong - again), Forgetting (Kol'la gets drunk for the first time at Poison Paradise). More would be added as I write more of the story...
This was a shortish chapter, so I'll see about updating it around Sunday. We'll see... depends on a certain sticky conversation in Chapter 38 that I have to iron out...

-KI

Numbers (for this quadrant):

0 - nai
1 - sa
2 - tho
3 - frei
4 - ah
5 - ko
6 - yul
7 - vee
8 - mah
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Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
Thank you, wonderful reviewers! To: lemomina, miravisu, iBlameGlobalWarming, smish, history, Danea, Kai_Maciel, a big thanks for hanging in there!

Youthful silliness up ahead! Conversations for the win... I hope!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 33
Golden Rays Burns Deep

[... new seasons, new cycles...]
[... each year passes...]
[... golden and ripe, sharp and poignant...]
[... as fruit...]

There was a rhythm to Kol'la's life now – a new kind of living which he found to be neither repugnant nor desirable. It felt like nothing he had experienced before. A kind of stasis. A kind of numbness. As if he was waiting for something. What he lingered for, Kol'la did not exactly know and on warm nights when the sweet heat of Asgard pressed down on his usually cool skin, Kol'la felt the urge to escape the golden existence of Asgard even more strongly than ever.

And yet...

[... and yet...]

Those times. Those times he watched the so changeable skies of Asgard – clear, filled with puffy clouds or swollen and dark with rain or blackness lit by lightning. Those times he supped alone, too annoyed by the eternal summer heat to properly deal with his noisesome fellow stable-hands. Those times when the evening air hummed with fat bees and the chirrup of crickets and the saw of other small living things which nestled in the cracks of wood and straw and buzzed over the pungent piles of shat which lay in the nearby compost pile.

*The compost heap.* Here, Kol'la smiled as he considered what rose in the corner of the back stableyard. The compost heap was an alien thing and, having been discovered in Asgard, was forever linked to warriors and wide boards of food and lusty wenches and Life incarnate. It was a strange heap to Kol'la, even after the years that passed – odoriferous, a riot of colours which lost to time and decay and spread as mulch over the less blessed portions of land, bringing a chance for life.

An interesting thought: the compost pile sinking into the grass was eaten by the horse and then returned to the land. Another cycle – a new kind of life Kol'la learned quickly. And he waited.
Waited. And he fretted.

Some days, as he went about his chores – feeding and grooming the horses, mucking out the stables and running errands – Kolla wondered why he had remained there. The maturing young man, continuing to slowly grow (and yet showing no signs of Jotun adulthood), knew that part of it was Thor and part of it was hope.

Hefting a pitch fork and attacking a nearby stack of hay for his favourite mare, sweat rolling unpleasantly down his back and chest as the sun beat down on his dark head, Koll'a cursed them both. And as if summoned by his dark thoughts, a loud holler rang across the shat and mud-smeared, intricately designed, dark cobblestones of the stableyard.

A loud "Koll'a!" followed by: "Koll'a! Great news!"

Emerging from Thora's stable, Koll'a squinted upward at the Prince who had, astride his favoured brown charger (not given to Koll'a's 'inexperienced' care), trotted over with a wide bright grin. As ever, there it was – the perpetual smile which Koll'a knew to be as great and vacuous as Asgard's blue sky. A light-coloured barn swallow darted into the stables just then and Koll'a heaved a disgusted sigh. Not entirely vacuous, he allowed. There is also his love of battle, passion for women and feasting and that generosity – devastating, thoughtless and equal to all... Koll'a glared sourly up at the excited Prince, noticing all the signs of a 'great and mighty quest' which translated to 'going on a dangerous, not well-planned jaunt without permission' in Koll'a's book.

"Koll'a! Great, great news! You would not believe!"
"And a good morning to you, Thor," Koll'a grunted in return.
"I am -"
"The answer is no," Koll'a stalked off into the stables, cutting off the Prince effectively.

Watching his shield mate disappear, Thor sighed and dismounted, the better to follow his annoyed friend into the only marginally cooler depths of the Royal Court's stables. Behind him, Sif gave a gusty sigh of equal annoyance and disapproval at Koll'a's (continued) curt and rude behaviour which had been present since the first day he had arrived. Why the Prince continued to seek out the stable boy was beyond the ken of most of the young people of the King's court.

"Come now, Koll'a!" Thor was saying, coming to a halt by the young man who had begun to polish a particularly fine silver bridle. "Do not be this way! I have not yet spoken -"
Koll'a's long slender hands did not pause, nor did the dark head rise as he replied shortly, "I am busy."
"Oh, now -"
"Busy, Thor," Koll'a reached for a small brush to scrub a little more carefully in the hard-to-reach inlay of the filigree.
"You always say that."

Koll'a stopped his scrubbing to massage the bridge of his nose, feeling the usual headache come on. The conversation was beginning to sound all too familiar.

"I always am."
"No, you are not!"
"You call me a liar now, Thor? I cannot be given to such habits as yours -"
"What are you ranting about now?"
"- gallivanting about -"
"Oh. That. Well – you -"
"- and as a lowly -" Koll'a would not be stopped now.
"Do not say such things -"
"- stable workhand, I cannot go running off on some hair-brained adventure -"
"Kol'la, you need not be afraid, nor cower here in the stables -"
"You call me a coward?" Kol'la glared up at Thor. "You call me a -"
"Kol'la. Listen. I did not mean -"
"- a coward because I obey orders? Is that what cowardice now – to do one's job in the role -"
"Listen!" Thor was bawling now at Kol'la with an incensed roar. "Now you listen to me! I apologized -"
"Some apology," was Kol'la's disbelieving, dead-pan reply.
"And you know that you are as willing to enjoy a fine trick or an opportunity to practice your seithr just as much as I enjoy a good fight -"
"Now -"
"Kol'la Silver口语. That is who you are and do not forget it! Kol'la Silver口语, the Mischief-maker, the Strategist Extraordinaire. Thor's Shadow. My right-hand man! That is who you are, Kol'la." Thor leaned down, shoved at Kol'la's shoulder and drew a furious green gaze upward. "You are no mere stable boy, Kol'la." He added softly. "I see you."
"I do not need comforting like those lackadaisical maids at the Court," snapped Kol'la. He snorted. "'See you' indeed!"
"This is about last time," Thor sighed, "is it not? It is!"

Kol'la redirected his venomous stare at the intricately wrought silver bridle in his hand.

"Listen. I said I was sorry -"
"Thor," Kol'la sighed, knowing Thor spoke sincerely. He always did. "It was my fault just as much as yours. However," A pause. Kol'la collected his thoughts. "The whole venture would have gone smoother if you had just..." He sighed. "I often wonder, when you blunder ahead without thought – when you ignore my advice constantly – when you pander to the whims of less intelligent, fawning sycophants who call have less spine then jellyfish combined -" Kol'la's green gaze swung back to Thor's blue one, accusingly. "I often wonder... why am I there?"

Thor shuffled his feet – opened his mouth. Kol'la raised a finger warningly.

"Am I some kind of court jester to provide light relief? A scapegoat to blame? A foil to uphold and add to your glory? Someone who makes your ego puff up as you look at me and pity what I can never become?"
"Kol'la -"
"No, Thor," Kol'la sighed, long fingers suddenly releasing their tight grip on the bridle. "No, Thor," he repeated. "I will not go."
"You are not my whipping boy," Thor frowned, "nor are you my foil, Kol'la. Listen -"
"I might as well be."
"Does your back pain you still? I will speak with Mother; she – OW!"

Thor's obsequious response was cut short by a sharp cry as Kol'la's boot met with his shin.

"Kol'la!"

It was Sif. The tall, well-muscled, tough young woman, clad in light half-armour and gold and red leathers, approaching the door, frowned as Thor cursed Kol'la's nameless forebears and nursed his shin. "Have care how you address -"
"Peace, Sif," Thor grunted. "It was merely the flailing of an infant -"
"Keep talking and I think Kol'la will explode," Fandral's light laughter cut in.

Kol'la did indeed look like he was about to tear off Thor's head. For a moment, it seemed possible that the son of Odin would meet an untimely end hung to his death by bridle gear... but Kol'la
managed to rein himself in.


"Why should we?" Fandral asked in his usual airy, irksome fashion – with barely concealed laughter in his undertones. "These will be Thor's stables one day. And, Kol'la, you will come at his beck and call."

Awkward paused. For a moment, there was nothing but the sound of horses nickering and stamping, birds chirping in the rafters, a crow's harsh caw-caw, a far off stable master whaling on a young stable boy, the hup-hup of a horse trainer in the nearby training ring and the further off clang of the blacksmith's hammer striking the anvil. Fandral's horse shook its head and Volstagg's ever cavernous stomach rumbled.

"When you say it like that," Volstagg finally muttered, "it seems too incredible to be true."

"Now, that is a fact," Kol'la rose, bridle in hand and moved over to hang it carefully from its designated peg.

"Kol'la," Sif frowned bristling. "Why must you always show Thor such disrespect -"

"First, he must earn my respect and, having once earned it, keep it," hissed back Kol'la. "Thor one day may indeed become a great King... but presently, he is no king of mine – and at this rate, he never will be."

"Careful now," Hogun's hand suddenly clamped down on Sif and Fandral's shoulders.

"That is sedition!" Fandral sputtered trying to pull away and failing.

"This is why I said -" Hogun reminded them.

"And Kol'la is a liar -"

"He grew up among liars -"

"It is not his fault," Thor protested, muscles tensing at the thought of Kol'la's words.

"What are you implying?" Kol'la growled, fists tightening as he tried to keep a leash on his fast rising temper. His patience was wearing thin.

"What do you think?" was Sif's cool reply.

"Come now -" Volstagg stepped forward.

"Sif!" Thor said, his strong voice cut through his friends' babble. "Kol'la and I have things to discuss – and it remains, as always, our own business."

"Ever since that trip -"

"Captivity," corrected Hogun.

"Whatever it was, ever since you have returned with... Kol'la... you have, well, lost all commonsense!" Sif waved her hand dismissively. "Thor, you cannot – cannot listen to this – this – serpent."

"Serpent? Serpent! I was attempting to ignore the idiot!" Kol'la snapped back. "I declined his invitation and he would not leave me alone."

"Oh," Fandral said, a little stupidly and Sif eased away uncertainly.

"The last time -" Thor grimaced, glancing at Kol'la apologetically. "Well, you saw what happened...

"Hm. He missed out on his duties thanks to your shortcut," Hogun agreed. "Lateness is the worst misdeed in Master Farfin's books."

"Shortcut? Is that what you call it?" Kol'la bit out. "If that was a shortcut, then I am the King of Alfheim! Thanks to Thor -"

"It was unfortunate," Sif finally agreed grudgingly, remembering her own dismay at the whipping Kol'la had received as punishment for dereliction of duties. "Does your back still pain you? There is an antidote, quite cheap, which you may purchase in -"

At that point, it took Thor, Fandral and Hogun to hold Kol'la back from tearing out Sif's throat. When everyone settled down again on various hay bales, the horses still standing outside waiting still for their very delayed masters, everyone took a breath and contemplated the problem at hand.
"Kol'la has not yet forgiven me," Thor finally admitted, poking at the hay absently. Then, he shrugged and smiled. "As usual. You need not understand, Sif. And he will get over it."
"Oh, I will, will I?"
"You always do."
"He does?" asked Fandral.
"These days, you two always look... well..." Sif shifted. "Angry."

Kol'la glared at his hands, Thor contemplated the stable ceiling. Then, the ever active warrior jumped to his feet and hefted his hammer.

"Kol'la will get over it. It is merely how things work between us, Sir. Kol'la," Thor added airily. "I was not intending to press you into our quest. If you cannot come, then you cannot come. I only fear that you will once again bury yourself in the local archives. You are turning into an old man before your time! And it is not for glory. It is my Mother – well, apparently she ran out of a particular stock of some magical herb which she so loves to use for her tea – and it only grows in a certain valley in Vanaheim. So I thought to give her a gift of freshly picked herbs. It would only be a small trip – and we need your aid to find such a flower. Think of it. Vanaheim – my mother's homeland. I know you have not yet traveled there, Kol'la. It is a fair place and most beautiful."
"You wish me to find a flower for you?"
"Well. Yes..."
"In Vanaheim."
"Yes. No battles. No enemies. A short visit and it is entirely the sort of thing you would enjoy – mucking about with magical herbs and whatnot."
"Thor." Kol'la sighed.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and wished himself far away from this too bright, too noisy, too hot place. Kol'la knew – Vanaheim was in his near future. I wanted to go, Kol'la sighed, but not saddled with a pack of dou'ma who do not know the difference between a plant and a weed, much less the difference between clover and mistletoe.

"Thor," he repeated. "What is the name of the flower? Where can we find it? In what manner do we harvest it in order to maintain its original magical powers? Is it against the laws of Vanaheim to harvest this plant? Will we need to pay any kind of tax or toll or farmer for the harvesting of such plants?"

Another long pause. Volstagg took out a lumpy package of brown paper and proceeded to unwrap a couple savoury pieces of what looked like mutton. Sif shifted further away from the curly-headed, heavily bearded man and focused instead on Kol'la and Thor. Thor who stared at Kol'la dumbfounded.

"I thought you would know – what with all those books you read night and day."
"Night and day?" Kol'la's voice rose sharply. "I hardly read books night and day, Thor! Merely when I have spare time – which is only in the very early hours of the morning and at night."
"Well, you just look like you are reading all the time."
"Did I look like I was reading when you first interrupted me just now?"
"Uh, no..."
"Well then."
"At any rate," Thor said lamely. "I thought you would know."

Kol'la stared at Thor's obvious disappointment with great incredulity. Somehow the fool thought that he would be able to know the Vanaheim herb! Seriously... the dou'ma... And yet, another part of Kol'la warmed at the thought that Thor had thought to first come to him instead of going to the Mage's Court for advice and guidance. That Thor had expected me to know... Kol'la did not know if
he wanted to laugh or cry. He opted for a shake of his head and a deep sigh.

"This afternoon, I can spare some time at the local archive and we can research the matter after Lady Sif investigates the matter in more detail."

"Me?" asked Sif.

"Yes," Kol'l'a eyed the young woman shrewdly. "You are a girl, after all... are you not?"

Volstagg muttered something, Fandral chuckled, Hogun sighed and Sif bristled.

"Of course," she said.

"Well then, you enter the Queen's Court and ask of her serving maid the name of the herb in question. Once we know that, we can better research how to get it. Then, then we may go – perhaps two days from now... Who knows? It may be such an easy matter, you will not even need me to be there."

Thor looked betrayed, "You must come, Kol'l'a!"

"We shall see." A beat, then: "Does this not seem to be a better plan, Thor?"

"Yes," was the reluctant reply.

"Very well then, I shall see you after lunch," Kol'l'a rose to his feet and dusted off his pants before stepping away. "I have other duties to attend to. Until then."

With that he disappeared. Sif shook her head.

"Thor. I do not know what you are thinking. He is not to be trusted!"

"You do not know him, Sif."

"No, you do not know him -"

"He has shown no sign of dishonour or disloyalty toward me," Thor replied evenly. "In the bonds of captivity, in the heat of battle, he was there – protecting my back. Kol'l'a... I do know know what his past holds, but this I can say that he wishes for a better future. Do we not all deserve a chance?"

"Yes," Fandral eyed Thor, considering the oddly wise words coming from the usually hot-headed warrior. "You sound rather grown up."

"I do?" asked Thor, frowning.

"In a way," Hogun rose as well. "Do not let it get to your head however. Early days."

And with that, they left. Another day in Asgard. Another cycle.

[... another cycle...]

Chapter End Notes

We'll see how things turn out and how the centuries have passed for our young men.

XD I hope we can see here how Thor doesn't mean harm - but he is clearly insensitive.

He is NOT MALICIOUS... just... insensitive.

A few questions from readers:

Q: Will we see Sleipnir? Is Sleipnir around?

Author's Note: Yes, I will mention Sleipnir when I can fit it in without seeming like a huge deal - because it's not a huge deal in the movies and it won't be in this fanfic either. Remember Loki has no kids and so Sleipnir is only mentionable in passing.

Q: What was Thor thinking putting Loki in the stables?!
Author's Note: This was not Thor's call - it was Odin's. Odin is... a very complicated person. Think Dumbledore. In armour. With one eye.

I also anticipate people asking questions about Frigga. She will show up - but in a very specific situation. I feel that in the movies she is very much relegated to certain duties and as such wouldn't necessarily have bumped into Loki at this point. Yeah... Hope this is believable!

-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
Rise To Meet The Sun

Chapter Notes

Wow! People seem to be enjoying this! I'm so glad!

Thanks to all my reviewers who commented and chatted and brought up some good points! Be sure to check the author's note at the end of this chapter!

To: Kai_Maciel, iBlameGlobalWarming, lemomina, ImperialDragon, Claire, JessiMarie, Danea, Nebelkind, Fandancer

Here we go adventuring~!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 34
Rise To Meet The Sun

"Well," said Kol'la in a deadpan voice, staring at the brown rafters overhead, "I told you so."
"You always say that," Sif's disgusted voice sounded out through the dim light which pierced through thick iron bars of their underground cell which also hummed with a strong magical barrier. "It is always true."
"This is not helping," Hogun finally said, shutting up his two comrades in distress.

The usually taciturn warrior's words could only silence the two other restless captives for a short while before Kol'la began complaining again. *It is as though he is unable to leave his wounds alone,* Hogun mused. *Always, he must pick and poke and prod until it runs with blood afresh. Until the scar lays thick and eternally unremoveable.*

"And this always happens -" "It does not always happen," Sif rebutted. "Just sometimes."
"More times than I would like. Why Thor -"
"This is not Thor's fault!"
"Well, he -"
"This is not. Thor's. Fault," repeated Sif slowly and mutinously. "And you know it."

A small smile crossed the warrior's usually stoic face as Kol'la's sigh issued forth into the falling evening air.

"I guess not," he admitted slowly.
"She is right," Hogun finally had to support his friend. "Kol'la, this was not Thor's fault..." A pause. "However, challenging a group of farmers to single combat is not the best way to endear oneself to one's opponents." As Kol'la tested the strength of the wards again, Hogun added, "Thor will come."

Yet, he wondered if those words held any true consolation for the young ex-slave. *The Kol'la of Sharda'aa could not believe... and is the Kol'la of Asgard any different?*
Sif stirred and then shifting a little to her left, laid a hand on Kol'la's shoulder comfortably as he sat down beside her heavily on the small cot. They sat there in the falling dark. In silence.

[... these happy golden hours...]

[... pass swiftly...]

[... and fade...]

The herb-gathering 'quest' to Vanheim began well – all things considering. Armed with the name of the plant in question, Kol'la spent his dinner hour researching the topic – and gathered as much information as he could. Thanks to his careful reading and clear instructions, Sif and Hogun were able to help him cut the tender stalks without crushing the sweet nectar within.

It was not his fault that illegal activities were happening in the forest Thor had chosen. Nor the fact that the elven locals, now irate and suspicious, had not listened to Thor's protestations and proceeded to imprison the three herb-gatherers. Of course, Thor remained free.

*Of course*, Kol'la fumed as he paced the small cell he shared with the other two. *I hope the idiot has the sense to send Fandral home with the plants before they wilt.*

By the time Thor managed to reach his uncle, Lord Frey, negotiate his friends' release, brag about his own valiant combat against the thieves, the flowers had begun to die, losing the precious nectar they needed in the first place. Cutting off Thor's excuses, Kol'la scolded the taller warrior until Thor got annoyed and wrestled Kol'la into silence with a hearty 'ha-ha'. Lord Frey was not amused. However, before Lord Frey could send word to his sister, several guards arrived through the Bifrost with the intent of escorting the entire party home. The promise of punishment hung in the air and Thor sighed as Kol'la's glares became more menacing by the minute.

Then they arrived on the Bridge. Then they arrived at the castle. Then they were hustled into the throne room. Then, alone with a stern-looking Odin and a worried Frigga, the three Warriors, Sif, Thor and Kol'la, on single knee, endured a long scolding. A tedious reprimand lengthened by unnecessary and increasingly annoying interruptions on the part of Thor.

Behind the four warriors who ranged on either side of Thor and behind the Prince himself, Kol'la kept his head down, mouth shut, eyes trained on the glorious marble paving upon which he knelt and ears wide open for anything concerning his as yet uncertain fate. In the end, the Warriors Three and Sif disappeared down various halls to return to their families, who would no doubt sigh and assign them some tedious tasks as punishment.

For a moment, there was silence.

[... but not true silence...]

[... Asgard is a land of light and sound...]

"You are the stable boy, Kol'la, are you not?" Odin paused at the remaining lackey who, according to rumours, had inveigled himself into Thor's company. Ever since that day – when Thor had argued for Kol'la's invitation to Asgard – the two had gone through various stages of friendship. Oft times, during those rare moments when their small family could take their supper privately, the conversation between the three Royals would inevitably revolve around Thor's recent misdemeanours and Kol'la's name would crop up with alarming regularity.

According to General Tyr, Kol'la was outwardly biddable, quiet and respectful towards his betters
and quick to obey Commander Farfin's orders. A lover of books and gifted with natural affinity for the magical arts and seithr, the boy did not usually opt to battle other warriors, nor did he attempt to further his capabilities on the field or in the ring. Any sign of the vicious warrior Thor had boasted of seemed to have disappeared, revealing instead a natural bent toward strategy and politicking.

Intriguing, Odin thought, eyeing the slender figure before him, that this uneducated child should hold all the natural mental capabilities of a king... and Thor, as future king, would do well to heed his advice. Odin glanced at his wife. Frigga had remained silent this time around, obviously torn with pride and love – for Thor had done this for her sake... and also disappointment. What she thought of Kol'la was not apparent. I do not think we have met him properly, Odin frowned. This must be rectified.

"Yes, Lord King All-Father," Kol'la was saying, eyes still trained on the floor. "Hm." An ominous pause. "Rise, Kol'la. Thor."

The two young men smoothly rose to their feet. Thor, as usual, looked only mildly apprehensive and mostly proud of what he had achieved. What Kol'la felt could not be read from a studiously blank face – and still body. Yet, Odin felt mild tension vibrating from the dark-haired young man's shoulders – and those vibrant green eyes glinted.

"You came to this Realm, thanks to my son's intercession," Odin nodded. "I recall that day – and I remember saying to my son something of not wishing to regret such a decision some may consider foolhardy -"
"Father – in this matter, Kol'la is innocent -" Thor interjected, hand cutting down sharply through the air, at which Kol'la's chin jerked a little
"Thor -"
"He was obeying my orders!"
"That is interesting and something to consider - the issue of the level of responsibility you appear to take for this misadventure on Kol'la's part," Odin agreed. "For although you are my son and will rule this land, you do not yet directly rule Kol'la... who should be answering to Commander Farfin alone."
"But Father -"
"What do you say for yourself, Kol'la?"
"It is as the All-Father says," Kol'la meekly replied, and yet there was a note of resigned disappointment in his tone of voice.
"Hm." Odin waited for a few seconds, but Kol'la showed no signs of stirring from his stiff stance and the bright green eyes were more trained on the back of Odin's throne than the King himself.
"However, Thor called on you, Kol'la, and no one, I know, can gainsay him. Therefore, I shall leave your reprimand to Farfin who is a good man and understands the full weight of Kol'la's actions in relation to his responsibilities." Odin caught Frigga's eyes and she nodded, blue eyes showing a little relief at her husband's leniency. "With that, Kol'la, you are dismissed."

Kol'la bowed again, turned on his heel smartly and marched out, slim figure straight, back firm and with nary a look behind at his comrade. Steps even and unhurried, the stable work-hand walked down the broad, pillared, resplendent and yet imposing Hall of Odin's Court. It was a place he had only entered once before and the riches, the luxury of gold and brocade – the glittering jewels and beautifully carved marble seemed like another foreign, alien world to him. Kol'la belonged in the dark, the dim places, the corners of rock and stark wastelands. He smelled of horse and straw and dung and sweat. Kol'la did not belong here.

The great doors opened before him seamlessly, allowing him to pass out and down lovingly carved stairs to the great doors and then three foyers and the Great Courtyard and onward and downward to his own place where he belonged.
Farfin was waiting, legs akimbo, arms folded, face creased in a deep frown – and at the sight of his errant underling, his iron grey moustache rose as his lips parted and a cross between a bellow and a shout issued forth. Kol'la did not stop walking forward but his fingers tightened at the signs of Farfin's displeasure. *The King did not punish me*, Kol'la thought, *and did not lay the blame on me – but the commander is within his rights. I was a day late, after all.*

Once again, Kol'la found himself cursing Thor and his carelessness as he strode forward to stand before his superior. Farfin wasted no time. Damning Kol'la and his forebears and his lack of wit and commonsense and rebellious nature and no sense of duty, Farfin raised his voice knowing that the other stable-hands were listening – and also learning their place. *Knowing one's place, after all,* Kol'la mused inwardly as he allowed Farfin's invective to stream over him, *is what one really must understand. Know your place, Kol'la.*

"- and you understand the root of all of this, do you know, Kol'la?"

Kol'la knew better than to answer that question. Just as with Boss-man and Shax, Farfin was given to rhetorical questions and so the dark-haired, green-eyed young man held his tongue.

"This is all due to your need for attention and belief that your betters are your equals and your place here has no meaning at all for you as you raise your eyes to the Royals and their kind and imagine your place among them. Your absurd belief that you might stand and fight at the side of one such as our Crown Prince will cost you much if you continue on in this matter, Kol'la – and your extra duties for the following week will enable you to reflect on such things. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Report to Arfol tomorrow. Until then, return to your quarters."

"Yes, sir."

The next morning, after his usual duties, Kol'la went to Arfol, the stables' head caretaker, and received his extra duties assignment – scrubbing the stable yard cobblestones. By hand. It was gruelling, back-breaking work and entirely a waste of time, usually allotted to poorer workers looking to earn an extra coin and perfect in this instance to teach a high-reaching, invidious would-be lackey to the Prince.

Several hours later, Kol'la heard the familiar voices of Thor and the All-Father and, glancing upward swiftly, the young man now on his hands and knees scrubbing the paving caught sight of a group of courtiers and ambassadors from Alfheim obviously readying themselves for a hunt. Hunting was, after all, a favoured past-time for many who lived within the Nine Realms and a perfect way to show hospitality during diplomatic functions. As the horses trotted past (dragging straw and muck back onto the paving), Kol'la found himself hard-pressed to suppress a sigh – but he kept his head down and his hands moving with the scrub brush.

There was an uncomfortable pricking at the back of his neck as he continued his work, feeling more unkempt and unwashed than ever under the scrutiny of the elves and the courtiers. It brought to mind old memory he had long hoped to be dead: Hellblindi, standing in a great hall of black stone and blue and looking imperial with his silver and Royal lines. His only consolation was that, considering the fact that the Crown Prince would be confined to what the restless warrior felt to be incredibly tedious diplomatic functions, Thor would be as bored as he was humiliated. With that, he returned to work and forced himself to forget the Prince and his own aspirations.
This is the cosmos. The worlds of What Is, filled with wondrous things, can not be considered as fair as the Nine Realms which hang in their prescribed places since the dawn of Time. They revolve in their turn, born of more than matter and heat and light, and thus stand as signposts of What Is Not. Among millions of glorious stars, broad vistas of nebulae and rock and everything that exists in the galaxy called home, there flows, they say, a current of magic, curling and flowing and eddying around the nine focal points: The Nine Realms, of which Asgard, Jotunheim, Muspelheim, Alfheim and Vanaheim are the five most powerful, shimmering on the edges of What Is and What Is Not.

Like Asgard, Vanaheim is a fair, golden place – a sheltered place, now a peaceful haven, if you believed the stories of travelling merchants and would-be space pirates. Long ago, it was said, before Jotunheim had raised its head, the Realm of Vanaheim had battled Asgard in a desperate attempt for Allpower – and failed. Now it lay in the bosom of Asgard, under its watchful eye, being closest to that golden Realm.

Not so far off – yet further away, Alfheim lies – the Realm of the Light Elves, the Fair Ones, it is a green and living place, full of the fantastic, the mythic mixed with the mundane. Under the great boughs of trees, Alfheim's inhabitants, the Elves, dwell, eternally sheltered by the evergreen leaves of their last forests. Chattering rivers run down from the mountains and meeting together spill out into larger rivers and lakes and the Sea. Thus surrounded by nature, the ambassadors of Alfheim most enjoyed the hunts on Asgard – which led the King's party away from the bustling, over-crowded capital of Asgard and toward the lowering eaves of Asgard's own great forest, Stormirk, which wound its way around the foothills and nether reaches of the Storrjall Mountain and its range which spread outward from the centre of Asgard. Within the Stormirk, wildlife teemed, carefully farmed and hunted during the appropriate seasons that the symbiotic relationship between man and beast may remain balanced as it has after thousands of years.

Hunting was one of Thor's favourite things to do – particularly during the cooler months of the year when boar, deer and bear roamed in the nearer reaches of the forest. On ordinary days, Thor would have his horse saddled, and, if his friends were not already with him, would call for the Warriors Three and Sif to join him. Sometimes Apprentice Kyrr and a few others from the King's Court and the Mages' Council would join them – and on occasion under the guise of caring for the horses or without permission, Kol'la would be given permission to join.

However, hunting with the delegation of Alfheim was another matter entirely. There was no tussling or coarse jokes, no horsing about nor room for error – for this was the time to show Asgard's pride and glory, wisdom and strength, past and future achievements. And when evening fell, when Asgard's guests had bedded down in the King's sumptuous hunting lodge far up the mountain above the capital, Odin found himself alone with Thor at his side in the main hall. Evening fell and shadows extended through the room from the walls, leaving only a square light to stretch through the large, open spaces. Without a word, Odin rose and paced to the grand door facing to the north. He turned and observed Thor who sat slouched on a barely padded wood bench.

"Follow me," he said.
"Father?" Thor looked up, confused and jumped up, striding over easily to his father's side.
"Come..." A silence ensued as the two left the lodge and walked to the edge of the mountainside which the King's hunting cabin was set securely against.

For a moment, there was nothing but the sound of whistling wind and rustling branches and the sound of scurrying in the forest which sheltered them on either side. Before them stretched the city – golden still, glinting under the pale moon, and silent. Far away, Thor's home still seemed as awe inspiring as ever and his heart swelled with pride... And yet, he mused, it's odd to see it so, for at this
distance, there is none of the life that I am used to.

"What do you see, Thor?"
"The capital... Asgard..." Thor said slowly.
"Hm," was Odin's short response.
"There is something else to see?" Thor asked carefully. A pause and then a deprecating short laugh.
"Kol'la says there are always two views to a single thing and things rarely are what they appear."
"He is wise."
"Yes..." Thor sighed. "He is. His intelligence is keener than mind," he ended regretfully.
"That may be true – but knowledge and intelligence are not wisdom. When I look down... I see people, Thor, my people. Our people. The reason for what we do. These past few years, I have watched you grow – but you must grow and mature even more if you are to take the throne."
Thor groaned, "I want it, Father. I do! But..."
"What is a king, Thor?"
"Well... he is Lord of the land, protects the Nine Realms, rages war on beasts, creatures and beings, such as the Jotunn, who would do it harm."
"A king never seeks out war," Odin warned Thor.
"Certainly," Thor agreed, "but neither must we show weakness!"

Odin shook his head and sighed. "What I say does not appear to remain with you. You have much to learn yet, my son."

"You always say that."

Thor's words sounded sulky in the dark and Odin could not read his young child's face thanks to the falling shadows.

"Sadly, I must repeat myself since you refuse to listen. Stubborn as a mule, you are – and ever ready to break your mother's heart. From now on, from this day forth, I expect you, Thor, to put all your energy into your studies – and to give full attention while you attend to matters of the Court. Your mother spoke to me of the need to revisit lessons on the small courtesies expected..."

Odin's quiet voice drifted off into the quiet night of Asgard, drifting off in the light breeze. There was nothing in the Realm to hear but the wind and the soul of all which binds life together on golden Asgard. It drifted through the forests and mountains where the shadows shifted down to the edges of the great city. A world filtered in the ghostly moonlight of ragged night clouds.

[... this is how kings are made...]

[... some through lessons...]

[... some through trials...]

[... some through revolt...]

[... like iron and gold forged in the blacksmith's fire, great kings of legend are born through adversity...]

In the mists of time, when the world was young, the Sages once told of two great Jotunn warriors who clashed their horns and met in battle on the eternally flat, black and pale green Holkn Vollr. The plain, as legends say, was the great stage for a meeting of might which would change the face of Jotunheim itself. Was glorious combat sought for a mate? For a throne? For honour? None can say – but out of the battle of magic and strength, the Holdra River was carved where it streamed across the plains from the Vollrvatn.
To the south of that great River, the ancient of Meerauk rose – splendid and fair on the plains of the Holkn Vollr. Since the ages of old, the ancient capital has remained desolate – yet sacred, for it is the wellspring of the Jotunn and holds the origin of the Rites of the Court. Mysterious inscriptions lined its high crumbling lines in ancient, forgotten tongue – speaking of what? No one knew for certain.

As his Father and his Ancestors had done before him, Crown Prince Helblindi, head down, trudged in the face of the massive storm born on the cruel winds which swept across the Holkn Vollr. He followed in silence behind his Father on the long trek to Meerauk, left alone, as was tradition, with his own thoughts.

These were the beginning of the Rites which would one day prepare him for the Throne and give his Father freedom to return to the For-Eldra, to the snows, to the Ancestors. The Rites Of The Throne began in Silence and ended with Attainment. It was a lonely time, a lonely place, a lonely existence.

I guess, Helblindi sighed, that is what Kingship is... It is power, but it is responsibility. It is being united to all – and yet... Helblindi's eyes rose to inspect his Father's strong, unyielding back. It is loneliness. It is being the Mother of everyone... and of no one. The Crown Prince shivered at the memory of the brother he had almost long forgotten. The brother who was lost. The brother of whom no one spoke. The brother who should have been walking across the Plains behind Laufey-King. Helblindi stared ahead into the solid wall of white snow and saw nothing but a field of grey and white and red, a block of ice with spirals of magic from a set of absurdly small hands. When Meerauk eventually loomed – its grand black walls, stark and clean against the gloomy skies – Helblindi knew that it was now or never. He stepped forward. Goodbye, little brother, he thought as he passed through the ever-open gates. Now this is my burden, Helblindi straightened into the wind, chin set in determination. The Throne is mine – as it should be – and I will carry our glory onward.

Meerauk was silence, but Helblindi would be strong. It was his time.

[... like iron and gold forged in the blacksmith's fire...]

Chapter End Notes

There you go - awesomeness in a box. Or something like that. I hope.

Thor is around 20-22, Loki around 19-21. XD

Author's Note on Sif and the Warriors Three: Some folks have been voicing some worry/interest/concern about why Sif and the Warriors Three aren't getting along with Kol'la. I have a few things I feel I should point out.

#1 - remember what I said about unreliable narrators... Kol'la's point of view is biased. Do not trust him! It's like believing what Harry thought about Snape all through books 1-6.

#2 - think up your own reasons why they would dislike Kol'la - and use the movie as a springboard. Why don't they like Loki from the very start of the Thor movie? Well, he was a trickster and young and different and a bit of a douche and not very trustworthy as a whole and had a history of being jealous of Thor. In this fic, it's probably for similar reasons and add to the fact that he's still "new" and an "immigrant" and has no apparent respect for Thor and appears to have his own agenda. I'd also like to point out that Thor (who does many things but isn't a liar) says that Kol'la has gotten them all in trouble
before... so Kol'la is also a bit of a douche.

#3 - just because people don't like the main character of the story doesn't make them evil or bad. I actually don't see the previous chapter as being a sign necessarily of hate or intense dislike... they are young people - teens - who have emotions that come and go and they say dumb things and don't mean what they say all the time. Loki is hypersensitive, the others are the total opposite... so we just have a lot of fuel for arguing. It's like what happened between my sisters and brothers and I. We blackmailed each other intensely as kids/teens, ratted each other out, broke each other's things and did lots of crap - but if there was a common enemy, we banded together pretty quick.

#4 - I also think that because Thor treats Kol'la with less respect, the others take their cue as well. My main beef in the movies is that they are groupies and are all about Thor - with no real apparent care for Loki himself. (They get up to all sorts of nonsense in the movie which annoys me no end. They are NOT good friends for Loki, much less Thor, IMO.) The fact that Loki initially hides his blue arm from his friends, his sibling and his parents, speaks to me of vast broken relationships - and of course, in this fic, that is even easier to imagine because this Loki knows better than to believe that they'll accept him.

I hope this makes sense! In order to help everyone, I added a small scene to the front of this chapter and I hope that it creates a bit of something else... another picture of another facet of Kol'la's relationships.

Update in 5 or 6 days or so... and I hope you guys like this!
Let me know! Be sure to comment!
-KI

Numbers (for this quadrant):

0 - nai
1 - sa
2 - tho
3 - frei
4 - ah
5 - ko
6 - yul
7 - vee
8 - mah
9 - lei

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
om'a'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
Shadows At Noon

Chapter Notes

Thanks to all the lovely people who are faving, following and, most of all, reviewing! I'm feeling really encouraged - which I need, since I've been hitting a few writer's blocks on a couple scenes... and I've got my plate full with most of my private tutoring starting up again and in a week or two, my oral English classes will start... So yeah... things could potentially slow down as I get into the rhythm of school again.

A big shout out to my reviewers: Filigree, don'tpaytheboatman, miravisu, lemomina, YellowWomanontheBrink, iBlameGlobalWarming, Danea, Kai_Maciel, Ninjathrowingstork (and still catching up, Skywinder). Bless you guys!

And stuffs happen in this chapter~! A bit longer! We start to see a rhythm of life, I hope! And... what is that ahead... a barrier of rocks that go straight down...

Also note the Asgardian map far down below in the link section!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 35
Shadows At Noon

"I just..."

Don't know what to do, Kol'la finished Thor's unspoken admission in his head, knowing that between them such things could not be said, could not be voiced into the hot summer's air. Even after all our time together, Kol'la thought, even then – there is always this... this gap between us, this eternal damning inequality. And so, in the end, he will be alone – as all kings are, as is Tradition – this is the way of things...

Kol'la, for a moment, allowed himself to remember another great throne in an ancient hall, long disused and Elska's hints and mutterings from which he had gleaned the Truth. If Elska was right, Kol'la thought bitterly as he heaved a heavy load of hay from the cart in the corner over the edge of the stable door's high wall and into the manger of some courtier's mare, that burden could have fallen upon me... and I would have borne it well – if only to prove to...

He balked at the mental thought of the taboo word: father. The word Kol'la had never used – never would use – and the chance for acceptance which had long since died on white plains before the black gates of a desolate city.

I just don't know what to do.

Thor could not admit it and some dark part of Kol'la smirked at the increasingly frequent look of befuddlement on Thor's face during more recent days as the Crown Prince found himself moving from the role of 'watchful observer' to 'active participant' regarding Court matters.
A silence then descended between the two as Kol'la patiently waited for the Prince to speak his mind. Flies buzzed in the thick, warm sunlight of the mid-afternoon. Several birds chirped and at the door, a gaggle of geese honked abrasively as a small hound pup attempted to herd them. Horses stamped, shifted, nickered and whinnied in their respective, spacious stalls. Beyond the back door of the grand Royal Stables the sounds of a scolding cook clashed with the return derision of the grocer boy. Several stable-hands walked by, alone and in pairs with bits of harness, bridles or other riding gear in hand, every one of them busy. None stopped, for they knew better than to infringe on the conversations between the Crown Prince and his favoured friend.

Kol'la finished tending to his last horse while Thor leaned against a stack of hay, seated upon a pile of bales. His blue eyes glared up at the ceiling – and for a moment, Kol'la wondered if he would actually find out what was bothering the young Prince – but then Thor groaned, rubbed his eyes and sighed.

"I grow tired of Court these days," he began his usual complaint. "As usual, the bickering of aged witless men goes on apace – and Father allows all manner of foolishness to arise – particularly between the Court of Lords and the Court of the Mages. As if those who merely dabble in tricks should have a say in matters of state and war."

War? Kol'la snorted to himself. We are not at war. His green eyes flickered over the blonde warrior shrewdly. And that might be the problem... for young men raring to find a chance for honour and glory desire, above all things, a chance to prove themselves in battle.

"But Father says I must learn how to handle all manner of things – and that includes mediating such small matters." Thor eyed Kol'la as the green-eyed stable-hand folded his arms with a familiar disgusted look. "What now?" he sighed, then heaved himself onto his feet. "Come, Kol'la," Thor smiled quickly, banishing the dread subject, "the sun shines and I asked Commander Farfin and he told me you were free for the rest of the day until after supper – so I thought –"

"No."

"Kol'la!"

"I said 'no', Thor," Kol'la shook his head, divesting himself of his rough leather apron and smoothing out his course, green tunic.

"What are your plans – that you would say 'no' before hearing –"

"Thor," Kol'la replied smoothly, "how long have we known each other? No. Do not answer that. It is a rhetorical question to which we both know the answer. Furthermore, in all our time together, these many years, how often have I gotten in trouble thanks to some misbegotten plan of yours or the misadventure of fate when in your company? Compare the promise of accidents, maiming, punishment and injury to the promise of learning and bettering oneself. Now," Kol'la raised a finger, over-riding a sound of protest from Thor, "use what little sense you hold to divine what would better my lot for this free time given to me."

"Very well, I understand not wishing to come to harm," Thor sighed. "Although the Norns know that you have brought equal amounts of injury on your own head – and may I remind you, mine as well." Kol'la smiled quickly then – a sharp, cruel thing but full of amusement – and Thor grinned back, before shaking his head puzzled, "but... learning?" He asked with disgust, grimacing.

"Again?"

"Again?" Kol'la returned with a short laugh. "Why do you show surprise? Every time, Thor, this is how it goes – since the beginning -"

"It is because it is madness, Kol'la. To spend so much time with one's head in one's books... Reading... writing all those arcane words of yours in those treasured notes... the tricks you learn to weave. I swear, one day, I'll return and find you wearing the blue and white livery of a Mage's apprentice!"

Kol'la turned away at Thor's familiar refrain, face stony, mouth set in a thin, hard line. Jerking his
worn leather satchel off a nearby hook and pulling on a rather ugly, but practical, battered brown hat – the better to protect him against the hard light of the sun – he made his way around Thor and outside. Behind, Thor followed, voice raised in continuous protest. As was his wont, Kol'la ignored him – but unlike the usual (Thor giving up when they arrived at the Archives' doors), both halted at the sound of a familiar alarm.

With the dull clang-clang of the main watch tower's bell, the quiet large courtyard erupted into chaos. Courtiers, advisers, clerks and various Lords spilled out in bustling mass from the Great Hall. Stablehands, stable boys, messengers and lower staff scurried about as various warriors and commanders began to bawl out orders. Someone arrived on a frothing, sweating horse and was ushered into the tight ring of commanders and generals now grouped on the top of the stairs around Odin All-Father.

Kol'la, ignoring the stray curses sent his way as various men blundered past him, jostling him roughly, enjoyed the chaotic jumble – the mad energies which swirled about stirred up by emotion and the maddening call of war. And in the middle, he couldn't help but marvel at it – in the middle, he stands ever so calmly – Odin All-Father, the eye of the storm.

"Kol'la!" It was Thor. Again. "Kol'la! You idiot! Whatever are you standing there all agape for?" It was Thor, miraculously enough, already astride his personal favourite – and in his hands the long slender reins to Kol'la usual hack. "Come now! They are not going to wait about all day!"

Wordlessly, Kol'la turned about and, catching Commander Farfin's annoyed gaze, noted the subtle nod. He could almost hear his superior's disgusted sigh, but Kol'la also knew Farfin would be slightly pleased and rather relieved that at least Kol'la was showing more desirable inclinations – hunting and battling rather than studying and experimenting. Not a day went by without a rather snide remark or mild aspersion was cast upon Kol'la's propensity for magicks and seithr.

Not today, Kol'la grinned bitterly, disappearing into the nearby stable to find his personal cubby-hole in the room where the stable-hand weaponry was often stashed. Returning to his waiting horse with his arms in hand and cheap armour quickly buckled on, Kol'la gracefully mounted, taking up the slack of the reins, and gently guided his horse, Snjar, with the usual quiet clicking of his tongue. Within moments, the first and second companies left, joined by Thor, Kol'la and a group of younger warriors and mages, including Sif and the Warriors Three.

All of whom, we could've done without, Kol'la though sourly, watching Fandral lean forward to unclasp an unwitting Mage's Apprentice's saddle girth strap. Less of these hot-blooded young fools and more experienced soldiers such as General Tyr. As they moved past the courtyard's main gate, the slender, black-haired stable-hand glanced back at the tight knit group of generals now waiting for their mounts. I am surprised General Tyr isn't leading these companies, Kol'la mused. What has the All-Father planned?

"What happened?" asked Sif. "Bandits? Slavers?"
"Bandits, apparently – who are using some strange creatures from another Realm – to devastate the area no doubt – but no man can besmirch the name of Asgard and live," boasted Thor, grinning at Kol'la who just quirked his eyebrow in amusement.
"And with that," Kol'la declared, "we are now condemned men. And women," Kol'la added with another quick, sharp smile. "I did not see you there, Sif."
"The sun blazing from your new halberd must have blinded the poor boy," Fandral laughed at Sif who tried to ignore them.
"Well, he can hardly expect me to save him from his sad handicap," Sif retorted dryly. "It is Volstagg's turn to carry him home this time after all."
"I hardly -"
"Come now, children," Volstagg said heartily. "I thought it was obvious that as token woman for this
"Why me? I -"
"What bosom?" asked Kol'la acidly, interrupting Sif's protest. "I've seen more curves on a pine tree – and with less bristles -"
"Oho! The Silvertongue has emerged!" Fandral crowed, gloating at the glower on Sif's face.
"Unfortunately," Hogun sighed.
"Ha ha ha," laughed Thor breezily, his laughter wrapping around the group, smothering the sharp stings of hard words and submerging the everlasting tension with his usual oblivious serenity and good humour. "Come now, you two! It is a grand day – a sunny day – and it is promising us glorious battle with something other than bilgesnipe or wild boar. Smile, Kol'la! And do not look so heated, Sif!"
"If he remains silent," Sif replied sulkily, "then so will I."

Kol'la refused to reply to her and contented himself with planning her demise at the victory banquet to which she no doubt would be invited after the quest. It would serve her right, Kol'la thought coldly, and remind her of what I am capable.

…onward they trod…

…in the face of danger...

A clement wind blows from the upper ranges of the mountains, bringing with it the promise of rain some days or, on others, the hint of freshly fallen snow. Summer winds blow cool from the Storrfjall Mountain and in the warm winters, the breezes may shift, swirling round from the southern side of the Realm and bringing a warm touch – a promise of spring.

… they have come...

… arise and bring me my vengeance, Asgard...

… these interlopers will never see the sun set again...

Kol'la, as he rode forth on Snjar, shivered at the insidious wind which tugged on the red and gold pennants and at the gaily coloured rosettes and ornaments which hung from bridle and harnesses. The Spirit of Asgard was uneasy and impatiently pulled the warriors onward.

…listen carefully to the wind of Asgard…

…it is not wild and desolate but it is fierce and strong…

…it calls for blood…

…it desires, above all things, glory and power…

This was summer, when the fields lay thick and green and tantalizing. As the First and Second Company and Thor and his friends descended upon the bandits who had had the temerity to attack the Ageless Realm, the warm wind rustled through vegetable and fruit laden tree boughs and plant stalks. Thick fruity scents hung in the thick, humid air between the Valleys further inland and away from the refreshing tang of the sea air. Apparently the bandits had moved inland to the center of the Westfold, proving themselves to be rather mighty foes – and a perfect challenge for the Crown Prince.

Cursing fluently in All-Speak as he watched Thor disappear into the midst of the bandit group roaring with excitement and blood-lust, Kol'la began to summon a strong working best used for times
like these. The bandits, a mixed lot of aliens from Skrull and Ugora, had brought with them two Si'ro'yaniu, stone-lava beasts better suited to Realms such as Muspelheim. Standing several heads taller than the tallest warrior there, the two usually docile animals now charged back and forth across the fields, sowing destruction every which way they went.

Si'ro'yaniu... Kol'la, letting the others dash forward, wondered at the rare sight before him. Si'ro'yaniu... the fire bulls of the planet Yujin. Watching a pair of careless warriors fall under the wide hooves of the great beasts which towered over their heads, Kol'la sighed. The Si'ro'yaniu were peaceful beasts usually – living in large herds, traversing great distances over the lava- striated ash- scapes of their home planet, Yujin (or other similar planets). Dwelling in the shadows of the ever active volcanoes, these stone-lava beasts used their great horns to scrape through the newly laid piles of snowy ash to find the hardy red hohwa, fire-flowers, and to split open the still soft piles of lava, which they ate and drank. Gentle creatures, very old and wise – and often domesticated by other volcanic planet-based communities, the Si'ro'yaniu were raised for tough supple-stone hides perfect for armour and nutritious lava-milk which was enjoyed by the Stone-people.

They should not be here, Kol'la's hands twisted again as his original intention changed with anger at what the bandits had done. He had seen this before in the Battlehouse – creatures brought for game fighting, angry and scared beyond all reason – and mad for freedom. They were not meant for this and, having tasted blood and battle and the unreasoning call for hate and vengeance, will never be able to go back home.

He understood. Understood too well.

"Thor!" Kol'la bellowed. "THOR!"

Turning, the Crown Prince absently grasped his hammer as it returned to him and he caught Kol'la's eye over the long distance between them. Kol'la nodded and let loose his magicks which snaked forward and sank into the earth, creating an instant soft ground which sank under one Si'ro'yaniu, trapping it easily as a marsh. At that, Thor's Mjolnir flew through the air, hit the front plate of the head right between the eyes – and the young bull toppled over, squashing several of its Skrull handlers.

Kol'la silently watched it fall.

He understood. A spear in a still chest. So much blood spilled in desperation on the sands of the arena. One day, Kol'la thought as his eyes traveled over the still, rough black hide of the slain Si'ro'yaniu. The now unmoving sleek vicious horns which had been honed to unnatural, lethally sharp edges. The usual patterns of red lava beneath the cracks of hide slowly dying as it cooled from the inside out. One day the Void will take me as well. One day...

The other Si'ro'yaniu was still off in the distance, it's deep voice raised in a bawl of terror and anger. Kol'la found himself distracted as several insect-humanoid Ugora with tattooed grey carapaces raced his way. Deftly twirling his spear, Kol'la skewered two before he found himself on the defensive. Hogun's throwing stars landed in the skull of one bandit who had gotten close enough to drench Kol'la with foul breath before dying. Thankfully. There were a few more breathless moments and when he found some time to look about him, Kol'la discovered that Thor had gotten himself pinned between a few too many bandits.

Beyond Sif was yelling something – several commanders were rallying the men in a vain attempt to bring down the last Si'ro'yaniu - Volstagg was down on the ground hollering about getting a medic this instant – a few courtiers were left, fighting back to back – Hogun and Fandral were attempting to battle their way to Thor's side unsuccessfully – the young Apprentices had... where were they? Kol'la knew that far too many Aesir lay dead for his liking. This is impossible, Kol'la thought, for
The lean warrior-mage tore away from the last of his opponents – literally – for Kol'la had twisted off the Skrull's arm and thrown it away carelessly before gutting the rabid creature. Whipping about, Kol'la began to fight his way back to Thor's side, hoping he would make it in time. Thunder and lightning crackled again and again as storm clouds formed and bolts of lightning descended. And above it all, Thor's voice rang out – an unending roar of anger and power.

_The fool_, Kol'la thought incoherently, realizing that he wasn't going to make it in time. Pushing past others in his way, hair flopping irritatingly in his eyes, Kol'la's daggers appeared in his hands almost instinctively as he cut his way through anyone who tried to stop him.

"Thor!" he yelled, wishing he could move things with his mind. If he could banish Thor and push him – if he could move the idiot – if he could get his attention – if he could - "THOR! YOU NEED TO GET OUT OF THERE!"

The Si'ro'yaniu was careening, now frothing red streams of fire at the mouth, obviously crazed with the noise of battle and ear-shattering explosions and the pain no doubt radiating from the various swords and picks which had gashed and sunk into its dark hide now bleeding streams of fire. Kol'la knew that it could only see the crimson tide of war and battle, that it fought for the plains of rock and red petals upon which it would never roam again.

He knew. He understood – but he could not stop this anymore than he could stop the disintegration of Time or the hunger of the Void.

It barreled down the slopes of the gentle hills, crushing green and brown beneath its hooves and the ground rumbled. Sif was screaming something about the generals – Kol'la could barely take a word in – the air thrummed – the Si'ro'yaniu bellowed, its deep bass rattling the bones. Great spiked hooves moved forward inexorably, driven from behind by three Skrull bearing electrostaves.

_Electrostaves._ For a moment, all he could see were the Slavers coming again. The Slavers and their bright lights descending, the Jotunn scattering in every direction, babies crying. _Time_, he gasped to himself. _I need time. What do I do?_ Then it came to him. _A risk... but worth it._ Kol'la lunged forward, hands finding the ground as he began the swift-acting working again, the soil shifted beneath his feet as the shock wave spread forward answering his call.

[… Asgard howled…]

[… who is this who dares call on the golden powers that be…]

[… who are you…]

_How dare you, Other-Soul?_

The ground rippled and the Si'ro'yaniu stumbled forward, missing Thor and the swaying Ugaro and Skrull, it barreled into the rock wall behind the Crown Prince. Thor fell forward onto his knees, stunned by a side blow as some scattered rocks fell from above. Kol'la began to run forward but at the sight of the Si'ro'yaniu's feet beginning to find footing once again, he fell to his knees, placing his hands on the ground, and called on the forces which lay within him. The dreaded power – the ability which he abhorred yet needed: ice.

Ice ran outward and Kol'la hoped that no one would see the tell-tale tinge of blue to his fingertips as he attempted to retain his Aesir coloration. Cold blue and white surged forward – foreign and surprising, washing upward in a great wave as his magicks and the spirits of the universe pressed
inward and down. Waves like glass rushed upward and froze, killing Skrull and Ugaro where they stood and then, finding the feet of the Si'ro'yaniu, hardened, keeping it still in its tracks.

There was no world but his own – a world of wondrous colour. His eyes were filled with the spangles of red and gold, the fiery spirals of Asgard's soul, twining in some incredible, miraculous way with his own blue and green tendrils. Pain suddenly radiated from his lower back and stomach. The last tide of ice, which now reached up to the scarred withers of the beast, stopped suddenly as his arm snapped under the unexpected weight of an iron-clad foot.

A cry. His own voice – unrecognizably hoarse.

Kol'la turned – it was difficult to see underneath the shadow of the great beast which loomed up beside him. He turned – and out of the corner of his eye, he could see Hogun and Sif managing to drag Thor away, leaving behind Mjolnir – and in front of him – Kol'la looked up. He looked up – and there loomed a bandit, swathed in dark leathers and stylish technological armour, raising a bloodied electrostave. Blood seeped outward from his own bent armour, spilling from his stomach about his knees in a large puddle. He had been stabbed. He had been stabbed? Kol'la had no time to consider the matter. Sweeping the end of the electrostave to the side and then down, the masked bandit dealt Kol'la such a blow that it sent him sprawling sideways and down onto the soft ground. It took the dark-haired young one a few moments to struggle to his elbows. As he managed to raise himself with one arm, Kol'la cursed the arrogance of his opponent who so calmly paced about him, no doubt rejoicing in the stable-hand's weakness.

I am not weak, Kol'la set his jaw in determination as he continued to attempt to pry himself up, disregarding the darkness which was now rapidly encroaching on his vision. He could feel blood coursing down the side of his face – his right arm - his fighting arm was horrifically numb - but Kol'la ignored it as he looked up. Up the long spear and met frightful blankness in reflective eyes. A soulless thing, he thought disjointedly. A walking Void. The young Jotun would have laughed at the unexpected appropriateness of his fate. I was destined for the Void – and it has come for me... as my dreams foretold.

Cracking filled the air as ice creaked ominously. The electostave rose, flickering with white fire, and Kol'la bit back a cry as he tried to shift back – but found his left leg had not only been broken, but had been shattered in several places - and his right ankle throbbed warningly, making movement almost impossible. Almost impossible. Almost. He swayed back - where could he turn?

One more step, beloved – just one more step -

Once more - backwards – trust me...

Kol'la managed to inch back – and then -

There was nothing but fire and a ripping, roaring sound which rent the air in a high-powered jet of flame and light. Over his shoulder and upward, it filled Kol'la's narrowing vision – moving away from his line of sight, tearing through the head of the electrostave bearing bandit, and onwards, unstoppable into the very heart of the still bellowing Si'ro'yaniu, neatly beheading it as well.

What – Kol'la thought, as darkness gathered in. As the ice gave way finally, as the Si'ro'yaniu toppled, as the shadows fell over him, what... was that... He could see nothing – no – he could see the light and fire ray disappearing and the blue-white wall now running with a thousand lines, fragile after all. There was black hide bursting through ice as the weight sagged – as fire red ran out – as the head tumbled forward – rocks rattled under the force of horns which dug into the wall, gouging scars into the very land to show what atrocity had happened there. Onward it fell, unstoppable in its momentum and Kol'la struggled – but his legs would not move.
Move, he thought, move move move! Impossible. It was impossible. He could see black and blue and white and a spear in Toh's chest and a closed great black gate and wolves blotting out the moonlight. There was weight on his back, forcing him down painfully onto his arm – and pain filled his lungs – Kol'la's hearing was filled with nothing but the jerky gasps of his own heaving lungs – and he thrashed – only to find his legs had been trapped. He twisted about and found himself eye to eye with the Si'ro'yaniu's head now crushing his legs into the soft soil. It's dark brown eye was close - still open, now glassy and still. And empty.

Like the Void, Kol'la thought, stomach twisting sharply – the darkness was pulling downwards over his eyes like the shroud of ceremonial sacking over Elska's body before he was returned to the snows. Perhaps, he thought, in the end, that is all there is. We all return to it. It is what binds us all together. Darkness was falling now - shadows wavering and turning - the sun setting - light fading - and his fingers quivered as his right hand rose to trail upward to the lightless eye. He wanted to say 'I am sorry', to say 'This is not your fault', to say something with meaning. To assure it, to assure himself that in the end, there was no blame to be laid at their doors. That it was understandable - His fingers stilled on the rough, black hide as unconsciousness finally claimed him. I understand.

Chapter End Notes

A CLIFFIE! BWAHAHAHAHA! (not really a cliffie really, but yeah...)

So sad. I hope some of you guys caught the metaphor that is the Si'ro'yaniu!

Let me know what you think!

What happens next?

DUN DUN DUN.

(not really, I think you can guess who comes on in the next scene... if you use logic)

-KI

Author's Note on Points of View:

I am always interested in certain scenes being shown from various points of view. Kind of like a director in a movie with how he shoots and uses the camera. You can tell the change of scene by breaks. The bold text in the parantheses may signal a change in point of view or the use of the "-0-0-0-". For example, the beginning of Chapter 34 began from Sif's point of view but shifted to others. We'll see the POVs of certain characters coming up (Odin, Frigga, Laufey, various Avengers, etc) - and we have seen others before. You can always double-check the point of view by whose thoughts are being voiced. I only voice one person's thoughts per scene. Hope this makes sense!

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-eff'er
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
Ripples Of Change

Chapter Notes

Wow! Thanks guys - for being patient and all. First day of school went OK, I think... More people following this story and favoring it! THANKS SO MUCH! Be sure to chat! I love talking about writing and the fandom!

Thanks to: lemomina, Uriko, iBlameGlobalWarming, Kai_Maciel, Danea!

And more plot happens~! What a plotty story this is! (death) I hope that we can see some interesting sides to people in this chappie though! Lots of groundwork being laid for the "Thor"/"Avengers" stuff here! In a way...

BE SURE TO CHECK BELOW FOR LINKS TO THE ASGARD MAP!

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 36
Ripples Of Change

Who we hold so deeply in our heart...

Who we watched from untimely birth...

Who carries all our hopes...

He struggled upward through dark waters, dark waters which weighed him down and pulled on heavy armour and the spear which hung limply from his hands, which fell now from unresponsive fingers, which plunged deeper below into dark. He could not speak, could not hear at first – but there was dark. Darkness fell.

[...fell...]

Wake, beloved, who has come so far...

[...on Jotunheim...]

A wide, seemingly eternal flat swath of land lay before him. He turned about slowly - it was the same from all sides - a vibrant field of green rising, running out to meet the sky of vivid of blue. Green and blue. No, he thought, there are others... Reds, purples, pinks, yellows.

Reaching down, he plucked absently at the blue-red bloom brushing against his ankle and, drawing the flower up, straightened to stare at the soft fragile stem in his fingers. His right hand rose to brush across the petals.
Inhale.

The air about him began to chill.

Exhale.

A buff of breath barely visible in the frozen air - he glanced down and saw it there in his hands - a crystallized flower - frozen beauty - he jerked - it fell - from nerveless fingers -

Inhale.

It fell.

Exhale.

It shattered into a thousand pieces. Even more - until it was naught but dust - like a ripple in a pond, the force disintegrated the now frozen world. Naught but dust - dust and fragments rising to meet a dead sky.

Inhale.

And below -

Exhale.

Below gaped the Void. Beneath his feet, it opened up and he was falling - He was falling, swallowed by the ancient enemy of his childhood nightmares: the ever hungry Void. It was empty, they had said in Utgard, empty and eternally starved for life.

-"it was empty it was empty it was empty-

However, they were wrong. It called to him. It said:

You are mine.

[...silence fell on Jotunheim...]

Time passed, uncounted - and then the darkness eased. A smudge of something paler, a lightness, a grey towards which he moved instinctively. Dappled and moving and changing. Reaching upward, he tried to find his way.

Go, beloved...

Take what is yours!

You have never been so near as now.

Elska? He thought hazily. No... not Elska. Never him. Could not be...

The grey spread and white pierced through, flickering and moving in random patterns as though he were floating beneath the surface of a lake and looking upward at the sun. His pale hand rose from his side as he turned to watch it. Long fingers reached out – and a hand emerged through the light to take his. With a gasp, Kol'la emerged.

[...the in-between world is walked by those who sleep...]

-"The in-between world is walked by those who sleep..."
"What happened?"

A pause. Rustle.

"He will live. 'Tis but a broken arm - and the left leg is badly shattered. The bruises he gained in battle and the mild fracture of his ankle will fade. The ribs were damaged also, but those will heal... with time. The..." Another pause. "The lower wound from the -"

"It was alien technology, Skrull, I think. Or Slaver. I was given no time for thought, for when we arrived on the battlefield, the bandits had already laid waste - and the boy was on his knees. Gugnir made short work of the attacker - and creature... Many years have passed since these hands have taken life with violence." A sigh. "These young ones still must struggle for peace..." A silence, then: "He looks too pale."

"That is what worries me... for the weapon had plunged deeply and all the way through, and was extracted with great force, wrecking great damage on his internal..." A pause, then quieter. "And Thor -"

"Thor is well?"

"He is well."

"Does he know?"

"No."

"It was a close thing."

"Yes," Frigga whispered.

"Very close," Odin repeated. "On all fronts for the both of them."

"And?"

"Nothing," Odin finally replied to her unspoken question. "I came in time... and the truth is ours for the holding. We will say nothing."

"You cannot think -"

"Search your heart, dear one," was the old King's soft reply. "What does it tell you? What has your foresight seen?"

A long silence then and choked cry.

"This is... not right..."

"No," Odin drew his wife into a close embrace, looking over her shoulder and down at the pale form of the young man once named Kol'la. "It was never right – from the beginning... but this is our chance to ease the ills the mistakes of Fate incurred upon us."

Frigga nodded against his strong shoulder. Times of change had come – for Thor, for the stable-hand, for all of them.

-0-0-0-

The Healing Halls of Asgard's Royal Palace, unlike the rest of the grand, golden and intricately decorated palisades, halls, rooms and passageways, soothed the soul with gentle blues and greens and little decor to overwhelm the eyes. Light curtains fluttered with the ocean breeze blowing off the Asgarthaharr, the Sea of Asgard. It was a cool wind carrying refreshment in the stifling heat of the Asgardian summer. Soothed by victorious battle, the wind of Asgard carried nothing but a serene song of golden grain, young cattle and fruit-laden orchards.
When Kol'la opened his eyes, his first glimpse was darkness slowly giving way, in reverse as it were of what he had last seen – as though he had woken up underneath a death shroud and even now was finding new life within. Fingers twitched as eyes recognized a familiar patterned interweaving knot in the high ceiling above him – the Healing Halls. Thanks to their misadventures, Thor and Kol'la both had visited this place for some kind of bandaging before.

*But never have we woken up here,* Kol'la mused. The warrior-mage sighed as he realized that Sif and the others would no doubt not let him forget that he had once again expended himself and proved his comparative weakness. *I am surprised that they are not here to make such jokes at my expense... Nor has Commander Farfin arrived to scold me – surely I was late for my duties.*

With that thought, the stable-hand turned his head and attempted to raise himself to his elbows – and failed entirely, feeling even more drained than usual. Cursing softly, Kol'la tried again, this time managing to heave himself onto his side in a vain attempt to get his legs over the edge of the bed. One of the curtains behind him slid aside with a light rattle and Kol'la tensed as he realized that he had been caught by, no doubt, the ever feisty Healer Reitha or her incredibly strict attendant, Aerith.

However, instead of an instant barrage of high-pitched scolding, there was only a slight gasp – and before he could move, Kol'la found himself being gently pulled back into his previous position on the bed by an unfamiliar, well-kept hand. As he turned, Kol'la found himself face to face with the worried face of the Queen herself.

Her Highness Queen Frigga was, as ever, lovely and fresh-faced despite the time years had laid upon her. The Vanheim heritage she bore, they said, had gifted her with more than youth but also innate grace and the gift of Sight. Golden hair ran down in a stylish, yet practical way, spilling over soft blue fabrics which swathed her shoulders. Below, a stylish peach-white girdle cinched a slender waist and then more blue spilled downward to meet the paving.

Struck dumb, Kol'la found himself instinctively following her unspoken orders as she laid him back on the pillows, propping him up only a little before clucking over him in an absent-minded way as skilled fingers ghosted over now red-stained bandages. Shaking her head, she sighed and then smiled as if remembering something – a memory, no doubt, of another time her husband or son had come to her for care. Carefully pulling the soft blue cotton of the healers' robes away, Frigga revealed a carefully applied bandage which had been wrapped about Kol'la's light-muscled, yet thin torso.

He found himself incapable of saying anything – he, Kol'la, who could find words for any occasion. It was frustrating to say the least. Something in his body's tension must have translated, for then the Queen looked up and her blue eyes met his.

"How do you feel?" she asked softly, placing a hand briefly on his forehead, smoothing away unevenly cut black strands.

"I feel... well... lady, I mean, Your Highness... I mean..." Unable to look away. Stammering. Like a fool. Kol'la wished he could bury himself, even in his pillows if need be. Dull heat flooded his face.

"Just call me, Frigga," she smiled then as if he had said something meaningful. "All my dearest patients do... and truly, I am glad you have finally awakened."

"How long -"

"A good week. I am afraid to say -"

"Oh no -" Kol'la paused as he realized he had just interrupted the Queen of Asgard. Green eyes rounded with fear and shame that he should show his poor manners so quickly. "I – I apologize -"

"No, dear, I understand," Frigga's smile became, if possible, even bigger and brighter. Blue eyes twinkled as she mischievously added, "I was about to say that Thor has been a lost soul without you
Then she looked down and began to carefully unwind the bandaging. It was a difficult process and Kol'la found himself managing to prop himself up enough for her to pass the strips from underneath him more easily. Small squares of herb-packed poultices and various other patches were slowly revealed – now definitely stained crimson. When he finally was able to lie back, Kol'la allowed the room to steady about him, feeling a bit more dizzy and light-headed than he would like to admit. Meanwhile, the blood-soaked bandages were removed and new were laid upon the slowly healing wound – this time bound with a simpler fastener.

When she was done, the blue robe was drawn again over Kol'la's chest and the sheets were pulled up about his waist and tucked in quite tightly as if attempting to trap the young man back in the bed. Kol'la did not protest, but watched Frigga instead, closely, almost suspiciously as she disposed of the bandages and lined up a variety of potions he was to take in order to encourage the healing process. Various stones lay heaped up in a bowl on a far table with a stack of fresh bandages and other rare herbs and things usually stored for rather serious injuries.

"It was... it was bad?" He finally found himself able to ask and he coughed, throat a bit dry. "Well," Frigga's voice was a bit muffled as she hung up a bit of fresh towelling and then brought over a pewter cup of water for him to drink out of slowly. "Well, yes, it was... bad..." She sat down and helped him drink his fill and placed the cup by his bedside table, blue eyes glistening with something he did not wish to name. "We were... all very... concerned. Worried, for you were not responding to the regular treatments." A sharp glance here covered by another serene smile. "Perhaps it was the weapon, we cannot say..."

"Thor – he is – he is well?"
Frigga laughed and shook her head, "Yes, yes, I am afraid my poor lummox is doing much better than we would like. One would think that a concussion would at least slow him down a little – but he was so vehement about hunting down the rest of the bandits and -" Here, she sighed, "Odin All-Father had to calm him down a bit when he saw you lying in... well, there was much blood, apparently."

"He stabbed me, I think. The bandit, I mean," Kol'la's fingers quivered over small pile of bandages on his stomach now hidden by robes and warm blankets. "From behind... I couldn't... I couldn't tell because of the moment – it was all so fast -"

"Yes, that is what Odin told me," Frigga leaned forward to take Kol'la's slightly trembling hand in hers. "But it is over now – and thanks to you, my boy is safe. We are so proud of what you did." "It was just my -"

"We thank you," Frigga's gentle voice cut through Kol'la's dismissive remark, "from the bottom of our hearts."

For a moment, they said nothing and then Kol'la nodded awkwardly, not certain of what he ought to do with his hand in hers. Part of him wished to pull away, another part of him - the young child from the Gothahus deep down inside yearned for her to remain.

"You are..." The young man struggled for the words. "Welcome."
"Now, I would have you rest and I will sit and read some book that Thor brought for you. I brought my own, since my son said that you enjoyed reading above all, of which I heartily approve... Sadly, we will have to sample the delight that he selected - let us see what he got you – ah!" Here she laughed – a tinkling, magical sound – and Kol'la, eyes closed, revelled in the light laughter he had never heard before. "A treatise on the history of intergalactic piracy and the various technologies of bandits. A little too late if you ask me."

Kol'la grunted and coughed a little – the corner of his lips turning up in a reluctant smile and a well-hidden laugh. A foreign thing, yet... not entirely unwelcome. And, for the first time in his life, the
abandoned child inside of him wondered if this was what it was like after all, if this was what the word Mother meant for those so blessed with them. Like Elska, he thought lazily, but softer.

"Let us see. The first chapter is entitled 'Piracy From The Dawn Of Time'. Hm. That seems rather presumptuous at best, but nevertheless, onward we forge – it begins with – 'The origins of all things, as is usual, must begin with earliest -""

-0-0-0-

Frigga’s soothing voice lulled Kol'la into peaceful sleep. Rising silently, the Queen watched her newest, now-sleeping patient - still too-pale face tipped forward with recently washed and combed dark-hair curling around his ears. The green, sharp eyes were now hidden, but she would not forget what she had seen in them, pain, fear, uncertainty and an aching want. Her chest tightened at the thought of what had forged such a young man. She gazed at her hand, noting how his fingers had twined tightly with hers.

No, she thought wistfully, brushing away long dark strands from his smooth forehead and gently kissing it. Leaning back, Frigga took her seat again without reclaiming her hand. He is here now... and I will not let him go. Not until... not until he has what he fears to need.

[...and so something that was made which can never be unmade...]

[...and a bond was born...]

[...will never be broken...]

There, in that cool, quiet world, the minutes and hours ticked by slowly and peacefully, interrupted only for short intervals by the outside world as represented by Thor and those who knew the quiet stable-hand.

Thor brought with him the smell of green grass, blue skies, warm sun and pungent sweat unleashed from gold armour and dark leathers. Sif and the others stood a few paces back, always, uncertain on what to say to the slender warrior who had, against all expectations, proved himself in a way none had done before. Nevertheless, Volstagg’s young wife held no such reservations and in thanks sent along sweet pastries and other tasty food which were never given the chance to strain the young stable-hand’s stomach thanks to Frigga’s stringent dietary routine.

Commander Farfin came once as well, smelling of horse, straw, shat, well-treated leather and the odoriferous compost heap. The gruff man sat uneasily on the chair by Kol'la's bed, feet planted firmly apart, scratching his greying, wiry hair. He spoke of Kol'la's charges now given to a new stable-hand named Torna, who he thought was a complete waste of time – as usual for most beginners.

It puzzled Kol'la – that Farfin should speak of Kol'la the stable-hand in the past tense when he was so obviously there and more than willing to return. Yet, the young man said nothing and fell further silent as he contemplated the increasingly frequent times he had woken to find Odin sitting at the foot of his bed in the further chair, watching him sleep.

Odin All-Father was plotting something – that much was certain. But what? Kol'la wondered.

A week later, Kol'la began to walk on his own two feet again to the relief of Thor. It was a good moment – to finally be free. Free to go where? Kol'la wondered. What do I do now?
One night after the evening meal, the great door to the Healing Hall opened and when Kol'la's curtain slowly moved aside to reveal three mages and Odin, the almost healed patient suddenly understood. Calmly laying the book he had been lazily perusing aside, folding his hands and attempting to look wise and mature, Kol'la watched as Odin took the chair at the foot of his bed, as was his wont, and the other Mages arranged themselves about him: High-Mage Agaeti, Mage Hrotha and Mage Flarathir.

"We have come here this evening with the purpose of ascertaining the fitness of one so-named Kol'la to join the ranks of apprentice within the Mage's Court," High-Mage Agaeti's pompous voice paused and Kol'la found himself hard put not to burst out laughing at the incongruity of the entire situation.

On the other hand, he sobered up as he realized that Odin did look entirely serious and that the other Mages looked rather thoughtful as they surveyed him, this appears to be happening for certain... and even though they do not believe the All-Father entirely, being the skeptical, power-hungry scholars they are, this is my opportunity show them – show the All-Father my worth.

Kol'la straightened a little and listened a bit more carefully as the High-Mage continued, "Furthermore, this has been mandated by Odin All-Father himself, Highest Mage of Asgard's Council of Mages, and so sponsored, Kol'la of Asgard, will you step forward to take the trials on such a time as when you have been fully recovered?"

"I will," Kol'la replied quietly, lifting his chin to meet the High-Mage's piercing stare. "I will and thank you."

"Very well," nodded the white-haired man. "We have heard and some apprentice's witnessed your abilities first hand in battle – and tonight, if possible, we wish to see a token of your seithr."

"Here and now?"

"Indeed," Mage Flarathir smiled then coolly. "Perhaps the task is too much for the boy, Agaeti – he does after all still look rather -"

"I can do it," Kol'la's left hand twisted then and suddenly from the middle of his palm a flame of bright fire leaped and then quivered calmly and hovered there.

"There you go," Hrotha smiled delightedly. "Just as Garyth told us! So natural and so quick! Wonderful!"

"The boy will go far," Odin said as well just as Flarathir opened his mouth, no doubt to douse Hrotha's enthusiasm for the supposed boy-wonder. "He has a long way to go," blue eyes gazed at green measuringly, "but he will get there. Where he ought to be."

"Pardon, Your Highness, but -" Agaeti paused as Odin raised a hand.

"My wife has seen it also and this is the road we must all take. Together."

Kol'la said nothing, green eyes wide as the words sank in.

...my wife has seen it...
...this is the road we must all take...
...together...

Before he could say anything, Odin rose to his feet.

"Come, Agaeti. There is much to discuss before the night is over." The King paused and looked down at Kol'la, face still inscrutable and Kol'la tensed as the older man nodded. "Rest well – there is a long battle ahead of you."

And with that, they departed, leaving the hall silent, the perfect place for Kol'la to mull over the words spoken. The riddles. The hints. The promises that seemed to good to be true. Or were they warnings?

...this is the road we must all take...
Together, he thought, watching the candlelight flicker softly on the ceiling overhead. At least... at least... Kol'la drifted off to sleep slowly. At least I will not be alone...

[...this is the road we must all take...]

[...together...]

[...it starts here...]

[...as it did under empty skies...]

[...the empty skies of Jotunheim...]

[...they are waiting...]

Chapter End Notes

There we have it. Another step for Kol'la to take. Another step... closer to Loki. Loki is coming in Chapter 40! (Or not... since I've had to insert a couple of chapters. Ugh.)

A few things to note:

1. Part of this chapter - the Frigga/Loki scene was so hard to write... It'd be great to hear feedback on it. Let me know what you think! (Even if it's just to say, "COOL!" or "WHAT IS THIS SHITE?!"

2. If you have fanart for this fic or something like that, be sure to give me a shout so I can spam on Tumblr and FFNET and elsewhere. XD

3. Be sure to check out the sketches and maps and fanart for this fic on my profile page! (scroll down)

4. Question time!

Q: Is Loki a shape-shifter in this tale?
Author's Note: IMO, if you watch "Thor", you see baby!Loki hold onto Odin's thumb and then shift his skin colour. I don't think Odin put the glamour on him (as he does in some stories/myths/comics), but that Loki is himself a shapeshifter of a certain level naturally, which could increase with power and effectiveness if he practiced. If you cast your memory back to those "good ol' days" on the mining colony, we see his first shape-shifting abilities when he changes his skin. However, I would say that his shape-shifting ability IS STILL linked to his magic, so with an immense loss of magic or coming into contact with his homeworld magic (using ice or the Casket) would cause him to revert to his Jotun colouring. I hope this makes sense!

Update in 5 days or so~!

See ya round!-KI

Alien Glossary:
'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
**What New Seasons Bring**

Chapter Notes

First, as usual! A HUGE THANKS to people who chatted and reviewed my last chapter! I'm so encouraged! Thanks to Skywinder, lemomina, iBlameGlobalWarming, Kai_Maciel, ImperialDragon, YellowwomanontheBrink, Fandancer, laSamtyr!!!

Second, be sure to check out a new fanart for Ulfrbarn by Merichuel!!! Really awesome!

NO, SERIOUSLY, CHECK IT OUT.

Third, have you seen Tom Hiddleston with Cookie Monster? DELAYED GRATIFICATION! (that's what my writing style is all about~!) (haha) But man... I wanted to be Cookie Monster, literally oozing all over Tom Hiddleston's arm. (sigh)

A bridge kind of chapter - but with some important info in it! Keep an eye out!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 37
What Seasons May Bring

[...summer gives way to autumn...]

[...green turns to gold and red...]

[...and then the winter comes...]

[...white, marching down the mountainsides...]

[...thus, seasons pass...]

[...and time...]

In some ways, everything had changed. No longer did Kol'la rise before the sun under aged wood rafters among the rising heat and stink of horses and alongside the other unwashed, disgustingly cheerful stable-hands – stable-hands content with their lot in life and never raising their eyes to the beckoning horizons.

[...to the busy skies of Asgard...]

[...the Great Blue calling...]

No longer did Kol'la work with the large, gentle mares and feisty stallions of the King's Royal Stables. No longer did Commander Farfin bellow his name in his usual annoyed growl, which often held undertones of good-humoured long-suffering.
No, all this had passed. Time had brought change, wrought change.

No longer was Kol'la clad in the standard course brown, black and green cloth of the stables, but now he wore, daily, the blue and pale creams of the Apprentice's uniform. There was a dark black stocking cap, the blue and pale cream tunic over a cream undershirt with blue interwoven armlets and below, black breeches with polished black, knee-high boots. Over top and across his blue-clothed chest, Kol'la slung a small satchel, perfect for storing herbs, stones or small notebooks, and a smaller dagger scabbard attached to his slender set of leather belts hung at his other side.

Time brought a later wake-up call – a quieter one as the far away clang of the Bell rang out, announcing breakfast. Passing through the quadrants and the great, grey halls, there was only the quiet shuffle of feet and the sonorous chanting of various higher level Acolytes as they tended to the straight rows of flourishing herbs and plants under their care. Songs of blessings and melodies of tender workings which encouraged the flowers and greenery to grow to their fullest potential.

Time brought Kol'la better meals, finer clothing and more intelligent company, as teachers and fellow Healers, Acolytes and serious-minded Apprentices welcomed the newcomer into their fold – carefully yet warmly. The Mage Archives was the regular haunt of Kol'la, the quiet spot where he browsed the rare scripts of spells and various workings long recorded by mages before. The halls too encouraged thought as men and women congregated in dimly lit corners, voices appropriately hushed as they discussed various theories on what transpired during some spell or on the particular workings of some herb or crystal. On rare occasions, a sharp voice rose in heated debate – and echoed along the arched halls and pillars – and then, all conversation would cease as heads would turn to peer at the one who had disturbed the peace.

Upon inhaling the familiar, musky scent of ancient scripts and well-tended books, at first Kol'la thought that he had finally arrived in the place he could call home. This is it, he had sighed to himself with pleasure as long fingers trailed over the worn books neatly ordered upon the long bookshelves. However, as time passed on, Kol'la began to slowly realize that in some ways, things had never changed at all.

The Aesir remained, as always, uninterested in expanding their magical arts. As Kol'la searched through the various tomes, revelling in ancient knowledge from the Nine Realms and beyond, the young scholar came to realize that his fellow classmates showed no such interest. None of them seemed to be inspired by or excited about the practical side of spell-casting: shields, summoning, projection of self and the enforcement of will upon material things. Bound by the standards of the King's Court, the Mages were consistently placed in limited positions of power, unable to show their true strengths – and happy, for the most part, to remain thus.

Once again, Kol'la found himself defending his studies against Thor's careless words. Several times, they came to blows in and out of the arena. Within the arena constrained by Asgard's stifling strictures, the battles rarely ended well for Kol'la, reminding him once again how easy it was to fail oneself and the expectations of others. After one such exchange, Kol'la tore away from his close friend and stormed off into the heart of the Mage's Court, the largest archives with handy corners within which to hide, the place he knew Thor could not penetrate. There, within the comforting silence, hours seemed to pass by like years.

[...and so time passes...]

[...but some things never change...]

[...the world immutable...]
"Your studies..." Odin's voice broke into Kol'la's thoughts one early evening, jolting the young, dark-haired Apprentice out of a particularly focused look at a treatise about the Ways, the Hidden Paths between the worlds. Aged fingers wandered over the dark maroon, blue and black covers of the books which Kol'la had laid out, opened to various chapters on long-distance travel through the Void. The single, weary eye flitted over the words and the old King's fingers traced the page lightly. "These are..." He trailed off.

Kol'la rose cautiously, green eyes watching the powerful older man – the one called Odin All-Father, who stood before him in simple dark leathers and little decorations in the way of gold. It was a relaxed look and was nowhere near as bright and glorious as the armour the Asgardian King usually wore in his Court. White hair fell over broad shoulders and an equally well-groomed beard fell neatly down to the All-Father's chest.

"Agaeti is an aged man," Odin sighed and started again. "We are all aged men." He nodded and then shook his head. "As time passes, as I watch my son grow tall and wiser with the years, I know it even more. We have aged and time demands we pass on what we know to those whose paths run into the future."

The young, dark-haired Apprentice did not reply, but, fingers flexing slightly over his notes as if protective of his ideas, he watched the King respectfully. A smile crossed Odin's face as he took in the wide-shouldered, well-set stance. Kol'la was not afraid as most would be in his position.

"Agaeti is an aged man," the King repeated, "and the young ones, such as you, are the ones to whom we look – your talents and skills are what Asgard needs... I knew that from the first day I saw you."

"I am glad," Kol'la finally said, neutrally.

"But you are not happy," Odin stated. "Not entirely."

Kol'la hesitated, then admitted: "There are moments..." He paused, uncertainly.

"Speak, son," Odin replied softly. "This will be for my ears alone."

Kol'la nodded slowly and then reluctantly added, "There are moments when I feel the stifling heat of Asgard more strongly." Another pause. "More strongly than other days."

"Yes. The burden of youth is freedom. The burden of age is responsibility." Odin circled about to take a seat opposite of where Kol'la had been sitting. Slowly Kol'la followed suit, green eyes never shifting from Odin's single blue one. "It is a difficult passage – for some of us, more difficult than others. There are days when I think of the future and wonder if it is as inevitable as my good wife believes, particularly in regards to my son. My son, who, I am to understand, has taken you into his confidences."

At those words, Kol'la's fingers slowly interwove together and settled with carefully constructed calm on top of the pages of notes before him. His gaze shifted to some place over Odin's left shoulder, eyes carefully blank and revealing nothing.

"I do not wish you to break that trust," Odin hastened to add. "Merely to take upon your shoulders a serious charge – which you may take as extension of my trust, for you have become a great practitioner of seithr and strategy, upholding my son during many of your... misadventures."

"Your Highness -"

"It is that you continue what you have started – to hold onto this kinship, to watch his steps when the path grows dark and to speak your mind as is necessary. To your own heart and commonsense, be true." The aged man caught Kol'la's eye and the younger man bit his lip before glancing down at the notes beneath his slender fingertips.

"I feel you overestimate my abilities to affect your son -"

"I feel I underestimate you more often than I should."
"I am truly not -"
"But I believe you are," Odin smiled encouragingly. "You have curbed many of Thor's excesses and have encouraged him to think a little before he acts."
"Although, there have been many times I have not been successful -"
"Yes," an indulgent smiled then, "more because you are also prone to mischief as well."
"Perhaps," Kol'la replied grudgingly.
"Nevertheless, it would ease this old man's heart to know that you will continue to stand at my son's side to the best of your abilities."
"You trust me to be a friend?"
"No," Odin said after a moment, his words measured and heavy as stones sinking into the serenity of the stillness between them. "No. I trust you to be a brother."

Kol'la's head jerked then a little, as if he had been burned and his fingers tightened a little around the feathered quill atop the cream papers. Green eyes widened, glistened and then grew distant as if remembering something.

"Brother," he finally said, neutrally, but the word was filled with a thousand unspoken questions.
"Have you a brother?" Odin asked.

-0-0-0-

Inhale.

Brother. The word brought up a name almost immediately: Helblindi. Elska's few words spent on King Laufey and the Royal Family. A faceless Mother, an unknown Father, and a brother – a brother I know. He knew now – a brother who could not be. Where there other brothers? He did not know. Do not need to know. Or so I thought... Brother. Family. What was family but expectation and eventual disappointment? Surely that cannot be what Odin desires for Thor – unless I am the useful fodder, the necessary foil... Brother.

Exhale.

"A brother?" Kol'la's voice sounded distant and cold to his own ears. "No."

A silence. The candle flickered and Odin said nothing for a moment, but Kol'la did not amend his assertion. Odin nodded slowly and continued:

"I had two brothers – now I have but one..." A sigh. "Time is cruel..." Then: "They are what all kings need: a wife and family. What I have failed to give Thor."
"In matters of love and... well..." Kol'la trailed off delicately, raising an amused eyebrow, "I would not be too concerned on marital matters concerning Thor."
"No," Odin finally cracked a smile. "He reminds me of myself when I was his age. Impetuous, headstrong and too easily swayed by passion. No. It is the other matter. We never were able to give him a sibling, and so he is threatened with the lack of too necessary hard-headed counsel – and someone else to rely on besides whoever allows herself to become his wife."
"He has many friends to rely on – I am..." Kol'la glanced away and then down to his hands and the variety of colour in the feather. "I am no one."

The feathers brushed and then crinkled among his fingers as an older, stronger, callused hand laid on top of his, a warm heat. Kol'la stared blindly down at the King's hands now clasping his. He opened his mouth – and his fingers trembled as he considered pulling away, but Odin's grip tightened just a little as if in reassurance and command.

"Now... that," Odin's voice broke the heavy silence with a quiet murmur, "is a lie."
"I have no one – I am no one," Kol'la stubbornly repeated. "You have my son's love and loyalty, you have yourself. No matter what name you bear, there is only one of you, and the flow of magicks around you testify to the importance of your existence."
"Your – the Queen, she has – she has seen it," Kol'la said bluntly, a bitter smile crossing his face. "Seen the uses Asgard may have –"
"No," Odin swiftly cut in, "well, yes, there will be good for us – but your star shines just as brightly."
"So it is a treaty then. An agreement. An alignment."
"If you must see it as such," Odin sighed, "then yes."
"To be a... brother..."
"It is our dream for the both of you – to grow together and use what has been given to you to bring peace to the Nine Realms."
"A nameless wanderer and a Prince," Kol'la smiled bitterly. "I think the Nine Realms is in for a world of trouble."
"Perhaps, but I have faith."
"Very well."
"You need not make such a heavy decision so quickly," Odin chuckled then, rising. "Think on it – and I will come another day."
"No," Kol'la rose as well, shoulders straightening and chin set with determination. "It seems clear to me."
"A quick mind and strong intuition." Odin nodded. "Then I shall see you. Soon."
"Sorry? I shall see you soon?" Kol'la blinked, puzzled.
"For supper," the King smiled. "My wife will be delighted to have you join us. He clapped Kol'la's shoulder absent-mindedly as he passed. "You will not regret it – she will no doubt put some extra effort and make the pastries herself... quite delicious, I think. But then," his smile grew fond, "I may be biased."

With that, Odin left Kol'la standing there in the middle of the small alcove before his precious tomes and careful scrawl of notes and flickering candle which ran with white wax down the iron candlesticks. Standing there in silence – dumb-struck in deep thought, wondering what had really happened.

[...and so time brings changes...]

[...even the Realm Eternal's constant Spirit is stirred...]

[...and the young folk strike out to find their fortunes...]

[...meet their fates...]

Fall followed summer again, bringing autumnal colours of red and gold and orange and purple – and the hounds howled in the crisp, cool air as the foxes sped home through the bristly underbrush and icy cold rivers tumbling down from the mountains. Fields now full of ripe corn and wheat and orchards hanging thick with other delicious things were swiftly harvested. Magical spells for agriculture and other remedies for health kept the healers and alchemists busy – and Kol'la found himself embroiled in a particular spell for fire-based shields against wild wolves which could be easily erected by lower-level Apprentices for the benefits of the villagers living in the outer limits of the cities and towns.

Winter fell heavily – thick, white snow laying over the hard grown like a warm blanket. Kol'la enjoyed the cool air, often volunteering to take the necessary journeys out to the smaller towns of Harrborg and Villrborg in order to deliver various potions, remedies or create practical workings for the townsfolk. On those days, he took Snjar out, inhaling the sharp air, feeling more alive than ever.
Revelling in the silences, Kol'la enjoyed the quiet quests out to the further reaches of Asgard. They were not usual quests such as Thor enjoyed – and if at times Kol'la left Asgard all together in his slowly expanding exploration of the Dark Ways and the Untrodden Paths through the Void, that was for his knowledge alone.

Discussing the variety of ways one could travel between worlds – between Space and Time – with his fellow Apprentices (and then, Acolytes), Kol'la began to realize that most were only too happy to rely on the good graces of Heimdall and the glory of the Bifrost. The Hidden Paths, the Untrodden Paths, the Dark Way was dangerous, they said, and best left to the elves and other desperate folk of the Nine Realms. Raised eyebrows, dark insinuations and the shaking of heads were signals enough to the cautious Kol'la, and he never raised the subject with his colleagues or teachers again.

So, the years passed by calmly enough, filled with short quests for the Mage's Court or longer quests, protecting Thor's back. Interspersed were long periods of study, in which Kol'la grew in knowledge by leaps and bounds. He began to study as an Acolyte, speeding through his studies with enviable speed. Whispers often followed him down the halls as he stalked past, blue tunic fluttering, head in a book. The Jotun's sharp ears could hear their discontent and envy at the insouciant way in which he treated the Crown Prince when the young warrior came to visit (and it was often). How the Prince honestly looked bored and disinterested in any of the goings-on within the Mage's Court – until Kol'la showed up with his heavy glares, sharp tongue, wicked smile and penchant for mischief.

Of all the Mages, Mage Smithra, Healer Gjalla, and Mage Flarathir were most disapproving of the carefree Acolyte. At least once a week, if Kol'la was not out on some quest or errand for High-Mage Agaeti or Odin, the Healer or two Mages were castigating the young mage for some supposed misdemeanour in the hall. The fact that they could not exactly pin the mischief on Kol'la angered them more. No matter what demeaning chore they gave him (from washing bed-pans to laying out compost on the gardens to scrubbing pots in the kitchens), Kol'la's serene expression and calm responses gave them no grounds for further punishment.

Kol'la, after all, knew that their suspicions did have some foundation. Among the other students and newcomers to the Court, he had gained a reputation not only for magical prowess but also a penchant for mischief and trickery – and cool, unnerving ability to take risks. A live fire, Mage Smithra once had ranted in the Upper Mage Council, that will burn out of control. Odin, however, would not be gainsaid – and so, Mage Flarathir shook his head as he watched Kol'la dragged once again away from his studies to stumble after Thor, complaining loudly about "not wishing to get involved in yet another meaningless brawl for some strumpet".

"She is no strumpet," Thor was saying. "The lady in question is seeking your favour, Kol'la! Be reasonable!"
"I have no interest in the woman, Thor! Unhand me!"
"Kol'la – keep this up and your reputation will be set in stone – as some kind of -"
"Some kind of what?" Kol'la jerked out of Thor's grasp and glared at his shieldmate stonily. "I dare you to finish that sentence."

Thor sighed.

"Listen, I know you like girls – you remember that one whore on Sharda'aa -"
"Do not speak about Glo-Glo in such a manner – she was -"
"She was no lady, Kol'la. I know you have just come from that whole thing with Kayra -"
"There was no thing, dou'ma!"
"That is not what she told everyone at the feast!"
"She is merely some envious Healer who did not like the fact that my working was more effective than her year-long studies and I would not pay attention to her useless prattling - or the fact that I
"I swear, Kol'la, the way you treat women -"
"What about the manner in which they treat me?"
"Well," Thor rolled his eyes and shoved Kol'la before him as they left the main gates of the Mage's Court and out and down the broad road, "you merely have to learn how to behave around them – how to curb them – and what better way to show your prowess than through combat?"
"For you, it always comes round to combat," Kol'la replied sourly. "You are always forcing me to train in the 'arts of war', Thor, and forcing me to fight – as though I care about gaining renown by wrestling like some dumb beast in the mud."
"Kol'la, this is not just about renown," sighed the Crown Prince as they made their way through the busy streets of the centre of the capital. "It is about how the others see you – you know what they say."
"I care not what they say," Kol'la replied quickly, daring Thor to disagree. "Well, you do not want to be considered a weakling ALL the time, do you?"
"It makes for an element of surprise – and why they consider me ergi just because of my slight build or the fact that I am a seithrmaster is beyond me. Just because I am a sorcerer or attend classes at the Mage's Court does not make me less of a – a – a man, or a person!"
"But there is no honour to be had in such underhanded dealings and tricks -"
"Say that again the next time you need my aid in battle," Kol'la jabbed at Thor viciously in the arm. "Say it!"

Thor just laughed and shook his head, brushing off Kol'la's remarks and disagreements easily. He could always laugh – and Kol'la found a great urge overcome him to crush the ignorant Prince. Some things, he sighed, never change. I will never be able to change him... This is a lost cause – and if I am unable, who will be?

It was a worrisome thought. In the Eternal Realm, trouble stirs just as easily as elsewhere. Kol'la began to understand a little better what haunted Odin and kept the King up so late at night. Eternal we are... and yet we feel as though time is too easily spent.

Time, Kol'la mused, is running out.

Chapter End Notes

Yep. There we have it. Another step for Kol'la to take. Another step... What happens next... HM? A conversation of epic/silly proportions. Frigga in the next chapter! YAY! And family dinner time. Yes. I hope it turns out OK.

But some bad news... Kol'la won't be Loki until... maybe Chapter 43 or something like that. I had to break up a few chapters, so yeah... SORRY! But he is coming. I've almost gotten to the moment! (gasp~!)

Because of things I've had to add and stuff, this story will now reach 75 chapters. Hopefully it won't expand anymore...

Also, I've decided what to do with those side-story ideas! HA! As thanks for being splendid reviewers, every now and then, for special occasions, I will email a side story to those who review. When I'm finished writing the entirety of this story, I will post all the side-stories on FFNET - but only those who have reviewed will have read some of them (not all) beforehand. So if you wanna sneak peek of side-stories, be sure to drop a
Let me know what you think!
Since this Chapter is shorter, an update will come a little faster... maybe in 4 days... around Wednesday. XD
-KI

Author's Note on Odin: Just want to clarify that Odin has not made Kol'la Thor's brother legally... just saying to be "like a brother" to Thor. For what reason? Well, he has cited some reasons... but be wary! Not all is as it seems... and people LIE! (just like House says)

Author's Note on the Cliffie: It's OK if you are confused since the story is written from Kol'la's perspective and he is confused. However, I did leave a few clues.
1) Odin and his gang hung behind, but they were mounting their horses
2) Kol'la hears Sif mention something about the generals: "Sif was screaming something about the generals"
3) There is a long jet of something like flame: "There was nothing but fire... in a high-powered jet of flame and light."
4) This long jet of flame and light makes something like a ripping, roaring sound: "a ripping, roaring sound"
5) This force moves upward and not only pierces the bandit but also neatly decapitates the Siroyaniu bull neatly (like a lightsaber)
All of these clues together might make sense... maybe not. If not, I added a few sentences in the next update chapter to clarify things. XD

Alien Glossary:
'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
A Glimpse of Destiny I

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who is favoring and following - but even greater thanks to the encouragement given to me through such kind reviews. A shout out should go those who reviewed the last chapter: Zirconium, kai_maciel, iBlameGlobalWarming, Uriko, lemomina, history, Danea, Snakecharmed79.

As a tangible thanks to those who reviewed the previous chapters, I will be contacting everyone soon about the first side-story I'm planning/writing. I will probably provide a mediafire link (with password) or send directly to emails. Just PM me your preference.

Sorry... but this is a rather conversational piece...! Massive editing had to be done to this b/c I accidentally called Kol'la Loki! You can tell it's almost time for him to be Loki b/c he feels more Loki-ish and my subconscious is crying out for the name we all love.

Sigh.

So if you see a 'Loki' anywhere, please let me know.

Also, revisiting the Asgard map may be in order...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 38
A Glimpse of Destiny I

[...the skies of Asgard...]

[...open and serene...]

[...split by a hawk's cry...]

[...silences teem with life...]

Sweeping down from the northern sea, Asgarthaharr, across the promontory of the Aestrplat Highlands, the wind brings to the Aestrfold homesteads a touch of the sea – the faintest tang of salt and crispness. Running along the soft pale gold heads of wheat in the early fall or along the dark loamy soil of early spring, it sings brilliantly of adventure on the high seas and starlight beyond.

So it runs, until it meets the eaves of Storrmyrk, the large eastern portion of Asgard's Great Forest, where the wind hesitates among the trembling leaves and creaking boughs. As the now warm wind eases southwards around the edges of the ever cloud-topped Storrfjall mountains, to where the Leysaharr sea laps up against the wilder regions of Asgard. This is where the Rikrfjot River runs down to the Leysaharr alongside the Sothafold and where the wind can once again greet wild waves
which drop off into the Void and are returned by rising and lowering clouds and mists. The never-ending magical cycle of Asgardian weather, Asgardian life.

Up and around the wind whistles, cheerfully the western forest of Mikillmyrk, which is a hillier region that eventually fronts on the Waestrfold. Like its twin, the farmland of the Waestrfold bears crops of wheat and corn and other vegetables and fruits. Isolated hamlets and their outlying farms are far and few in-between – but eventually more and more low-roofed homesteads gather on the plains and gentle folds of hills – as the City of Asgard looms.

Here, the grand Orchards of Ithunn lie and further inward the mystical quarter of the mage's Court, where the Aesir High Council of Magics and Academics are seated. The wind, whimsical as it is, varies from careful to destructive, tugging on the fluttering pennants, flapping flags, clanging bells, clattering shutters and swinging signs. Canvas tents and canopies smooth out underneath the wind's gentler hand – but on other days, everything goes to Helheim in a hand-basket, and noting is sacred from High-Mage Agaeti's stocking cap to the flower girl's petals.

Asgard is a glorious playground – and even now, the wind speeds along its merry way, blasting around corners promising rain and other disastrous things later in the evening. No hall is too grand for its admittance – and eventually, the wind reaches one ornate balcony and a paired set of wide, intricately-carved windows on either side properly curtained with purple and gold.

It is evening now and this is the All-Father's private dining room, which is, as is usual once a week at least, in use as the Royal Family sits down for their evening meal.

[...the wind moves on...]

[...like Time, it waits for no one...]

As the serving girls and men withdrew after laying the table with food and all the dishes, Frigga rose and began to briskly serve herself some of the vegetable soup which sat closest to her. Unlike usual meals in the grand, more public dining hall, the Royal Family did not stand upon ceremony in their private eating rooms and Frigga had a fondness for serving her "boys" - which Thor and Kol'la alike protested. This evening, Kol'la, seated across Thor, on Frigga's right hand side, carefully handed her some steamed sprouts while taking the overly gilded soup tureen.

"So," Frigga was saying, "it looks like rain tonight, which is just another added blessing since the Norns know we needed a bit more moisture in the soil. With this clement weather we are having, I think the planting will do even better than before!"

Odin nodded agreeably, skewering a few more slices of roast boar before helping himself to the bread basket and the steamed sprouts which had been carefully (and silently) offered by Kol'la. Glancing at his son on his right hand, Odin watched Thor stack up a pile of meat and couldn't help but smile. Ah... Thor... as always, a man who knows not the meaning of the word 'restraint'.

"And of course, that means only good news for the orchards," Frigga continued on. "Ithunn's Orchard will no doubt produce some fair product this year."

"Yes," Kol'la said, helping himself to a small slice of bread and meat with gravy on top. "I myself am looking forward to Mage Erik's herb harvesting this year. He was saying that the magical properties of the Realm are especially strong this season which will make for healthy plants."

Underneath Kol'la's comment, Thor's satisfied munching could be heard – which earned him a reproving look from Frigga. Odin smiled indulgently again and then watched Kol'la carefully select food from his plate as if the slender warrior-mage was more of a bird or a rabbit. As usual, Kol'la showed his difference – in those small, not-quite-noticeable ways. In the small things, Odin thought,
perhaps... in the important things as well... It is difficult to tell. It has always been difficult to tell with that boy, ever since the first day I laid eyes upon him. A murky destiny, Agaeiti said, murky indeed...

"You have your own garden, do you not?" asked Frigga. "I thought they gave every Apprentice a small plot of land."

"Hm, yes," Kol'la nodded, "but it is too small to grow the rather important herbs and considering the usual level of intelligence required to care for, much less harvest, it is no surprise that certain... herbs are not allowed -"

"Father," Thor's booming voice cut through Kol'la's quiet explanation as the young warrior turned to the grey-haired monarch. "With this weather, do you think the stock of boar and deer will replenish just as well? Perhaps this would be a good time to visit the Wilderlands outside Vanaheim -"

Before Odin could say anything, Frigga frowned and sighed, "Thor! Kol'la was speaking!"

"Oh... well..." Thor replied bewildered, "He can still speak with you, can he not?"

"I am certain we can have two conversations on the table," Odin agreed mildly.

"If he uses his indoor voice, yes," Kol'la replied a tad bit snidely. "As it is, I doubt anyone could be heard over your usual racket, Thor."

"Do not blame me if you take after the mannerisms of a mouse, Kol'la."

"I am no mouse!" hissed Kol'la.

"Well, no," Thor smirked, "now you sound more like a snake."

"Boys," Odin gave each of the young men a LOOK, and the two settled down. Ever they must find some way to battle. He continued, "A trip to Vanaheim may come sooner than you expect, Thor, and I am certain that hunting in the Wilderlands would no doubt excite many a young Asgardian warrior and Vanaheim lordling."

-0-0-0-

At this Frigga sighed, remembering days of long ago when she had been younger and with more freedom to do as she pleased, able to ride alongside the other maidens who accompanied the young lords in their hunting expeditions. A time of merry romps and singing and dancing and other such romantic delights. Odin, in particular, she remembered, had been in his element. At the sight of Kol'la rolling his eyes, however, Frigga abruptly realized that others might not understand such pleasures. Going by Thor's grin, the Queen shook her head as she helped herself to some meat offered by Thor, I know he means to put Kol'la through many trials if they were to both go to Vanaheim for hunting... and Kol'la has always considered such pursuits as a waste of time... Frigga smiled indulgently. Those boys... my boys...

-0-0-0-

There was a pause as everyone continued eating and then Frigga began the conversation again, knowing that Kol'la was now rather put out and could not be expected to extend his usual social graces for the rest of the evening.

"I noticed that the delegation of Dark Elves seemed uneasier today," Frigga noted. "Are the talks not going well?"

"Hmmm," Odin gave the two, suddenly attentive young men a look before returning to piling his plate with more food including some kind of red jelly which had a sweet taste to it. "Well, there seems to be some rising factions within the Realm – strong dissenters who wish, above all, for power. This is never a good thing and with the ongoing power vacuum within Svartalfheim, I fear that sooner than later, a powerful Elf will rise and if his – or her – goals are not peaceable... well,"
the old king sighed, "we may have trouble on our hands."
"Are there any names currently rising to the forefront?" asked Kol'la.
"None at present, but they will no doubt come forward as our negotiations continue on. Perhaps in
the next inter-Realm tournament, they will break with tradition, grace us with their presence and
allow us to discern the true state of things."
"This seems to me to be nothing but a waste of time," Thor's fist banged the table rattling the
silverware and Frigga swiftly picked up her goblet which was currently filled with the clear cordial
of Vanahem pears. "They play with us and mock our overtures. We should destroy-"
"Ah," Kol'la laughed then, bitterly, "I was waiting for the oh so familiar refrain."
"You disagree?"
"Obviously," was the reply, dripping with disdain.
"You always disagree."
"Because you are always wrong."
"I am not always wrong," Thor protested.
"Yes, you are."
"No, I am not."
"Are too."
"Am not."
"Are too."
"Am not – there was that time-" 
"Boys!" Frigga said, setting her goblet of cordial down a little harder than necessary. "Now you two
sound like younglings bickering-"
"They are still young, the both of them," sighed Odin, "and they show it even now."

Kol'la glared at Thor and Odin before returning to stab at a piece of offending boar with his knife.
Thor went back to his stack of meat, also clearly insulted.

"Now," Frigga said with a sigh, "there is nothing wrong with disagreeing-"
"He disagrees all the time-"
"On principle-"

Kol'la and Thor's voices cut off as Odin's fist also rattled the table and the monarch said in warning
tones: "Listen to your mother!"

The warrior-mage was about to point out that Frigga was not his mother and he had no reason to
listen to her or less than any other person, but then Kol'la realized that Frigga did look
genuinely upset and disappointed. A knot formed in his stomach as he remembered all the times
Frigga had visited him within his sanctuary at the Mage's Court, how she had always given him
things – seeds and herbs and rare magical tomes for his own personal use – and had asked for
nothing in return. Kol'la shut his mouth and stared unhappily at his plate.

She is too kind, he thought, and that is why Thor will never learn the truth of the matter, will never
know the reality of life...

"Now," Frigga said into the awkward silence. "Kol'la. What were your thoughts on the matter?"
"Well," Kol'la inhaled, calmed himself down and ordered his thoughts. "Looking at this from a – a
political standpoint - and I know that I am not well-versed nor educated in such matters, formally
speaking - yet, I feel that going to war against Svartalfheim would undercut Asgard's current stance
of peace... It would be better if Svartalfheim could be seen as the aggressors, which would then give
us license to do as we please." A pause and Odin nodded slowly which Kol'la took as a good sign
and he continued onward. "Furthermore, the Dwarves of Svartalfheim enjoy the neutrality and
would not accept Asgardian rule as easily as some would suppose, I think. At least, that is the
intimation that I received upon reading Kikkabruk's treatise. Kikkabruk is a Dwarf of Niflheim, true,
but they are brothers in race and understand each other. In both cases, Dwarves have found themselves most well-suited living in the shadow of Asgard's counterbalance – Svartalfheim and Helheim and Niflheim. Besides, violence cannot solve everything."

A silence and Frigga reached over to give Kol'la's hand a squeeze, looking very proud and Kol'la ducked his head, blushing just a little. Odin's blue eye which had been scrutinizing the warrior-mage closely moved back to the king's plate – but not before catching Kol'la's green eyes which rose uncertainly to meet his. The ageing monarch's face eased a little with a swift smile and Odin nodded approvingly.

"A king should never seek out war," he said after a moment, turning to give Thor a hard look. Then he added, "but he must be ever ready for it."

Kol'la blinked at those words. *What can those cryptic words mean exactly? How could Thor even begin to understand... But of course, it is not my place to say anything... not really...*

"Well, then," Frigga broke the silence with a light laugh, "that only brings into relief how important our relationship with other realms is. The delegation of Vanaheim young lords and ladies which will be visiting us next month will be important for Asgard's future – as well as a good opportunity to enjoy oneself."

"Ah," Odin smiled then, obviously with fond memory, "the youthful court of Vanaheim. Do you remember those days when we went hunting in the Wilderlands – and chased the wild beasts therein, both fair and proud? And afterwards, wandered hand in hand in the heather or under the trees and found pleasure in-" 

"Odin!" Frigga whispered, scandalized, face red.

"Ah!" Odin laughed then, noticing the combined looks of horror on Thor and Kol'la's faces. "My pardon, I beg you... memory took hold of me and – come now, Thor, is it so hard to imagine your father and mother enjoying the days of their youth?"

"No, no," Thor mumbled, now more than a little red. "Not as hard as it should be, perhaps."

"Agreed," Kol'la said incoherently into some steamed sprouts.

"Well," Frigga gave the two young men a fond look, "I am certain you two will make your own memories, for the ladies of Vanaheim are fair indeed, I think."

"They always are," Odin gallantly added with a wink, which left Thor breathlessly hacking up a load of wine – and Kol'la grimaced at the red spittle aimed his way, delicately pushing his plate aside, appetite now almost decimated by Thor's usual bad table manners.

"The girls will love a good song and dance -"

"That is well," Thor grinned, winking at Kol'la conspiratorially, "for I love a good song and dance myself – of many varieties – and usually great company enjoys all the kinds of enjoyments Asgard... and I... have to offer."

Kol'la snorted into his own wine, muttering, "That is the truth."

Frigga sighed and Odin shook his head, chuckling.

"On the other hand, if this is purely a diplomactic matter," Thor gave his father a quick look, "I am certain it will be nothing but dull..." He paused to consider the matter further before adding, "And some girls are dull by nature."

"That is because you wish for a girl who can knock you about," Kol'la teased Thor impishly.

"Well then," Frigga laughed, "that is settled. Lady Sif, it is then."

"Lady Sif, yes!" crowed Kol'la as Thor began to protest. "That is a perfect match."
Odin was not so pleased about Kol'la's snickers, but before he could reprimand the dark-haired young man, Thor mentioned someone called Kayra and the conversation which had calmed down quickly escalated into a shouting match. Watching the two young men holler at each other over the small table, disregarding Frigga's interjections, he couldn't help but remember himself at another similar table with his brothers. *This is what I wanted for Thor, but...* Odin sighed as he listened for the sharp shards of emotion which laced through Kol'la's voice like hidden daggers. *But... the knife I wield is double-edged and cuts even itself... Can it be trusted so easily?*

"Just because I have standards-"
"Standards? Ha! You were but playing with her-"
"Playing? Playing?!"
"You know how you love a game-"

The aged king eyed the green-eyed warrior-mage, face blank as he digested Thor's words. *Standards? So it is true then...* Odin mused, that Kol'la does not seem to court women as Thor does – and if he finds satisfaction, it must be only known to himself and the one whom he sought. And yet, if what Thor says is true, then this young mage can only understand it as if it were naught but the rules of engagement, as if it were naught but a game...

*This young child...*

"ODIN!"

That was Frigga now, more angry than before and obviously needing someone else to corral the two young men who had resorted to kicking each other like young babes underneath the table. Odin grabbed each shoulder and, catching their attention, gave them each another look. Feet stilled but Thor and Kol'la looked like they were about to speak again, so Odin shook his head, coughed and said:

"Now, listen, you two." A pause. Then: "In matters of love, we all have our own rules. That is the way of things. Sometimes," Odin paused, eyeing Kol'la.

*Mysterious and incomprehensible.*

"Sometimes," Odin continued slowly, "we must agree to disagree, understanding that we may never understand – but we can respect nonetheless. Do you understand this?"

*Do you hear me?*

"Yes," Kol'la nodded, pushing his plate emphatically aside, avoiding Odin's gaze.

*Yes, he would understand first.* Odin eyed his blonde-haired son. Thor looked a little lost, but the warrior nodded.

"Very well..."

"Now," the old man nodded as Frigga rose to call the serving girls back for dessert. "Your mother says there is dessert?"

A few of the larger plates (but not the boar, Thor would no doubt want more of that for dessert as well) were removed and a pale green pudding arrived – cool and soft. It was not the usual choice for them – but it was Kol'la's favourite and Frigga was rewarded by an unguarded, wide smile which flitted across the young mage's face.

"Mint pudding!" he sighed, fidgeting a little as he waited for his serving. He stared down at the bowl offered him and sighed, "My favourite."
"I know," Frigga gave a bowl to Odin and Thor before serving herself. "It has been a while since you could sit down with us for a meal, Kol'la – so I thought it would be a nice treat for us all... and it is perfect for warmer weather like today."
"Today was hardly warm," grumbled Thor poking his bowl in a dissatisfied manner, "here, Kol'la, you can have mine as well. I'll have more boar."
"Thank you," Kol'la hastily took Thor's bowl and placed it by his own, ignoring Odin's amused, raised eyebrow.
"It is a bit more tart today," Frigga noted, sampling her share. "Perhaps some lemon."
"I think some lemon," Odin agreed. "It is more pleasing this way, I think."
"Hm, yes, and it is cooler than the last time," Kol'la nodded happily.
"More congealed," Frigga agreed, "and less soupy."
"That was not such a good batch," Odin nodded, "You are missing out on a good dessert, Thor."
"I do not like it so much, even if it is done right," Thor shrugged, skewering more meat, "and besides, why waste good food on someone who has no taste for it? Better that Kol'la enjoy it. It is not as though he can eat such kinds of food everyday."
"Now, Thor," sighed Frigga.
"It is true!" Thor protested uneasily, knowing from the look that Frigga gave him he had said something wrong again.
"It is true," agreed Kol'la quickly, starting on Thor's share now, "and I am thankful, as always."
"Well, we are blessed to have your company," the gentle queen smiled.
"Even if you two do end up squabbling like children underneath the table," Odin said trying to keep a smile from forming on his face. "I will have something amusing to tell Lord Tyr and High Mage Agaeti tomorrow... and the ladies of Vanaheim when they arrive," he glanced up to catch twin looks of horror aimed his way – and he chuckled.
"I am sure he will not tell High Mage Agaeti," Frigga consoled Kol'la who still looked a little chagrined and frightened. "He is just having a small joke. Now, Kol'la, have some more – seeing as Thor will not be asking for extras – would you like more, dear? No? Kol'la? Here..." As she ladled out more of the mint pudding, she smiled at the slender young man and prattled on reassuringly, "So, now that you are nearing the end of your tenure within the Mage's Academy, how do you feel about your studies as an Acolyte? Do you think you will stay in the Mage's Court or study elsewhere for a while?"

With that the conversation turned to more mundane topics.

[...and the night brought rain...]

[...and the days brought the ladies and lords...]

[...of Vanaheim...]

Chapter End Notes

This and Chapter 39 and Chapter 40 were meant to be all in one chapter - but... alas... things got a bit out of control when I realized I had planned too much detail into one chapter... We'll see how crazy it gets. Sorry that this was one long conversation... but this is really necessary to show how their family dynamics are working out. Although they aren't technically a family... THEREFORE LOKI WILL BE CALLED LOKI AROUND CHAPTER 43... SORRY!

BUT I WROTE IT! YES! THE LOKI NAMING CHAPTER IS DONE! (passing out
from frothing at the mouth thanks to her inner excitement) Hopefully it'll be exciting for you when you get there.

Anyways, let me know what you think~! I always appreciate comments!
Update will be around Sunday or Monday, depending on how motivated I feel and life and stuffs...
-KI

MORE SKETCHES AVAILABLE ON MY PROFILE!

AND BE SURE TO CHECK OUT THE A TABLE OF AGES... so I don't have to keep calculating this stuff all the time. (my maths are terrible) On this picture, you'll not only see the ages of Thor/Loki as the story progresses, but also how it fits in with Realm time and relative Earth ages (but not Earth time, I'm not that interested yet) - AND also a freebie! JOTUNHEIM TIMELINE! (What the heck am I doing? I just spent an hour on this. I've got no life! AH!) There will be parts of the Timeline, where you'll be, like, "What's going on?" All will be explained in one way or another... and if you use logic, you may be able to spoil yourself a little about the direction of this story. So, don't click unless you are a real nerd about this story...

I hope someone can appreciate it... I spent an hour on it...

Author's Note on Writing Dialogues: I scanned in a part of my writing notebook to show folks how I plan dialogues, since a few have mentioned how they have enjoyed my dialogues, and I thought I might show my techniques for the very important dialogues which dot this fanfic. Might be useful for those who want to see how other authors plan their writing! See my profile for the link to the scanned pages!

Author's Note on Frigga: The Vikings had a very patriarchal system, true, but they were also realistic and knew that there were times that women had to operate outside the usual parameters - (thinks of Tolkien and his women) - and that is rather fair all things considering, I think. So doormat!Frigga isn't a very kind portrayal of her because it's saying she is powerless/unable to do ANYTHING, which is an exaggeration. On the other hand, in the movie (and in other forms of canon), we do see Frigga give way before her husband, accepting his "wisdom" (which btw, I thought was pure bull-crap, but hey, whatevs)... which I think shows a different kind of strength. Meekness isn't weakness, you know? So, I think my Frigga doesn't just take charge and whoop Odin's a$$ (as some people like to write her) - but she does enact awesome destruction-control measures when the men mess up. [Hope this makes sense.]

Alien Glossary:
'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'a'uzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
Asgardian Glossary:

seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Chapter Notes

Thanks to all those who reviewed! I hope you enjoyed the special side-story I wrote. Thanks to: Kai_Maciel, lemomina, Petreska, history, iBlameGlobalWarming, Ninjathrowingstick, Yuurei, Danea.

Double double toil and trouble! On all fronts... In this fanfic, lots of it. In my real life, tons. My dad was diagnosed with viral meningitis...Seriously? What? I know... weird... and my allergies brought my immune system down crashing, so I've got a cold AND a growing case of some bizarre form of eczema called... dishydrosis or something. T_T

Between illness and class prep and stuff, I may not update for a good week after this. Depends how I feel this week. (crosses fingers) Here's to hoping!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 39
A Glimpse of Destiny II

When the youth of Vanaheim's Court finally arrived in Asgard, the entire city and, even more so, the Palace were in a tizzy of expectation. Servants rushed about surrounded by a perpetual barrage of commands. Housekeeping staff revisited musty guest chambers in a whirlwind tour of the further recesses of the castle. Stable-hands and their boys found themselves pressed into various duties including re-cleaning the entire Royal Stables from top to bottom until they sparkled – if stables could sparkle, providing maintenance around the Courtyard and Palace and other various errands... if they weren't already working on their own daily duties. Maids cleaned and gossiped and tittered and giggled at the tales of the nonsense the young Lords of Vanaheim could get up to when abroad. No better than young Prince Thor, if you asked them.

The youth of the Royal Court of Asgard, the young lords and ladies therein, who had disappeared into the countryside for familial matters or late spring holidays, returned to the capital with high hopes of getting Court invitations to the various functions that would no doubt be held. Many a morning was spent waiting for the red and brown-clad messenger boys who brought with them excessive bundles of vellum filled with gorgeous cleric scripts and carefully worded invitations to balls and hunts and tea parties and the like. Of course, the amount of invitations you received equated a certain social status, so, as the days passed by, nervous young ladies and excited young lords were filled with intense expectation more usual during the Winter Solstice celebrations.

The Mage's Court was in no better state. This annoyed Kol'la no end, for the young scholar was more interested in completing his final dissertation on the use of heat energies for self-sustaining travel through the Void. High-Mage Agaeti had shown uneasy approval of the project, but had allowed Kol'la to continue, knowing that obstruction would only fuel the young scholar's insatiable curiosity even more.

At any rate, unlike most Apprentices, Kol'la had already completed the exam for Apprenticeship and
was now speeding through higher level Acolyte work in an effort to combine both achievements into one graduation. He had no time for Thor's discussions on the joys of tumbling young Vanahem ladies or Fandral's inane babbling concerning various Court gossip (which usually amused Kol'la and gave him idea for well-meant pranks – but not these days) or Volstagg's perusal of the Queen and her Handmaiden's plans for the feast entrees. Sif and Hogun, after Kol'la had nearly turned red from annoyance, had recognized Kol'la's need for peace and pulled a protesting Thor and Fandral away.

As he watched yet another group of gabbling, low-level Apprentices pass by in the corridor just outside his room, Kol'la sighed and shook his head. He knew what was coming – long-winded speeches, eternally revolving dances and outrageous amounts of feasting and drinking which would last until all hours of the morning. Interminable feasts offering nauseating amounts of food and mead... and drunk fools to boot, Kol'la grimaced and then brightened at the thought of seeing Sif standing about uncomfortably in a fine gown. At least, I will not be the only one miserable. And Vanahem is a magical place – the homeland of Lady Frigga – so perhaps there will be some interested in discussing magic...

BAM! The wooden door to his small, spartan chamber banged open as two lower-level Apprentices and a young Healer burst in: Thykka, Hael and Spaeyk. Kol'la scowled and was about to reprimand them snottily on destruction of Academy property (as if he had never done that before) when he caught sight of the stack of scrolls and brown squares in their hands. Blue eyes dancing and pushing back her long hair which had fallen out of its neat bun, Hael, currently the Academy's only female Mage Apprentice, laid her bundled down with triumph and stepped back to allow her fellow Apprentice Thykka and the Apprentice Healer Spaeyk to follow suit.

"Kol'la!" she said, nearly jumping up and down, which caused Kol'la to glare darkly at the three even more. "Your box was overflowing so Master Eskol told us to bring it to you. You know how he gets when things look messy – and with the lords and ladies."
"I know, I know," Kol'la rubbed his brow, leaving an even bigger smear of ink across it. "And you also know that I have no interest -"
"Ah! How can you say that!" protested Thykka, scrubbling through the invitations. "You have the most out of all of us here. Even more than the Aggra."
"You should not speak of High-Mage Agaeti in that manner," gasped Spaeyk nervously looking about as if expecting the aged magician to appear from underneath Kol'la's bed.
"Well, that aside," Kol'la waved his hand dismissively (and smiling just a bit that his nickname of 'Aggravation' had stuck). "They could send me a mountain of missives. I will not go."
"Serious?" sighed Thykka. "Well, you would be the one to say no..."
"What a shame," agreed Hael, opening up one invitation and then paused at the sight of Kol'la's evil eye before shrugging and continuing. "What? It is not as if you are going to answer them, Kol'la... I need to see what you got. We have a running tally and that bikkja, Kayra, has been saying she is about to get the most. I pointed out your pile, but she said you would not respond to the letters, so they do not count."
"She really has it out for you, Kol'la," Spaeyk sat on Kol'la's bed, ignoring another look of disapproval. "Ever since that time..."
"She deserved it," Thykka laughed. "You remember her face? I laughed so hard... my cheeks hurt."
"And that is saying something," Kol'la grumbled.
"OK. Come, Thykka, and help me to tally these up. A hunt. You writing this down? Here – I have my scrip and pen."

Thykka began to write up a running tally as Hael opened the letters. Attempting to focus on the intricacies of sigil-work in Void-space, Kol'la found himself listening to Hael's soft running patter.

"Let us see what Kol'la has here. Amazing. A hunt. Got that? And this one is... another hunt... but this one is with the High Court. How did you get that kind of invitation, Kol'la?"
"There is probably some rich old dame who-"

There was a short scuffle as Kol'la kicked Thykka in the shins and when everyone was more or less calm again, Hael's stack had increased a bit as the girl continued unmoved by the short tussling match.

"Two hunts so far. A dance. Another dance. A feast. A tea party. Oh, here is two more tea parties – no – no, Thykka, that makes three tea parties. And two dances. And two hunts. And a feast. Here is... a ball. The big one to which everyone is invited. Another tea party. You will be drinking a lot of tea..." Thykka made a face behind Hael's back. "I saw that," Hael said absently. "And another ball – there is much dancing in your future, Kol'la. Do you have sturdy shoes? No, sorry. You are not going. Never mind."

"Look," Kol'la's hand slammed down on the remaining stack. "This should not-"

"Another hunt. This one is a small one and it appears that it was extended from Her Highness, Lady Frigga-"

"Save that one," Kol'la grabbed the piece of vellum before smoothing it out again and then slotting it away somewhere in his scroll-top desk carefully. "That one is mine. I will – I will answer that."

"Hm. Of course he will," Thykka nodded. "He is her favourite after all."

"Ah, then you will want this tea party and this ball. Both from Her Highness. Oh, here is the Mage Court feast. And the Commoner's Street Dance. Not particularly special since we are all attending those. Still, here are two closed lectures – Kol'la! You will hear a lecture from Aggra and the All-Father himself on seithrmancy and – well, never mind, it is not like you plan to go. Two more feasts. And- No! Kol'la! Wait!"

Kol'la had had enough. Rising, he was now attempting to reclaim his letters. Spaeyk gave a small squeak of indignation as the young Apprentice Healer was roughly hoisted off his perch and out into the corridor, followed by Thykka, who with the determination more easily found in warriors was still continuing his tally. Ink spattered across grey paving and the piece of scrap vellum he had been writing on smeared. Thykka cursed fluently.

"We are almost done!" Hael was protesting in a higher voice now. "It is obvious you are more popular than Kayra or Vinsael! Come, Kol'la!"

"I. Do. Not. Care. Hael, please," Kol'la sighed, not so gently removing the letters from the girl's hands, refusing to be caught in some kind of fight with a girl over the Vanaheim nonsense. Pushing Hael out by her shoulders as the girl slowly edged to the door, Kolla wondered what would happen if he seized her and threw her out. Best not, he thought managing to edge Hael out despite the intense dragging of heels. The young Mage-to-be shut the door and locked all three locks which he had personally installed before slumping against the wood and sliding down to sit on the floor with a sigh.

It was getting worse.

[...but then...]

[...it always gets worse...]

[...before it gets better...]

The light strains of lute and fife and violas filtered past the heavy red velvet curtains and out into the mildly cool spring air. Long set, the sun had sunk behind the Skythurs Mountain, lighting up the grand city of Asgard. Few guests of the intimate ball, hosted by Her Highness Lady Frigga had gone out and so the smaller balcony was currently empty – save one still figure.

A slender black silhouette blotted out the stars and the glorious night sky – and it turned as the thick
red fabric opened just enough to let a short slim figure past. For a moment, there was on awkward silence as the newcomer – a demure young lady from Vanaheim looked about in the too faint glow of a lamp for the inevitable company of the dark-haired young man. There appeared to be none. Yet.

"Oh – I'm-
"No – no-
"I'm – I – I'm sorry-
"My lady, it is-
"I did not mean to interr--
"Not at all. There was no interruption."

Voices clashed and halted and started – and blue eyes met green ones timidly. A smile suddenly broke across the girl's face and laughter burst out. At the sound of her merriment, the young man's tense shoulders tightened a little – but when he saw the honesty in her blue-grey eyes, he relaxed a little.

"I am sorry," she sighed.
"It is no matter."
"I wished to breathe some fresh air," the young girl tipped her head and frowned, obviously trying to remember her name.
He smiled then – engagingly and said, "It is Kol'la. From the Mage's Court. I have been studying there these past... years."
"You did not come from Asgard originally?"
"What gave me away?" Kol'la asked bitterly.
The girl laughed again softly and then said, "Quite a bit, I think. Yet, that is not a bad thing." A pause. "This is when you are supposed to ask for my name."
"Yes," Kol'la turned more fully then, his green eyes sparkling. "I suppose it is. How remiss I have been! Whose company do I have the pleasure of keeping?"
"Vessa of the Lower House of Vaetia from Vanaheim. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Kol'la."
"Well, then, Lady Vessa of the Lower House of Vaetia, Vanaheim, what has drawn you out for fresh air at this fine hour?" Kol'la peered through the slight opening between the two curtains and noticed that yet another half-hour long dance was underway. "The festivities are yet to be over."
"Oh, you can call me Vessa," she leaned close, her light breath ghost just a little over Kolla's cheek as she too looked within the large ornate ballroom. For a moment, they watched the party continue on within before admitting: "Well, sometimes," she paused and then gave Kol'la a quick sad smile, "people need to... take a step back... to..." Vessa hesitated before shrugging and looking down awkwardly. "... consider things..."
"A man."
"I did not say that!"
"You did, in a manner of speaking," Kol'la grinned. "Which one?"

Her blue eyes flickered over automatically and his gaze followed hers as the young woman's eyes wandered over the dense crowd which stood to the side of the large open dance floor now currently filled with dancers. In the middle of the laughing group, there was a very familiar blonde head bobbing above the others, the long waving hair now nicely styled and washed for the evening setting off the even tan and clear blue eyes. Kol'la's smile twisted just a little and he glanced away and straightened slowly.

"I see."
"See what?"
"It is the Prince. Thor."
"I did not say his name!"
"Let me guess," Kol'la sighed, easing back a little. "This is your first time to visit Asgard – to see the Royal Family."
"Yes..." Vessa blushed and looked down. "So I must look rather... obvious, then."
"Rather."
"I am... sorry." An awkward pause. "I will leave you to... um..." Vessa paused and tipped her head. "What were you doing out here?"
"Getting a breath of fresh air," Kol'la replied with a light laugh.
"So you are avoiding someone too?"
"Oh, no, no." A pause. "Haha. No. There is no one here this evening that would interest me -" Another awkward pause covered by a light cough on his part before Kol'la stumbled on, wondering if his light blush was easily seen. "I am sorry. I did not mean to imply..."
"It is alright. I understand."

There was something in the quality of her tone of voice which caused Kol'la to eye the shy girl closely. Vessa's hair had been plaited in a rather old-fashioned way and her clothing was not very jewelled nor was she wearing the latest fashions. Kol'la had always prided himself on looking well; Vessa, apparently, did not - or could not. And she wants Thor to notice her? There is no way he would notice a dowdy creature such as her. Kol'la shook his head. A pity.

Unless...

"I am usually not interested in gatherings such as these, either," Vessa admitted painfully. "What do you find more interesting... Kol'la?"
"I am currently studying inter-realm travel through the Ways and the Void," Kol'la replied, watching her face closely expecting the usual tell-tale disinterest to creep onto her face. Nothing of the sort happened.
"Inter-realm travel, using magic?"
"Yes."
"That can be rather... dangerous..."
"The elves do it all the time."
"It is their way," Vessa blinked. "It is rare to find other kinds who can stand the rigours of such travel. Particularly through the Void."
"The Void is dangerous," Kol'la repressed a slight shudder, "all the more important to discover safe measures to enable better travel. Not all of us can depend upon the Bifrost."
"You wish to go travelling any time soon?"
"Some day," was the cryptic reply and then Kol'la gave the young girl a quick smile. "But that must hold no interest for you."
"I would not say no interest," Vessa smiled back, turning away from the red velvet curtain. "What Dwarven runes are you using?"
"Runes?" Kol'la asked. "Dwarven runes? Why dwarven runes?"
"Well, yes, after all, dwarves do not rely on the Bifrost solely to travel. My tutor in Realm Runes and Inscriptions told me that dwarven runes can encourage perseverance and may help with extending magicks and strengthen delicate workings. I believe if you look in..."

And the two scholars wandered off into the gardens, arm in arm, underneath the soft glow of Asgard's moons.

[...two minds meet...]

[...but the heart is, above all, a curious thing...]

[...and what the heart wants...]

[...the heart wants...]
Over the next two weeks, in between intense research, Kol'la found the time to go to certain select parties, tea parties, balls, hunts and other small activities. Of course, there was no choice but for him to attend the two lectures by High-Mage Agaeti and Odin All-Father – to hear their discussion on seithrmancy, Vanahem magic and its importance for integration with Asgard's own particular traditions. At the lecture by High Mage Agaeti, Thor noticed the young girl who sat by Kol'la – her blue eyes animated as she spoke with him, obviously intent on the subject at hand, judging by her gestures at the small vellum before her which held the notes handed out at the door. Thor looked at his own copy and stared at the arcane symbols – the arcane symbols which held no meaning for him.

Not that I care about such strange matters and useless knowledge. Kol'la, of course, will enjoy this speech - and he will, no doubt, chatter about it all day long with Mother afterwards. And Mother will look so proud and declare he is the second son she always wanted, Thor grimaced. I guess in a way, my lack of interest in all things magickal disappoints her. That Kol'la can bring her joy... should also make me feel glad. He is like a brother to me... Would it be such a burden to accept him even closer? I could see Mother taking him under her wing - and Father would not gainsay her... Thor shook his head, pushing his confused thoughts away, looking instead at the girl. Kol'la is another matter and can be dealt with easily enough... On the other hand... He looked at the two again – the dark gold hair bent closely to the hair black as midnight and frowned. Who was she again?

Thor did not remember the lecture thanks to the sight of Kol'la and the mystery girl sitting together – and the following night when Kol'la arrived for tea with the Queen and her maidens, Thor made certain to join (as a surprise) and speak with the maid in question. She was, as he had guessed, from Vanahem after all – and rather sweetly shy. Ignoring the dagger looks sent his way from Kol'la's direction, Thor bent his charm on Vessa and began to show Kol'la how it was done. It was a familiar rivalry - another kind of arena within which Kol'la and he had many times competed against each other. As Thor began to ensure his conquest, the unsettled thoughts concerning Kol'la settled just a little and Thor began to enjoy himself quite well indeed.

When the two left the women's quarters, an incredibly irate Kol'la dragged Thor aside and the heavier warrior followed willingly as the two stumbled into an empty corridor. Jerking his friend around, Kol'la met Thor's blue eyes evenly.

"I know what you are doing, Thor," Kol'la said.
"What am I doing?"
"You are poaching on another man's property. Again."
"I did not know she was yours!" Thor protested, barely holding back a grin of triumph. "She responded to me so easily and it seemed to me that your relationship was merely that of friends or -"
"Kol'la," Thor pushed the younger man back easily, giving them both a bit of space. "You are overreacting. She has not made her choice."
"You never let them make a choice."
"What are you implying?" Thor asked, voice dangerously soft.
"Nothing. I don't know," Kol'la rubbed his face tiredly. "You know what I am saying, however. Admit it! The girls lose all their sense and you make it so!"
"All who come to me accept freely as I give freely, Kol'la. It is not my fault if you cannot attract any, nor keep any at your side. Your reputation precedes you -" "What are you saying? You saying that no woman would choose me over you?"
"Well," Thor shrugged meaningfully.

A very tense pause ensued and then Thor folded his arms and cocked his head. If I did not know better, I would think that Kol'la cared about the girl. Impossible... and yet... Perhaps this is something of Mother's influence upon him. Mayhap Kol'la is beginning to change... for the better. Thor recalled his thoughts on the day he had brought Kol'la to Asgard. He had hoped to see his then
friend, now almost-brother look to life with hope and joy instead of dread and fear. Although Kol'la still is mysterious in many ways, Thor mused, he has learned so many things and has grown and come to be part of my life. Would I wreck his chances for happiness so easily - and yet, would I allow him to win without a fight? He abhors pity, after all, and would be highly offended if I appeared to give him permission to woo the girl. What other alternative do I have but to forge on forward?

"Listen," Thor finally said, making up his mind. "There are two dances approaching. Let us see who can court the lady and keep her attentions. If, at the end, there is no certain choice on her part, we shall meet on the battlefield."

"Thor, you must be joking," Kol'la said in a deadpan voice. Then, voice filling with dread. "You are not." The young man massaged his eyes, and then lowered his hand over his mouth in contemplation as he considered the matter before dropping them. "I cannot believe you think this is something that holds the solution. That I would even consider it as an option-"

"It is a matter of honour," Thor shrugged. "It is simple. It is the only way. You know it." He turned away and eyed the lean profile of his friend and then as a hard pale face turned his way, lifted his chin in determination and added mischievously, "Whether you wish to play or not, Kol'la, the game is afoot. May the best man win."

-0-0-0-

Watching Thor leave, Kol'la mulled over the prince's words and grimaced. May the best man win, he thought, slumping back against the cold, hard, grey stone wall. But, Thor, the truth is - the truth you can never know –

I am not a man.

Kol'la straightened and considered his options and the best way to avoid brawling in the stable-yard with the Crown Prince in front of their august guests.

I am not a man, but I may still win.

He thought of Vessa. Was she worth it? Was she worth all this trouble? Until then, he had not considered her too seriously – but suddenly... she seemed like a treasure.

[...the heart wants...]

[...and what the heart wants...]

[...the heart wants...]

Was it Thor who had given her value? Thor's attentions? Kol'la did not know. Or was it her curious, lively intelligence and the dichotomy of her heart's desires? Was it merely rivalry after all?

He was going to win this. Of course, he was.

[...is, above all, a curious thing...]

[...the heart is...]

Chapter End Notes
But... will he?

Author's Note re Thor: Thor's having some introspective moments here... This is to deal with a few questions/comments a reviewer pointed out and I thought had great merit. As a result, I'm tweaking a few things here and there concerning Thor... and hope it feels more organic! There are a couple things I'm going to be factoring in with Thor, however...

a) Thor is a social being - and I think that in a society that is mainly comprised of large families (culturally speaking), Thor might have felt the odd one out and wanted a little brother or sister.

b) Loki is not yet his brother... just a very close family friend whom Thor has come to think of as something like a brother (all but legally).

c) Thor kinda gets his own back/deals with his worries subconsciously by putting Loki down/giving him a hard time/teasing him etc  

d) Odin is by no means outwardly favouring Loki or showing Loki attention in any obvious way... Odin has chosen Loki - but that does not equate unadulterated affection, so I think Thor (rightly so) does not see Loki as a serious threat or rival for his fathers affection... (although... Loki might feel that way... dun dun dun). Frigga's affections, although appreciated by Thor, are not as necessary b/c he's in that phase where he's too cool for school.

e) Thor kinda... pities Loki which means that he's more giving/forgiving (we see that at the end of the dinner conversation, the off-hand comment that Loki is less privileged which leads to Thor's generosity)

f) other things will happen to ease the transition - which I can't speak of b/c it's spoilery.

I hope this works for everyone! Let me know what YOU think~!
If you haven't reviewed yet, there's still time to enjoy the side-story! Give me a shout, and I'll send the link to ya!
Thanks a lot!
-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker  
Dou'ma – idiot  
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid  
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow  
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium  
cho'ai - lover  
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore  
Morning-star - a mace.  
oma'auzha – mother-effer  
oto'oa - big sister  
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

seithr - magic  
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror  
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"  
bikkja – bitch
A Glimpse of Destiny III

Chapter Notes

Thanks to those who fav and follow me. Thanks to my reviewers! You all deserve hugs and kisses! To: lemomina, Kai_Maciel, iBlameGlobalWarming, Danea, SnakeCharmed79.

So, this weekend was the Moon Festival Holiday = no real break for me. I ended up getting Saturday off - just sat around and watched "Heroes Of Cosplay". Now, there is a local cosplay con in May... Suddenly... I wanna do a Lady Loki - but based off of the MCU-Loki. Can I do it? I dunno...

Also check out this to see my views on Loki re myth and a certain article posted recently: http://kakashidiot.tumblr.com/post/61594152146/the-reason-why-i-think-that-any-thor-avenger

HOLY CRAPIMOLLI! I BROKE MY PERSONAL RULE FOR THIS FIC - TO KEEP THINGS TO A MAX OF 3000 WORDS per chapter (trust me, I can go on forever!)... Oh dear...

Lots happen!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 40
A Glimpse of Destiny III

How did things always end up like this? Why was it always that I must be trampled low? Is it truly my destiny to always walk the lesser path, the darker way – and take the role of the defeated? The disadvantaged?

[...these moments...]

[...herald the dark...]

[...the soul refusing to remain vanquished...]

[...in its cage, frets...]

 Darkness was spotting at the edges of his eyesight – vision fading and from far away the sound of cheering, taunting, laughter and roars of encouragement blurred together into a solid wall of sound. Pinning him down like a butterfly under the alchemist's thumb, Mjolnir pressed with the full weight of its uru metal while above Thor laughed and roared happily. Twisting his head vaguely, nose brushing up against straw and dirt, Ko'Ila tried to shake off the growing dark. From far away, piercing the dull roar a lighter voice was calling his name.
"Kol'la!"

His name. *My name*, he thought. *...who?*

"Kol'la! Thor!"

The taste of iron filled his mouth as he coughed wetly and a stabbing pain jabbed deeper into his back like a knife. *Broken ribs? Perhaps... He was... Thor was... never – never really aware of his strength.*

"Kol'la!"

He blacked out.

[...the heart wants...]

[...and what it wants...]

[...cannot always be attained...]

In the end, it came down to the "battlefield" as Thor called it. *Yet, it is no battlefield*, Kol'la grimaced looking about the full stable-yard. Before him, Thor stood, broad face full of anticipatory glee as he circled the rough ring of dirt and straw. Around the two combatants stood a mixed, yet enthusiastic circle of stable-hands, horse boys, soldiers, guards, courtiers (young and old, Asgardian and Vanir), servants and other passers-by.

Washing women and ladies, standing by their favoured men, also had gathered to watch. The washing women called out boisterously, but not so the young ladies of Asgard's Court, nor those of Vanheim. This time, Sif, oddly enough, did not look happy, standing by the side of the quiet maid in question, Vessa. Very rarely did men seek battle for a lady's favour – and one could tell by the look on the warrior-girl's face that she did not approve. Yet, the crowd would not be denied their enjoyment, for rarely did Kol'la do battle in public – and when he did ride out to deal with some confrontation or take part in warfare whilst on a quest, it was always to devastating effect.

Still, he rarely battled Thor in front of others – and it was obvious he did not take a beating from his Royal friend so gracefully. How would the new Asgardian fare within the strictures of the traditional combat for love?

Heimdall stood to one side, eyes calculating as he measured Kol'la from head to foot, noting how Kol'la's slender frame compared to Thor's well-defined musculature. Both, having stripped down to their cream under-tunics and leather breeches, were a study in opposites: slender to muscled, dark to fair, pale to golden, agility to power.

"Round One!" Fandral called out – and Thor dove in, as always, initiating aggressive contact. The two grappled – dust rose, the cheering increased as various holds were sought – and then, using sheer force and weight, Thor flipped Kol'la and pinned him down with a meaty forearm for the requisite five seconds.

Sif rolled her eyes as Thor jumped, fists raised to the sky triumphantly – as if he had already won. She winced and bit back her sympathies as she watched Kol'la get to his feet a bit more slowly, silent and chill as if daring anyone to deride him. As he stood massaging his left arm absently, which had just now gained a heavy dark bruise running upward past his rolled up sleeve.

"Onward – to Round Two!" bawled Fandral – and Heimdall nodded, making it official. "Well, Kol'la," Thor was turning to his friend. "Admit defeat now and save yourself the pain of this..."
rough sport, which I so often heard you deride. What say you?"
"And you know what they say on Lio Fourty-Five. 'Do not count your koraths before they bloom.'"
"What is that?"
"Never mind."
"No, no. Tell me know," Thor laughed, facing Kol'la hands spread on his knees as he took the
traditional opening stance. "While you have the chance," he added to the laughter of those less drunk
to pay attention.
"If you must know," Kol'la followed suit. "It means do not count your-"

"We should stop this," Hogun said.
"It should never have started," Sif said blackly, arm drawing Vessa closer as the girl sighed again
with embarrassment and worry.
"You just wish they were fighting for your attentions," Volstagg said and added something not so
polite which earned him a sharp jab from Hogun and a glare from Sif.
"Perhaps if one of the commanders were summoned-"
"The Commander Farfin and Ifynn are here already, Hogun," Volstagg pointed out cheerfully while
helping himself to another pint of mead.
"What a disaster," Sif sighed.
"If the All-Father finds out..."
"If?" Sif gave Hogun a withering look. "If? More like 'when'? And when he finds out – he will not
be pleased."

Silence. Kol'la was talking with Thor.

"If you must know," he was saying, "it means do not count your victories until you have made
success certain."
"Well, this is one success I am sure of," Thor smiled back. "After all, you lack experience. You lack
the strength... and maybe you have no real heart for it."

Kol'la did not reply, but his lips tightened and with that, the two began to circle again, legs spread
just a little for firm footing, arms now hanging loosely, eyes fixed calculatingly.

Thor darted forward – but this time, Kol'la was obviously more ready. Sound escalated as the slim
young warrior-mage twisted about, hand slipping and then sharply let and upward, hooking the
crook of his unbruised right elbow behind Thor's knee. Pulling upward, Kol'la threw his weight
sideways, tipping the blond warrior over smoothly – and then lading on Thor's solar plexus with a
thud, pinned the surprised Prince down as Thor gasped for air.

Heimdall's voice boomed out, "And – ONE!"

"Round Two goes to Kol'la!" Fandral was shouting.

Kol'la, chest heaving and sweat trickling down and plastering his thin cotton shirt to his back, rose to
his feet and stepped away to let Thor get up. Unlike Thor, he did not shout and jump, but there was
an unpleasant smirk on his face and when Thor glanced at him, Kol'la's smile grew. All teeth – bright
green eyes glinting with unholy glee, ferocity and pride.

A look passed between them then – something Sif could not understand. Will never understand, the
warrior-girl realized, for this is something that is... that can never be fully explained. Men. With
another disgusted sigh, she watched as a combination of Vanir youths and Asgardian commoners
roared 'Round Three'.
It started – and this time, it was no holds barred. Rules had obviously been ignored as Mjolnir whirred out from its resting space by Heimdall's black boots. Everyone took several paces back – automatically. Volstagg eased over to stand before the wine and mead casks protectively. Knives flew through the air, nicking Thor, some finding their mark and slowing the sturdy warrior down... yet Thor was relentless and well did he pursue the ever shifting Kol'la, sometimes pinning down the younger man – but never long enough.

Kol'la was the wind to Thor's rock, easily shifting form as it suited his purposes. Once, they heard something crack in Thor's elbow – and the Prince gained a black eye and broken nose at some point in the proceedings. The slender warrior-mage, tossed about, kicked and eventually thrown down by Thor, fared much worse. When Mjolnir finally rested upon Kol'la's back, effectively capturing the thrashing young mage, everyone knew the fight had ended.

Sif breathed a sigh of relief and the girl, Vessa, gazed down at Kol'la with an apologetic look – obviously torn by her admiration for Thor and her respect for Kol'la. The dark-haired girl rolled her eyes, glad it was over. *For now at least,* she thought.

"Kol'la!?"

At the familiar sound of a raised female voice, Sif tensed. She turned and saw Frigga coming down the lane on her horse, obviously just returned from a ride with her husband. Odin All-Father, also still astride Sleipnir, his preferred eight-legged mount, looked on calmly. Catching sight of his son, Odin frowned and began to dismount. Frigga was already on the ground and making her way over.

"Kol'la! Thor!"

_**How did she know?**_ Sif wondered as the blonde-haired Queen strode forward, the crowd parting for her easily as everyone fell into uneasy silence. The tall woman was commanding in her ire, even clad in her casual riding dress of browns and muted purple. Unstrapping her serviceable brown cloak, the Queen met Thor's eyes before moving to Kol'la who lay still upon the ground. Unmoving.

Sif's hand jerked as Vessa tore free and flew forward to Kol'la's side, tears once stoically withheld, now falling freely.

"Kol'la? Kol'la?" She was saying over and over, tugging at Mjolnir wildly trying to turn the young mage around to no avail.

"Thor! What are you doing – Oh. By the Norns, you will be the death of me! Wait until your father." Stopping as she realized where she was exactly, Frigga took a deep breath and said in an icy, clear, cold way: "Thor. I think it best if you take our guests inside. Now." Thor nodded mutely. "And Mjolnir," added Frigga. "Go. Now." She paused to catch Heimdall's eye and several of the older courtier's and commander's eyes. "Perhaps the rest of you might give us some... space? Hogun, call the resident Healers over, please."

"You heard your Queen," a gruff voice said and everyone began to scurry about.

-0-0-0-

Maids and washing women disappeared whispering quickly to each other. Stable-hands and their boys fled into the recesses of the stables, a few remaining to stable the King and Queen's horses. Commanders barked out orders, the tables were swiftly dismantled and the Vanir eased back, huddling in an uncertain group at the main archway to the palace – as Hogun disappeared within. When Odin finally walked into the stable-yard, his son and the Vanir were already glumly trooping inside.

"What happened?"
"Foolishness," Frigga said, kneeling by the young mage's side, carefully rolling him over and tut-tutting at the sight of a wide range of bruising which marked the aquiline, aristocratic features and lightly toned torso. The girl, Vessa, clung to Kol'la's shirt tearfully and kept on babbling apologies. "This was my fault – I was so-so stupid – I should have – I should have listened and done what they – he had said. I did not mean any harm. I did not."
"Sif," Frigga sat back on her heels and gave the awkward dark-haired warrior-girl a look. "Take the child and calm her down." As Sif moved forward, Frigga added, "There may be more to this tale than meets the eye."
"Indeed," Sif agreed thoughtfully. "I will... talk with her as best as I may. Perhaps your handmaids would be suitable companions – and chaperones – for her this evening?"
"Ah..." Frigga eyed Vessa speculatively. "You think my son will wish to claim his prize?"
"I am sorry-"
"No. It is an intelligent decision, Sif. Remarkably astute of you," Frigga nodded. "Take her to my quarters. The handmaids will help you. Go."

With that, Sif pried away the obviously exhausted and overwrought girl, leaving behind the Queen who now presided over Kol'la's still unconscious form. Hogun was coming down the steps, breathless, with Healers in tow and a cot onto which Frigga carefully eased Kol'la. Bearing the fallen combatant away, Frigga said no more but watched Kol'la's unmoving, slackened, ever-pale face.

Was it only yesterday that he was in my healing room grievously wounded? No... but it feels like no time at all. And yet, some things never change, she shook her head, making a note to replace the boy's wardrobe with something better than the badly (obviously self-taught) hand-mended clothes. Once again, he has fallen victim to his own brand of foolishness and my son's... my son... Thor...-

-0-0-0-

Odin remained behind to oversee the dismantling of the tables and the proper stowing away of the casks. The once filled yard emptied until naught remained but a grey-haired king who glared at the blood-stained earth ruminatively.

Lingering, Hogun watched the aged monarch and considered the matter. Thor had won, he thought, and yet, in many ways, he had lost.

[...victories come at a cost...]

[...it is never apparent...]

[...but the price one pays...]

[...do you know it?]

"This should have never happened."
"Frigga-"
"Foolishness! Fighting over a girl!"
"Frigga-"
"What were they thinking? It is barbaric! What will the Vanir think?"
"FRIGGA," Odin's voice finally managed to cut through his wife's angry mutterings as she pattered about the spacious healing room allotted to her personal care. "Calm yourself, woman!"
"Calm myself?" Frigga whirled about, white bandages in hand as she approached her son. "Calm myself? How can one remain calm at a time like this?"

Thor sat in the opposite corner from Odin, looking appropriately (albeit temporarily) cowed as his
mother wound a tight bandage about his elbow. Applying crushed stones and murmuring a short chant over it, she had wrapped up the cracked elbow, knowing that within a few days, the torn tendons and aching muscles would ease and the hairline fracture would mend itself. *Kol'il'a, on the other hand*, she frowned as she checked his pulse again, *has never healed as we do. He is, after all, not Asgardian originally, no matter what changes Ithunn's apples have wrought in his physiology. Goodness knows what weaknesses and strengths his parentage gave him..."

Frigga looked up and gave her son a look, "Over a girl!"
"That is what most men do," Odin said, glaring Thor into continued silence, "Frigga. Just remember that this did not happen without Kol'il'a's consent – I am certain that this was the usual standard traditional battle-"
"Brawling is more like it!"
"Battle," repeated her husband evenly, "which is a thing of honour. Kol'il'a lost and in the losing, well..." Odin trailed off and shrugged. "Everyone knows the consequences."
"Odin! The girl is not something to be owned – to be bartered or some such thing!" Frigga turned on Thor and pointed a finger as his mouth opened. "Silence, Thor! The lack of commonsense in this place is most disappointing! Goodness knows what the poor girl thought! Frey will not be pleased either... Did you two think of asking Vessa what her thoughts were on the matter?"
"I did not have to."

The quiet voice cut through Frigga's scolding bringing the attention of the other three to the bed which took centre stage of the room. The patient had woken, apparently. Kol'il'a, as usual, attempted to get up – and Frigga rushed to his side, clucking her tongue and tut-tutting with disapproval as she forced her wilful patient back onto his pillow. Thor snorted and then looked away, avoiding Kol'il'a's lethal look.

"What do you mean?" Odin asked, giving Frigga a look – so the blonde woman subsided to her usual chair by Kol'il'a's side.
"I did not have to ask her," Kol'il'a finally answered, staring up at the ceiling ruminatively. "It was obvious to me – her... admiration... for the Prince was... well, rather telling. And unfortunate."
"For you," Thor grunted. "So her heart chose me! You never admitted that! What game were you playing at – if her desires were obviously for me? Weaving those webs of yours, as usual, Kol'il'a?"
"Thor!"

Thor subsided at Odin's reprimand and stared at Kol'il'a who did not avoid his gaze either.

"That is because you do not disappoint my lowest expectations – in your usual way, you go about taking little heed to the intricacies of the matter." Kol'il'a leaned back again into his pillow and sighed, coughing a little and grimacing before continuing. "She might have been in love with you – but she could no sooner gain your interest on her own than a drab marigold could catch the eye of a flower seller." A pause. "I thought... at first to see if I could steal her from you before you were aware... or even arouse your interest in a jealous kind of way."
"Well, it worked," Thor mumbled.
"Yes, it did. Too well." Odin chuckled before turning serious again. "Yet, something else happened."
"It took a few days – and a little bit of careful questioning around the Court and such-like – but I needed to relieve a few of my suspicions. Something about her manner toward me... prompted me to make certain-"
"Always suspicious-"
"Hush, Thor," Frigga leaned forward to squeeze Kol'il'a's hand encouragingly.

For a moment, the dark-haired young man's attention was diverted to their entwined fingers and his thoughts seemed far away. *Even more remote than ever...* Frigga sighed. *In some ways, Kol'il'a defies...*
"Well?" she prompted softly. "Why would Vanahem send her? She is of a Lower House – and those are usually not given to travelling. Everyone in the Vanir party was of the High Houses and Clans... but not Vessa. Vessa..." Kol'la explained slowly as if setting in stone something he had long feared, "Vessa was sent for me, I think." He glanced at Odin and then Frigga in embarrassment. "I know. I know. It sounds vainglorious at best-

"No, no," Odin mused, stroking his beard, deep in thought. "I could see such underhanded dealings finding their way to the one who holds the Crown Prince's counsel. The Vanir have their own set of political intrigues, as you well know... and... Lord Frey did seem, after all, interested in your abilities when you last visited there. Apparently, the amount of seithr used to keep you retained in their holding cells was enough to pique his interest."

"Ah," Kol'la said, suddenly at a loss for words. "Yes," was Odin's dry response. "'Ah!' indeed. And the girl – was she pleasing to you?"

"I think she surprised herself – and myself as well – in how well we... interested each other. The both of us find great joy in learning and in the use of seithrancy. My current topic of research was of some interest to her and we found other common ground..." Kol'la hesitated. "I believe that when Thor... interrupted... our... explorations... she was coming to enjoy my company in her own way. Yet, when Thor suddenly pressed his attentions on her, I think she became very uncertain once again. After all," he added softly and bitterly, "the heart wants what the heart wants, for good or ill." Frigga sighed, "What a mess."

"We did not make things easier for her," Kol'la admitted. "She was too young to play such games – and Thor and I were... relentless. It is no surprise that it got to this... point. I had hoped that she would make up her mind in some fashion before now... but..." He shrugged and glanced at Thor. "She couldn't."

"She still can't," Frigga said. "And how could she choose? Therefore the both of you must make it easier for her. You two must let her go."

There was a silence and the two young men stared at each other calculatingly. Odin watched the wordless communion and smiled. Of course, Frigga sagged back onto her chair, he is going to let them get up to their tomfoolery in the name of character building or personal growth.

"Odin," she implored, "tell them to let her go."

"Frigga – it cannot be done so easily," Odin replied seriously and softly. "It is as Kol'la says – the heart wants what the heart wants and ever have young men butted heads over matters of love."

"We are not barbaric Frost Giants!" Thor protested. 

"It is a manner of speaking, Thor," Kol'la snapped. "Use your head - no, wait... perhaps you should leave problem-solving to better minds and try your thick skull on-

"Are you implying-" Thor began. 

"Boys!" Odin barked, his voice clashing with Frigga's. 

"It is barbaric!" Frigga disagreed. "Once again you are sacrificing the well-being of – of our – of the boys just for some – some political lesson or-"

"Frigga!"

"Must they always come to blows over such silly-"

"Frigga," Odin stood and crossed over to his wife who rose to meet him, cheeks flushed and eyes bright with annoyance and worry. His hands rose to capture hers. "Frigga. Our boys - they live even now – and I will indeed have them desist. The girl shall be sent home with our blessings and well-wishes, but in Vanahem, she will stay. And Thor. Here, the king stared down at his son who gazed back mutinously. "Thor will learn control, for pursuit of the girl places her in an unfortunate position. She must know she is not a suitable choice at the side of the King of Asgard – and her family has desired that she stand elsewhere... at the side of the future King's advisor and favoured friend. The
future King of Asgard's brother, as it were." Odin stressed his words carefully and watched as Kol'l'a
relaxed and Thor blinked, tension easing. "So, you must understand, Thor, that this is a test of
disccretion, discernment... which you failed to a certain extent - but you may succeed yet at
controlling your desires and realizing that this matter demands the mind of a king. Do you
understand?" Thor nodded, unhappily but more peaceably. "Now," Odin sighed, "Thor, you and I
must part from here, for we have much to discuss. Kol'l'a will stay here - out of the snares of such
politicking... Frigga?"
"I shall stay awhile," the Queen sighed, giving way to her husband's unspoken request to let the
matter be for now.
"And my words are fair?" Odin asked quietly.
"Yes, Odin," Frigga laughed then lightly. "For once."
"I am glad I do not disappoint."
"This time."
"Such faith," the king ended their light banter with a small kiss, beckoned at his son and gave Kol'l'a
a nod. "I shall see you tomorrow, Kol'l'a. And you, Frigga, later on tonight?"
"Yes."

With that, the two men left and Frigga moved to the table and brought over various potions and a
light broth that would hearten any wounded patient. Kol'l'a ate the bread offered him slowly, feeling
the ache of a bruised jaw – and wondered if his face looked any better than Thor's. After the soup
and bread and potions and re-bandaging of his ribs, Kol'l'a laid back on the goose-down pillows and
closed his eyes while Frigga sat at his side and quietly chattered about court gossip while working on
a piece of stitch-work.

"My Lady-" He began, when there was a lull in conversation and the silence seemed to lay heavier
than usual between them. Kol'l'a stopped, uncertain on how to continue.
"It is Frigga," she smiled, taking his hand in hers, stopping her stitching for a moment.
He could never call her that. It seemed impossible. Many things... but never that... Never that.

"What is it?" Her hand left his to push away a stray lock which had fallen over his brow and lingered
to feel his temperature. Kol'l'a was always oddly cool. The only time he had shown a temperature
was when the infection had set in after that particularly large stomach wound.
"Well," Kol'l'a paused and then forged on, green eyes staring down at his bandaged knuckles. "They
say that you have the gift of Sight."
"Hmmm... there are times when... something yet to happen seems clearer to me. A glimpse of
something that may be or will soon be. My mother had that Gifting as well – but I was never fully
trained in it, and it comes only when I am rather relaxed... thinking or meditating or when I am
weaving or doing some quiet kind of menial activity... do you see things sometimes?"
Kol'l'a swallowed, remembering his visions as a child of the Void. Visions? Nightmares? Who
knew... No one could ever tell him – and he had never spoken of it. Not even to Elska. Not even to
Thor.

"No," he finally said. A not-quite lie. "No. But... sometimes," he sighed, "I wish I could. Just to
see..." He paused awkwardly, fingers fiddling with each other. "To see if this is my destiny."
"What is your destiny?"
"To lose." Kol'l'a looked away then, cheeks just a little flushed. "I sound so silly. What I mean is –
must I always play the role of the wrong one... the misguided one... the defeated one?"
"Oh... Kol'l'a..."
"Why must..." He would not cry. He would not cry – and yet the corners of his eyes pricked hotly.
"I always fail in what I set my hands to?"
"Kol'la, dearest," Frigga leaned forward then, to draw him into a close embrace.

A foreign thing, but Kol'la sought it nonetheless. It was like Glo-Glo – but not. Not really, he thought incoherently. Nothing like Glo-Glo. This must be another thing related to what a 'mother' must do. Her voice held a faint tremble, which he knew meant that she was crying, and there was an odd clenching in his gut at the soft sound - and an ache in his chest.

"Oh... Kol'la... Kol'la... Of course not," she repeated over and over. "Of course not. The things I saw... they were great things... and maybe some of them may seem terrible – but I know that you will work through your path, however dark it may seem and find the place to which you truly belong."

He could not reply to that – could not respond. For the next few minutes, they sat there – until finally Frigga released him and helped him lay back on his pillows. Dabbing at her tears with a handkerchief, she said nothing for a moment. Then she smiled a gentle smile, full of hope and love – hope and love given to him, turned to him. Given unconditionally, without demands or questions. It is overwhelming... and what can I offer in response? What have I to give to her?

He did not know. He wondered if he ever would.

"One day," she repeated, "you will find a place to which you truly belong."
"But it is not here," he whispered, green eyes dulling.
"Maybe... maybe not," she replied slowly. Blue eyes filled with sadness and worry... for him. "I know you are graduating. Soon. And soon you will leave – I can tell wanderlust when it lies upon youth... Kol'la, as far as you travel, no matter into what dark places you stray, no matter what terrible workings you weave... please... please... know that you are always welcome at my side."

Kol'la's hand crept back into hers and squeezed gently and a small smile warmed the usually cool green eyes for a moment.

"I know," he said. "I know," Kol'la repeated, more firmly. "I will always come back."

That was the best way he could say it:

*I love you.*

Chapter End Notes

Well, some more important Kol'la + Royal Family interaction! I love Frigga... and by the way, the last thought of Kol'la is NOT supposed to be creepy. It's Kol'la's subconscious response to Frigga's motherliness. I hope that that is clear.

Also, some may be disappointed about not going into detail about what happened at the dances and such. I will write a side-story for it. Perhaps I will send out another side story for those who review - when I reach 300 reviews or something like that. XD

As for the illnesses, my dad is getting better and is returning home - which is good! I still have a cough and allergies - but the eczema is now in control. Thank goodness!

Thanks everyone!
See ya round in 6 or so days (or more if life gets crazy)!
-KI

p.s. Over halfway done!
p.p.s. After hard thought, I added 'Thor' to the character list for this story... and got some friends to help me rewrite my summary.

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'inka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
bikkja – bitch
Grasping The Stars

Chapter Notes

My Dad is at home, recovering nicely. PTL! And my allergies have subsided for the most part - and now I just have to beat a cough and the continuing eczema. It doesn't help that I have to use chalk two days a week - which is totally not good for one's skin. I'm going to have to wear gloves... and of course - MOISTERIZE~! HA~!

As for those who reviewed and wished me well - THANKS SO MUCH! THANKS TO: Dragonanzar, iBlameGlobalWarming, Kai_Maciel, lemomina, Uriko, Danea and SnakeCharmed79~!

A lot of exposition up ahead. Sorta... SORRY! But pay attention - the devil's in the details~!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 41
Grasping the Stars

[...with these rites...]

[...what do we commemorate...]

[...but the origins of all that...]

In the beginning, the Asgardian Saga-Vefr say – in the beginning before What Is was, darkness reigned. There was only darkness; there was the Ginnung, the Void, the eternal vastness, the endless emptiness. Then, as the stories tell, as the Story-Weavers tell – in an explosion of light and magic, there was Life. That Which Is – both Seen and Unseen – came into being.

Now, hundreds and thousands and, perhaps, hundreds of thousands of millenia later, memories of the Ommni-Tith were given homage as the cycle of passing the stormerki, the mysteria, to a new generation of Acolytes, soon to be Mages, was once again enacted. The Rikr-Hringraevi had turned – and flanked on either side by fellow scholars, the Acolyte Kol'la began the final Runa a Fyrsta - the Rites of Initiation. Listening to the words of Agaeti as they flowed out with the ease of familiarity, Kol'la's eyes wandered discreetly around the large, formally decorated room before him.

Before him lay the low table upon which sat the symbols of their trade: staffs, scrips and vellum. To the left before them in a wide semi-circle sat the as yet unready Acolytes and Apprentices of the younger classes and those who had just recently graduated before him. Opposite, on the right, were the more important functionaries seated in their respective tiered pews – the highly decorated Honoured Alumni (for glorious acts of service), the Aesir High Council of Magics and Academics and other such dignitaries. Behind all, encircling the two half circles of the Mage's Court around the outer edge of the great, dimly lit, round room, were those forever immortalized in stone – those who had returned to the very fabric of Life from which they had come. Those who had passed on.
Above them all, sitting in the Upper Gallery of the domed hall, Odin sat with Frigga. The King of Asgard, Odin All-Father and his lady wife, Frigga of Vanaheim, had deigned to attend for the first time in millenia.

*For my sake,* Kol'la smiled to himself as Agaeti droned on – "...for those are not the futile gestures of lesser men, but with these rites do we commemorate the Origins of all that is, was and shall be..." – *they came for me.* The young Jotun usually would have found great amusement at such a grand deception – that Royalty of Asgard would come to celebrate the achievements of a savage beast, their life-long enemy, a Jotun. Yet, Kol'la had no heart for such madness in such a sacred moment. Instead, he found comfort in their presence, despite the weight of their gaze upon him. The gazes of all those present: Odin's usual unreadable, thoughtful looks, Agaeti's measuring glances and Flarathir's patronizing, yet calculating stares. Bracing himself and firming his shoulders, Kol'la found Frigga's proud gaze and grinned instead.

*If this is a trick,* he thought, *it is a good one.*

The ceremony itself was short and quiet as befit the life of Mages in Asgard – arcane, mysterious and not commented upon by the general populace which preferred simpler pleasures, grand adventures and honourable combat. Unlike the more popular Runa a Kelda and Runa'a'Vetr festivities and the more personal traditions of the Koma a Aldr, the transformation from student to master was much more solemn and, to the uninitiated or untrained who could not unravel the meanings of voiceless symbols, uninteresting.

*Like now,* Kol'la thought as a ceremonial scrip, staff and vellum were placed in his hands. Carefully balancing them (and very glad he had practised earlier), Kol'la repeated his part of the responses – "...finding meaning in gesture, placing force in motion, we partake in the mysteria, we can but graze the surface of the..." and vows – "...I am but a foot soldier in the Battle and stand, back to the Shadow, face forward to Valhalla and the Light..."

Spells of blessing and empowerment followed, intoned in the deep voices of the Mage's Council. Odin and Frigga spoke them as well – and Kol'la realized that, at some point, Odin must have also taken those vows to fight as a Force for good. *Odin as an Acolyte?* Kol'la thought. *Impossible... and yet...*  

*And yet.*

*No doubt,* Kol'la decided, *knowing the importance of all of this, the All-Father thought it necessary to encompass all that is Asgard during a time of unending war – but it did not come natural to him as it had for Lady Frigga... Lady Frigga, who, coming from Vanaheim, could not – could never – take an official position within these halls... in the end, she carved herself her own place within the magic of Asgard. Her will is indeed strong. Kol'la smiled to himself. As mine will be.*

Polite applause broke through his thoughts and High-Mage Agaeti took his place behind a marble podium set up within the wide aisle to give a long-winded speech on responsibility and giftings and other dull topics which Kol'la had heard so many times before. Other mages afterwards stepped forward to give praise or words of advice. Kol'la smiled coolly at the mild jokes cracked by the ever mirthful Mage Eryth and the back-handed compliments of Mage Flarathir. Letting their bombastic words roll over him, Kol'la revelled in the feel of the rough wood of the simple staff within his hand.

A pause. Then, with a nod, the low table was lifted away from before them and the ten Acolytes could take five ceremonial steps forward into the middle of the room on the checkered marble paving. They stopped as quiet servants placed a long, deep iron box before them – the next obstacle in the Rites: the Skipa, or the Infusion. Instilling his magic into the crude wood within his left hand, focusing his power on the small crystal set into the rough carving at the staff's head, Kol'la filled it
carefully, yet quickly with his magicks and then in turn set the staff inside.

Stepping forward importantly, Mage Flarathir gave a short speech on the fires of their magick filling the universe and how each small flame could take part in the streams of Life and blend with the colours of the Magickal Spheres. With that, the staffs were set on fire and the slow release of magic with the heated crystals turned the flames into glorious iridescent colours of reds, purples, yellows, oranges, greens and blues.

Watching the flames, knowing that in the more theoretical classes there was an on-going discussion as to what colour (if any) symbolized what level of power, Kol'la wondered if his magics would always shine such a lustrous blue and green. *The colours of power in Asgard are red and gold – strong, vivid and bold like its people... but mine is cool. Always cool. Cool and cold.*

As the iron box was moved to a position somewhere behind them, the flames still crackling merrily, Kol'la and his fellow scholars opened the leather scrips which hung from their shoulders and pocketed the vellum within before stepping forward again – this time passing the High Mage to take up a line before the door which, facing the mountain, opened onto a small, green garden. The garden which had no name yet was spoken of with reverence by all those who worked Magick.

This was a sacred space and in its middle stood an inconspicuous, grey, stone well, fed by a stream deep within the earth which flowed down from the Skythurs itself. As the stories went, not long after the dawn of Time when Asgard bloomed as the final act of Magick and Light, the heartbeat of the Realm was hidden within the greatest mountain – but its power flowed out and, they say, has continued to flow out to this day. On Runa a Fyrsta, each Acolyte stood before it and in deep meditation partook of the waters in the Laegjia, also known as the Rite of Immersion.

Eventually, finally, it was his turn. Kol'la stood before the Well, the grey stone underneath his palms felt solid as the rock of Skythurs itself – and like all of Asgard, it hummed with Life and green things and glorious purpose and great destinies and fierce combat. The Velspara-Speki, the Well of Wisdom, which granted those gifted few a glimpse of their destiny - or doom.

...you stand here...

...you take what is not yours...

...and yet, it may be...

...may be yet...

Kol'la thought of Asgard. He thought of Thor and lightning and the visible coursing of power through fist and bone and the strength of belief - *I see you* -, housed within blonde hair and blue eyes. He thought of wise and complex counsel and Odin All-Father's words – *I trust you to be a brother* – and white candles flickering in the dim library, lighting up dusty tomes. He thought of Frigga and a golden orchard and a sickbed of long ago and encouragement - *you are always welcome at my side* - and love, a quiet hall of weaving and the sweet fragrance of tea. He thought further back – back to the worlds upon which he had lived, suffered, survived – and the Voices of those places, which could no longer be called Realms for their power had long since died. Further back – further back –

...to the place from which you came...

...to the land of which we do not speak...

...to the origin...
Mage Opna and the rites of Jotunheim and the dusty Gothahus. Empty rites, Elska had laughed and snorted and shook his head. Sometimes the Caretaker had cried. Kol'la, standing before the grey well, thought he understood now. *Maybe. Maybe, just a little.*

...gesture without meaning...

...motion without force...

Kol'la's right hand moved forward and without much thought, without realization, clasped the dipper and eased it into the well's waters. The waters which rose to the well's top – clear and cold and sweet, he knew before even drinking. And when he sipped it –

...why should we not share...

...we who were once brother-sister...

...from the Dawn of Time...

...when we were born...

Kol'la's slender throat worked a little as the fresh water slid down into his belly. There was no one around him – just Kol'la alone in that small garden – such silence. Above him, shadows moved gradually over the sheltered place, the sun's ray winking in and out as the revolving stones, which had first caught his gaze on his arrival in Asgard, turned in time, marking the moment. Marking the place for all time.

He saw neither light nor shadow, neither green nor grey, neither what is seen or felt or sensed. Kol'la could only let what he knew would come to him – a sense of what lay before him. They had said – High-Mage Agaeti, Odin All-Father,Mage Hrotha and Flarathir – it was a time to know one's place. *What is it?* Kol'la thought. *What will I commit to memory, to letter, to Life?* He remembered his words to Frigga.

-must I always play the role of the wrong one... the misguided one... the defeated one?-

And her reply:

-The things I saw... they were great things... and maybe some of them may seem terrible – but I know that you will work through your path, however dark it may seem and find the place to which you truly belong-

Was she right? Kol'la asked. *What is it that you have for me?*

And the wind answered.

[...so we partake of Life...]

[...but can we understand it truly?...]

Before him spread Jotunheim, empty and white and void. The skies of Jotunheim were empty. *Void of life. Not the Void. Not yet. One day, however, Kol'la thought, it will succumb. Unless... unless.*

...unless...

Heimsrsal. Faint – and yet... not. There, and yet, not.
A tall, empty house of worship, the Gothahus, now silent with the Dead. Then, the quiet is broken - it is the cry of a babe in the dead of night heard only by a soul-dead Caretaker. He held the small thing in his hands - and, letting it live, brought the gift of years to himself and to Jotunheim.

*To Jotunheim?*

...there is hope, dear heart...

...there is always...

[...so we dip into the wisdom of our Forefathers...]

The Cosmos – full of colour and fantastic things and Life and possibilities. The Void – black and filled with nameless things and Death and inevitability. Eternally battling. And there he stood, as he always had, upon on the edge – but not as his Vow had stated. Never as his Vow. Never would he be able to fulfill that promise. *I am a liar*, he thought, as he gazed into the Abyss. *And always shall be. Ever shall my back be to Valhalla and the Light and ever shall I face this emptiness.*

[...so we glimpse destiny...]

When Kol'la emerged a little later than was usual, his face was blank, yet his eyes blazed an unearthly green. As the other now-Mages before him had done, Kol'la opened his scrip, removed the vellum and wrote a few words on the pages before folding the paper and committing the words to the fire. It was the last step - the Brenna-fir, the Immolation, giving back to the fires of Life what the revelation granted to one only moments before.

Frigga knew that it was not her place to ask what destiny had been placed on those slender shoulders, but she wondered what the young man had seen. There was no doubt in her mind that he had actually seen something, unlike the others who loudly proclaimed hollow retellings of great honours and bright futures. The motherly Queen's stomach twisted as Kol'la removed the scrip, placed it again on the low table and exited the room without a word. During the small meeting afterwards, the Queen watched as Kol'la, rather dazedly, responded mechanically to the well-wishes of his peers and the other Mages on the Council. Unlike his usual smooth self, Kol'la remained, for the most part, monosyllabic.

*He is altogether too quiet,* Frigga decided, much later on that evening at the feast which she had planned for the young Mage. *Kol'la is not... here...*

"Kol'la," Frigga leaned sideways to clasp the green-eyed young man's hand. "Kol'la... Are you well?"

"I am well," Kol'la's eyes sharpened as he returned to where he was. He smiled then, a small quick smile rather forced and he squeezed her hand lightly in return, comfortingly. "Well," he paused as Thor's booming narrative suddenly mentioned his name – in a rather unsavoury way, "as well as might be – what is Thor talking about now?"

"Ah. Some story about your last quest with him to that dreadful world..." Frigga shook her head and sighed. "He is really altogether too excitable – especially when it comes to feasts."

"Thor!" Kol'la rose and lobbed a piece of bread at his friend's head. "Not only is your story-telling as horrific as usual – but you are leaving out any actual facts and you are forgetting the best bits!"

"Kol'la!" The blonde warrior turned with a frown away from some now very mirthful courtiers. "I was not forgetting them – I had just not yet gotten to the part where you tripped over your own staff."

"The only reason why I tripped over my staff was because I had just used it to pull you out of that hunting trap you walked into! If it hadn't been for the age of the thing and the low quality of work
put into it, you might have ended your quest with some well-placed skewers! And I fancy that Hogun and Fandral – and even the ever-hungry Volstagg here – could say 'no' to a meaty round of Thor!"

More laughter. Sif was shaking her head, but also chuckling a little behind her own goblet of mead. Volstagg thumped Thor on the back and offered the Prince another leg of turkey for consolation's sake.

"What?" roared Thor in return, ignoring a glare from Odin who was not enjoying the spray of food raining on his head thanks to Thor's half-full mouth. "And do you remember why I was so distracted as to put my life in danger – only because you were threatening to rouse our enemy and warn them of our approach with that damned warbling of yours. I swear," Thor turned to the others, "if you put a gown on him and a lute in hand, you would mistake Kol'la here for one of our maidens." "And yet I would be the finest about," Kol'la retorted, face turning red.

"Thor," Sif said, rising from her place opposite the Prince and laid a hand on his. "Listen to me, Thor – let Kol'la tell the tale. After all, this is a feast in his honour."

"Yes, yes, listen to her as usual," grumbled Kol'la, giving Sif the evil eye. "Never the more rational one."

"After all," Sif continued sweetly, teeth now grinding at Kol'la's poor gratitude. "He is so sensitive, poor thing, and may never live it down."

Thor looked between the two who were now openly glaring at each other – then he laughed good-naturedly. Offering some more mead to his father and filling Sif's goblet up again as well, Thor shrugged.

"Now, Sif," he said, "you have a point. Come, Kol'la. Tell the tale with your usual great skill and awe us all with the recounting of my great – of our great deeds and what we conquered together."

"Hm," Kol'la's eyes narrowed. "If you make jest at me, I shall find you and –"

"And what?" Thor asked impudently. "Do not tell me you wish to enjoy another wrestling match so soon?"

"THOR!"

"Thor!" Frigga sighed and gave her son a despairing look, upon which Thor sat down and looked up at Kol'la with expectancy.

Realizing that the entire table had now fallen silent and all eyes were indeed turned upon him – waiting for the tale to be told, Kol'la sighed, shook his head, straightened his shoulders, took a deep breath – and began.

"As some of you may know, but two weeks ago, Thor," (round of hurrahs), "the Warrriors Three" (roar of approval), "the fair Lady Sif" (catcalls and huzzahs), "and your own glorious story-teller, myself," (even more roaring, laughter and pounding on the tables), "set forth on a grand adventure to the world, which is so named Que'ranos, known for its famed underwater serpents which float – thusly -" (a sweep of the arm and the hall was filled with the illusion of water and giant beasts – a hush lowered over the crowd) "and to that place, Thor had the desire to go and slay one such creature. As you may guess, this is no small matter since the oceans are deep beyond measure – and dark-" (here the waters and light dimmed, giving the entire room a murky, mysterious feel) "and rarely do they surface for the sun's ray and breath of air. Nevertheless, our proud Prince had decided and we landed. However, no sooner did we set foot on the soil than a crowd of inhabitants approached us with terrible news -"

His voice rolled onwards and outwards and the scene changed to stormy skies and the shadow of a threat. Faces turned upward and around watching the story play out in all of its comedic, tragic and epic glory. When the tale ended, there was thunderous applause and everyone agreed that Thor could
"Maybe, Prince Thor will gain the skill," one Mage said graciously, unwilling to lose standing in Thor's regard -- and Odin smiled. High-Mage Agaeti had been his right-hand adviser throughout the years, alongside his brothers and his wife. Kol'la, however, fulfilled two of the roles already. The All-Father had chosen. Soon, the rest of the Mage's Court would know.

...yet best laid plans...

...oft go awry...

"How do you think it went?" Frigga asked the next day, watching Kol'la finger the green leaves of her columbine absently.
"The feast was -- it went well, I think. Of course, telling stories is what I do best... and the food -- your choices were... I, ah, I enjoyed them. Thank you."
"Especially the mint pudding," Frigga said with small attempt to repress a smile at Kol'la's apparent inability to express his deep-hearted thanks.
"Yes," Kol'la nodded, his green eyes unable to meet hers. "Especially the mint pudding."
"Hm."

Frigga sat and then patted the stone seat beside her in unspoken invitation. After a moment of silent dithering, the tall, slender young man sat, hands trapped between long, leather-clad thighs, shoulders hunched - a picture of uncomfortable uncertainty. The Queen looked him over -- from the top of his neatly combed back black hair (so rare for the Realm), green eyes set in a pale, lean face carved with aristocratic lines. The thin lips set in a determined line -- with the strong jaw that still curved to give a soft look.

He will always be a boy, she thought, to me. Since his questing, he had gained muscle -- lean muscle that ran down his neck and gave some volume to his Mage Acolyte's blue and cream uniform. No longer a student, she thought, he should get a tailor...

Her hand rose to clasp the now wider shoulder and she smiled as she met his eyes. Kol'la's hand rose in response to cover her fingers with his longer, slender ones.

A beautiful boy, Frigga thought then, a handsome boy, I should say.

"What are you thinking?" Kol'la asked softly, lips quirking up in a smile.
"Why do you ask that?" she replied in kind.
"You have... an odd look on your face..."
"I suppose, I was thinking..." Frigga laughed then quietly. "How much you have grown since that first day I saw you lying on the bed, bleeding out. How much you must have grown since the time you were born... how handsome you have become. And clever, of course."
"Of course." His dark head tipped forward -- and his right boot crossed his left boot as he shuffled uneasily in his seat.
"Fondness is something that mothers feel all the time."
"Yes... I suppose."
"Well," she sighed, "that was... rather forward of me. Since I am not your mother."
"No," Kol'la looked up then and his eyebrows crinkled a little at the thought. "You are not."
"Mother or no, I am very proud of you and what you achieved yesterday -- and whatever you saw, I am certain you can overcome it."
"What you see is destiny," Kol'la said. "Mage Flarathir said that what we see at the Well is--"
"Flarathir is a bit of an ass, dear," Frigga laughed. "His magick is as he is -- unbending and harsh -- and not a little hungry. However, those of Vanaheim see magick as they see Life -- something that is
organic – that grows, even in the harshest of places... and so, nothing is set in stone, dear heart. Do you understand?"

Kol'la nodded slowly and Frigga drew him into a hug, knowing that this was the best she could do – for now.

"So," she said, drawing back, taking a deep breath and banishing the gloomy subject from between them. "I am thinking it is time to visit a tailor. Come, Kol'la, you and I – we could find something those than those blues and creams – what they do to your colouring! Do you wish to look like dead fish through all eternity? What is your favourite colour?"
"Well, black is most suitable for-"
"Black!" The woman threw up her hands in mock despair. "You and Thor! Colour! I am certain you know of colour!"
"Well, fine then," Kol'la chuckled, "when I was... younger... I wore green. Green is a good colour."
"And would go well with burnished gold or silver. Yes, yes, I can see it. And it would compliment your eyes so... see, this is what I was thinking..."

Dark and light blurred together as shadows shifted upon the grass beneath the gently rustling trees. Dark and light heads bent together in conspiracy. Dark and light, so juxtaposed, yet finding harmony, building peace.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there we go. A bunch more of Kol'la-centric stuff. Hope it worked for you folks! Send me questions if there's something unclear!

So, with that chapter finished, we are only 2 more away until the naming of LOKI~! YEAH~!
I'm so excited... I hope you are too! I hope it feels realistic... I hope this all feels seamless... and stuff. (sigh) I've not been at my best, so my writing halted, but recently, I got a lease on life, so I hope that my writing can pick back up again.
That being said, an update will come out in 5 days or so.

Please let me know what you think! It's really encouraging to me - to answer questions or dialogue with folks or rant about Hiddleston/Loki - and helps me write faster (and better)!

See ya guys around!

-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'a'uzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
bikkja – bitch
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
Ginnung – the Void
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
stormerki – mysteria
Rikr-Hricingraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa'a'vetr – Winter Solstice
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Skipa – the Infusion
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)
Laegja – the Immersion
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Thanks to: Anths-Girl, Skywinder, lemomina, Kai_Macial, Dragonanzar, Danea~!
Welcome new readers! I'm so pleased to meet you! When I hit 300 reviews, I'll be sure to send you guys a preview of a side-story I'll be writing up. XD

I'll be posting the older side-story up as well. xD

So, everyone is feeling better. I've still got eczema (on my elbow now)... but I'm really feeling great b/c this week is a holiday... YAY! As a result, I wrote up to Chapter 48! (!)

AND THEN THERE WAS TUMBLR AND LOKI IN CUFFS AND CHAINS AND MY OVARIES MAY HAVE JUST EXPLODED! I lost ability to write - to make grammerz and spellingz. Lost my can.(X.X)
(I'm ded.)
(ded)

I promised a friend that I would try to keep all my chapters to a minimum of 3K...
Well... that didn't work out so well... (sigh) But I'm sure none of you will be too upset about a super long chapter. (LOL) FIGHTING! VIOLENCE! MAGICKS! NEW VOCAB!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 42
Time to Shine

[...the warp and weft of Fate...]

[...the parts we must play...]

[...let us begin with the small discordant notes...]

There was an age old saying in Snjarhamr: a little mountain rainfall hails the village's doom. In Dagaheim, they said that many small flakes make a great storm and in Utgard they believed firmly in the adage many small fractures give way to the Void. And it is true, Kol'la thought as finished stowing away his supplies in his small travelling pack, alongside his spare set of clothes, whetstone, tinder box and safe box (for such important articles as travel passes, High-Mage Agaeti's official letters and maps). Small things can herald great matters and Lady Frigga once told me that every being and creature plays a part in the weaving of Fate – for good or ill – big and small.

It had been over half a year since his graduation from the Mage's Court, yet the memory of the Velspara-Spek still burned deep within his memory like embers of fire that would not die. When he
closed his eyes at night... when he closed his eyes, he could see it – the Well, the clear waters and the threat of all he had feared and the hope of all he had come to love. Somehow, the ever busy Kol'la found time to consider the matter.

And Kol'la was busy! Nowadays, between questing with Thor and spending spare hours at Lady Frigga's side, Kol'la also ran more important errands concerning anything regarding Magick to the further parts of the Realm and beyond. Unlike the Healers and other Mages, Kol'la, always the more experienced in the ungentle arts of warfare, had never sought safety with numbers and therefore had proven himself useful for emergency cases when a Mage was needed to travel to the wilder regions of Asgard or unsafe areas in the other Nine Realms.

How Kol'la transported himself was not entirely certain – and he never shared his secrets – although the rumours spoke of the possibility that Kol'la could have discovered seven league boots or mastered the art of flauguna. Despite the fact that Kol'la made sure to use the Bifrost on official missions, the younger Acolytes, in awe and fascination at Kol'la's apparent expertise in trickery, magic and war, believed that somehow Kol'la had found the Dark Paths, the Other Ways, the Ofolr Leith which only the Elves and rare Dwarf used for travel. The fact that Mage Flarathir and Mage Hrotha had argued over Kol'la's final research – on the use of internal production and external radiation of heat as fuel for magickal work while crossing the Ginnung – could only feed the rumour mill.

Ignoring the whispers which had always sprung up about him since the first day he had come to Asgard, Kol'la focused instead on his personal research (which extended to a variety of things, mostly involving on how to fight with minimal injury to himself), official errands and duties to the King's Court (Thor, mainly). So deep was he in his own thoughts that when the young warrior-mage bumped against the shoulder of someone ascending the steep stairwell of the Seer's tower, Kol'la did not at first register who it was he had passed on his way down to the ground floor of the main atrium. Mumbling an apology, the busy young man half-turned, eyes rising to meet the other's and then paused at the sight of a familiar set of robes. It was Mage Flarathir. Kol'la winced internally – and then paused as Mage Flarathir turned and smiled indulgently at the younger mage. Standing two steps above the dark-haired, green-eyed young man, Mage Flarathir had a good head on Kol'la – and yet, Kol'la knew, judging from Mage Flarathir's subtle shifting on his feet to a wider stance, that the older Mage felt, as usual, a certain... lack.

"Well, if it isn't young Kol'la... rushing off on some grand adventure again? Slaying beasts, passing lazy hours with the Prince and giving no thought to wise counsel? Hm... I see that Initiation has as yet to imbue you with a sense of... decorum."
"Ah, Master Flarathir, I apologize – in my haste, I did not see you there-"
"Ha, my boy. Still clinging to poor jokes for consolation, I see," the shorter, older man huffed.
"Hardly. I am merely attempting to end this conversation before it passes its predetermined allotment of time, its natural... due date, as it were," Kol'la responded composedly, with no indication of the laughter which was rising within him. A pause. A brief smile, then: "I am busy."
"You always are. Then it is a quest?"
"No." Kol'la shook his head with a short laugh. "No. High-Mage Agaeti is sending me with two Apprentices to Sothaborg in order to reinforce the magical barriers erected last year by Master Hrotha. His charms against the migrating bilgesnipe herds apparently need reapplication every time during this season of the year – but good Master Hrotha's expertise is currently needed at Court, so those duties have fallen to me."
"Great man, Master Hrotha. A talented Mage and those spells were created by him alone, I would have you know. Such kind of workings demand a certain level of talent."
"I was aware," Kol'la stifled further words of defence which sat on the tip of his tongue.

Mage Flarathir, he thought, always could get the rise out of you, Kol'la – and today, you have no
"Hm." Mage Flarathir nodded and then added after a short pause. "Well, be careful. Bilgesnipe are particularly active during this season and you know what happened last year – while on the self-same errand. Master Hrotha took several weeks recovering from that bilgesnipe attack – and he was quite saddened by the crippling of that apprentice of his."

"Apprentice Sotho."
"Yes, that one. So be on your guard, young Kol'la."
"I will keep that in mind," was Kol'la's even response.

The old, white-haired mage looked down on Kol'la... As if I were an insect, Kol'la mused. No doubt he thinks I am presumptuous – as do all the others. There was an awkward silence as Master Flarathir considered the determined pale face and blazing green eyes before him coolly.

"Is there anything else for us to say to each other, I wonder," Kol'la finally broke the silence again, lips turned up in a sarcastic smile. "Perhaps a 'good day' is in order."
However, instead of replying in kind, Mage Flarathir hesitated and shifted his feet again before saying, "The ceremony went well."

Is that a question? Kol'la wanted to ask. He held his tongue, nodded and said neutrally, "It went well."
"Moments alone with the Well often overwhelm those who seek its Voice. Yet, it is wise to heed its warnings, considering its inherent importance to Asgard – to all of us."
"Some may bend their backs to Fate," Kol'la replied quietly, his thoughts drifting to a flash of memory – a cold, empty Temple in a desolate city, a small altar surrounded with bodies and swirls of red and black – a child's forgotten cry heard by a mourning Caretaker. As if from faraway, he heard himself say: "But I wish to believe I can make my own Destiny, no matter what has happened before and what threatens to happen ahead."
"That sounds suspiciously like some wishy-washy Vanir nonsense to me," the ancient Mage sniffed.

Kol'la said nothing, which he knew would annoy Mage Flarathir even more.

"Well, regardless, I look forward to seeing great things from you, Kol'la. Anyone with half an eye can see you bear a great destiny."

Was that a smile? Kol'la wondered, disbelievingly. He had already begun to turn away, now bored of the conversation, but at those words, he paused, eyes narrowing in suspicion. What is he up to? An awkward silence ensued. Kol'la paused on the stairs and then turned back a little, nodding his head and inclining himself forward in an ever-so-slight bow.

"I must go. Farewell."

With that, Kol'la left, barely registering the senior mage's words of farewell. That was... strange, he mused. It was... almost civil. Most interesting indeed. Looking back quickly, Kol'la glimpsed the Aesir still on the second step watching him cross the large atrium. It remained with the warrior-mage for the rest of the day – the image of a bent, white-haired man, brooding like a hawk, dark eyes glittering as he stood alone half-cast into shadow.

As he rode off down the road with two lower level Apprentices, Kol'la mulled over the matter. Perhaps... perhaps... perhaps Mage Flarathir is also aware... that Odin had chosen Master Agaeti as his Mage Advisor and so much time has passed, it is conceivable that Odin will not choose, nor be able to choose, another. For one so aware of the Court and its foibles, Master Flarathir may be wanting to draw closer to Prince Thor... through me... considering that Thor will be King one day – and most definitely in need of an adviser. Cursing softly to himself, Kol'la kicked his horse into a
gallop, ignoring the muted protests from the ever-fearful Apprentices behind me. Politicking, he bit back a laugh, suddenly recognizing his feelings on the matter – excitement – as he had felt standing on the Svelshelf, the ice shelf of the Utanheim. Dancing on the edge, taunting the Void in the eternal game of Fate.

So it had already started.

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Just a few Asgardian years later, a good decade after Kol'la's graduation from the Mage's Court, the capital city of Asgard was once again thrown into a massive kerfuffle with the bicentennial inter-Realm tournaments. Vivacious and defiant as ever, the Spirit of Asgard stirred at the news of battle. The wind, rushing down the mountainsides into the city and beyond to the Asgarthaharr Sea and the stars, promised victorious battle and deeds that would be remembered throughout the Annals of Time. Asgard responded.

In a frenzy of productivity, the great city assessed its stores and goods, mended walls, fences and the poorer-looking tenements, painted signs and walls anew and hung everywhere fresh flags and pennants bearing the Royal colours. Uniforms were spruced up, tailors pressed into providing new fashions and peddlers, travelling the Realms, found their special items in high demand.

Youths from the Court – both King's and Mage's – practised their battle skills daily. Swords, spears, maces, knives and hammers clashed night and day, the butts were constantly in use for the archers and knife handlers, and the stables were kept busy providing fresh horses for cavalry practice and other riding demonstrations.

When news came from the Royal Court that Svartalfheim representatives would be attending and also taking part in combat, agitation and excitement increased even more. Both the "Dark" Dwarves of Niflheim and the "Dark" Elves of Svartalfheim were renown for their dislike of the other Realms – and as a result, usually declined Asgard's invitation.

Not so this year, Kol'la thought as he watched Frigga conference yet again with the housekeepers, head butlers and chief cooks on various matters including the menu, the hospitality arrangements, the Palace's decorations, and correct banner placement for the visiting Realms' flags – really it all seems endless... but this year, he mused over the matter of his own upcoming engagement, apparently with two Dark Elves, it is different. I wonder what has changed.

Then he noticed, yet again, how the colours of his own people would never be raised in honour and deference at the All-Father's celebratory banquet. Some things, Kol'la thought sadly, never change. It was an unhappy thought and if considered too long, soured his stomach, for it reminded him yet again how fragile his standing in Asgard actually was. If they were ever to find out... Kol'la closed his eyes briefly, pained. If they found out...

Thor's confident voice rose in his memory, then, speaking of the Jotunn race: Ah, pay no thought to those beasts. They are all better off dead – and should they attempt again to besmirch the honour of Asgard and break our peace, I will slay them all.

No. Imagining Frigga's look of horror, or worse, disappointment, Kol'la vowed to himself: he could never speak of it – and Jotunheim remained safe, ostracized as it was. Better to think on happier things and better days – spent fighting at Thor's side, celebrating afterwards (sometimes with a comely wench) and then returning home to Frigga's side.
Kol'la's green eyes rose in surprise at the insidious thought he had just found planted in his mind. Home. For a moment, the young Jotun-in-disguise considered uprooting the unwelcome emotion, unfamiliar word. Uprooting it as heartlessly as one would a scratching, scraggly weed from amongst the roses surrounding it.

Home. A weed of a word – or no? Kol'la's gaze drifted over the now quiet suite which belonged to the Queen. He had found a spot in a corner of the room – by a low table now bearing several bolts of red and gold cloth and a chest – far from the bustle of the servants. An unending swirl of motion always seemed to surround the Queen like a storm about the calm of its eye... and the Queen did remain calm, blue eyes intent as she managed the large household and provided support for her ever-busy husband. Now, they had left, allowing Lady Frigga to return to her tea and some relaxing needlework.

At the end of the day, Kol'la knew, we shall look at the spectacle and feel its effortlessness – perhaps never perceive the frantic motion beneath its calm surface. Like the Lake of Vithrivatn's thriving waters, hidden by ice. An Asgardian equivalent rose to his mind then: a duck in a fast-flowing river yet never drifting... That is Lady Frigga. The thought brought a smile to his face and Kol'la's green eyes sparkled with mischief at the analogy.

Lady Frigga. Home. It nagged him, that word – home, and reminded him of something that had only happened a week before. Lady Frigga had stopped him from throwing a limp redwort onto the compost heap. Taking it in her hands, she had clucked sharply and Kol'la could hear her gentle voice in response to his respectful question as to why she did not dispose of the weed – as if it were just yesterday:

"Well, you are right, Kol'la – to many this small plant is the dreaded poisonous weed.. but see, we shall put it over... here... and it will flourish safely, doing no harm to any – and when all the summer flowers have given up their last strength, this hardy redwort will offer some colour in the bite of late autumn. With proper Vanir crystals, the dread sap may be alchemized to form an effective – if bitter – tincture for colds and such ailments." A pause as Frigga eyed the replanted weed. "See now, it will grow beautifully in this corner... it just needed a place of its own."

A place of its own. A home. Kol'la knew he would always wonder where he truly belonged – but if he were to wonder anywhere, what better place than here?

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Soon enough, the august guests and their accompanying delegations and servants and gifts arrived safely and after two days of refreshment, the first day of the three-day long tournament began.

Early in the morning, peasantry and merchants and servants and lower City and Court officials began to gather in the lower stalls. Soon, the rest of the Court and various Guildmasters and counsellors and the guests of honour arrived to watch the skills of the peasantry and lower gentry. The entire day was spent on all forms of competitive sports and battles and duels: fist-fighting, wrestling, armed and unarmed melees, spear and knife-throwing, archery, one-on-one armed and unarmed combat and other less bloody challenges – such as weight-lifting, eating competitions and the like. Interspersed were also boisterous entertainments, women dancing, jesters telling jokes and playing tricks as the warriors rested and took various meals throughout the day.

Then, the next day followed with similar activities for the merchants, lower Gentry and other less-known lords from the far reaches of Asgard, Vanahim and Alfheim. During the melee, the Warriors Three and Sif participated as a team, successfully subduing any who crossed their path. Later on that
day, Hogun gave an able demonstration of multiple weaponry use alongside the more versatile, limber Sif. Fandral got himself roundly beaten by an Alfheim fencer, while Volstagg dominated the pie-eating contest later on in the day. Throughout it all, Thor and Kol'la cheered on their friends; however, the two young men were more excited and anxious for their own turns.

Day Three began fair and clear as the others had – and after watching various Lords battle each other (at one point, General Tyr battled two very experienced Dwarf chiefs named Val and Orin), Thor entered the ring to tremendous applause and roars of approval. He was, after all, the favourite of many and his obvious excitement was contagious. Before him stood the silent but equally excited Fire Giants, Sartr and Trisso. Sartr, a kinsman of the King of Fire Giants, Lord Surtr himself, would be the real challenge.

Sure enough, the combat, regulated by the Kveykva-herklaethi style, gave the combatants a single blade, small round shields and the option to use fists or wrestling techniques. Without Mjolnir at his side, Thor found the Fire Giants a real challenge – but fifteen minutes later, he still leaves the arena victorious – and laughing despite the singeing and blow to his head...

Finally, it was Kol'la's turn. Walking into the ring from the south entrance, spear in hand, the warriormage felt an eerie sense of deja-vu. It is as if I have been in this place before, he thought, surveying the packed stands, the lower gallery of spectators who were standing and the previous combatants, watching with an air of interest from the entrances to the arena and the specially designated fighter's box (in which Thor was now holding court). It smells familiar too, Kol'la wrinkled his nose as his feet shifted through the newly sprinkled sand which barely hid previously spilt blood from the particularly brutal battle between the two young lords – Vanir Lord Haevoth and Aesir Master Gareth Sveninsson. Blood, sand, dirt, sweat... the unhappy realities of combat...

Something I have learned well, yet something I abhor. Far better to show one's worthy by achieving victory, achieving greatness with sound strategies, with no blood spilt, little effort made... with the least amount of force shown. Thor has never understood this – never understands... maybe never will see the worth of such logic... but... Kol'la's green flashed upward at the All-Father who leaned forward, clearly attentive. ...but some do...

The roars increased at the other two contestants strolled into the wide ring – two Dark Elves named Malo and Cathor, whose grins, full of teeth, spoke of confidence in their abilities. Malo, Kol'la mused, is a kinsmen of Malekith... and Cathor, second brother to Ulketh... all of them great warrior-mages in their own right, following the grand traditions of all Elvish folk... this could be a long battle...

As the officiator of the games, Heimdall's booming, warm voice quieted the crowds. He announced the combatants by name as well as the rules for Kaesia-Seithr combat – magick would be allowed within reason – and to suit his words, several barriers rose courtesy of four very nervous-looking Mages. Kol'la recognized two as his fellow graduates and allowed himself a grin.

This will be fun, he thought.

[...here it is proven...]

[...as it had been before...]

[...destinies already carved in stone...]

[...or not...]

[...revealed...]
Physical altercations cost strength of body, the famous master of the great-sword tradition, Heimtharr, great-grand sire of Heimdall, once wrote, yet magickal forays will exact its toll from the mind. In the former, power is key; in the latter, endurance. In the former, much is made of movement and force and the clashing of the blade; in the latter, apparent lack of motion means nothing and often the battle is over before a word is spoken.

Thus spake Heimtharr, and while few read his treatise during recent times, Asgard's golden years, Heimdall never forgot. In a time when warrior-mages were plenteous, the Gatekeeper thought, battle was less predictable. In those days, the sight of a spear invoked fear – its reach, its flexibility and the powers it enhanced with stones and engravings... and Kol'la is a promise of a return to those days... a more dangerous age... but equally glorious... Is Asgard ready?

-Kol'la knew that Kaesia-Seithr battling, while often useful thanks to its speed, use of strategy and deadliness, also tended to bore those uninitiated in the art of seithrmancy. As the two Dark Elves and he slowly circled about the Ring, ignoring the increasing frenzy of their impatient audience, Kol'la knew that his victory could definitely cost him showmanship – and most likely, sportsmanship as well. There was no honour amongst warrior-mages, as Thor often liked to complain.

Honour... over-rated, really, Kol'la smirked – and then paused. Well, not showmanship. It is important to look well in what one does...

Without warning, Cathor darted forward, brandishing a wickedly curved spear which held a sharp blade on one end and a well-carved tip on the other which was embellished with the usual Svartalfheim villieldr and ofolr crystals and, as a result, told Kol'la much about what to expect from him. Kol'la's own hand-crafted metal met Cathor's in a brief clash and the slender Asgardian allowed his spear to slide downward before hooking down and then up in a graceful upswing parry. Ducking instinctively backward, he just missed the whirl of Malo's slender similarly-bladed spear and then twisted to the side, firing off a few daggers which sank into Cathor's less armoured, leather sides. Both Elves stepped back then, Cathor removing the knives quickly, cursing fluently in Elvish.

"So, this is a conundrum, skreyppa," Malo laughed softly, "like your brawny cousins, you enjoy brute strength... although it does not fit a slender gargani such as you."

Twirling his staff and hooking it within his arm, every ready, Kol'la did not respond. Merely smiled and allowed himself to appear a little smug, the better to annoy the obviously more hot-tempered Cathor. It worked grandly – but this time as the Dark Elf came in swinging, Kol'la slid left around the stocky Dark Elf, as Malo's epithets had suggested, and kicked him a little disrespectfully on the backside with a short laugh, which sent Cathor sprawling in the sand. Then, Kol'la briefly parried Malo, slipping behind him as well – only to disappear from sight with a quick twist of his hand in a hidden sigil and a short murmur.

Silence.

Cathor – now on his feet – and Malo shifted uneasily, bodies tense – shoulders hunched, feet braced and weapons at the ready. There was nothing now but quiet murmurs from the stand. The audience, now captive, understood this was a whole other level of fighting – and at that, Kol'la smiled in amusement, hidden within the spaces of concealment.

Let the games begin...
"Where did he go?" Mage Hrotha wondered aloud, "is this some new working?"
"Skokkr-a-Mir," Flarathir replied shortly. "That is what we would call it anyway. Very old and few know the spell to work it... it is complicated, requires much power, concentration and an affinity for Elvish tricks. Hm. What was the name..."
"Co'lca-cenedril," High-Mage Agaeti coughed sharply, looking to the silent All-Father seated on his left. "I had no idea the boy could manipulate such an ancient form of seithrmancy... let alone that of the Elvish variety."
"Not many can understand the power of the child," Odin replied calmly, "least of all himself, I should imagine. It is so easy to underestimate the intelligence the boy."
"Why do you-" Then, the ancient mage paused and stilled the words which rose to his lips, the as yet unspoken question he found he could not ask. Why do you not call him by name?

As always, the All-Father seemed so mysterious. Even now, sitting by him, standing at his side all these years, the old Aesir thought, I can only guess at what he plans. Obviously, young Kol'la has the potential for greatness... but of what sort... and what for?

"Ah, there he is," Flarathir shook his head, pointing out the obvious as Kol'la winked back into sight, holding his favourite spear. Once again, the two elves merged on their opponent – only to find that they had run their spears right through him – with no mass or matter to stop their blades... and right behind an unsuspecting Cothar, Kol'la reappeared.

Without warning, Kol'la whirled the long, engraved crystal-bearing staff – and as the rush of air and the sound of metal moving, Cothar turned – turned in time to meet the full blow of the spear which crashed his teeth together, nearly shattering his jaw, giving him such a knock that darkness came upon him instantaneously. As he fell, he could hear Kol'la laughing, glimpsed a wide smile full of neat white teeth and the murmur of a stunning spell. Then, darkness.


"It was a tveir spell... or tveir-andlit working. Double Face Illusion," Agaeti found himself explaining to the All-Father and his ever attentive wife, unnecessarily – but excitedly. "Holding onto Skokka-a-Mir at the same time! Unprecedented!"

"He struck the elf from behind!" another mage spluttered angrily.

"No honour among warrior-mages," grumbled another Lordling below.

"But he won," a cool voice said from behind them – and Agaeti found himself hard put to remain calm at the icy calm voice of Malekith, the menacing elf-lord of Svartalfheim. "That is all that matters in the end, is it not?"

"That may be true," agreed Odin mildly, "but when the dust has settled, we must also be able to live with ourselves. More easily done with cleaner consciences, I think."

"Hm. You would be surprised by how easily one can live with oneself regardless of such decisions."

"Then you are a far luckier man than I."

Agaeti, suppressing a shiver, kept his eyes fixed on the combat before him. Malo was now clearly upset and Kol'la allowed his triumphant gaze to grow a little, unsettling his opponent who circled opposite around the ring once again. More cautiously, Agaeti thought, but not enough. Too little, too late.

"Cathor was too gentle," Malo spat. "You are no seithrmaster, fintalenir. A cheap magician with many petty tricks to rely on to save his own sorry hide – a boyish trickster."

"And pleased to meet you," bowed Kol'la theatrically, drawing a laugh from the audience. "A trickster I may be, and a prankster to boot."
"That he was!" Hrotha chuckled loudly.
"-but not so easily defeated as Cathor. Not a..." Pause for effect. "Vanwa."

A round of "oooh"s and raucous laughter rose from the Light and Dark Elves alike and even Malekith chuckled behind Agaeti's ear at the Kol'la's perfectly intoned slight.

"His Elvish is well-spoken," Odin finally said as Malo roared and charged forward, invoking several spells in rapid Elvish. "As good as his seithrmancy."
"Well, tveir-andlit in and of itself, being a working of illusions is fairly simple. Apprentices achieve that within their first decade..." Agaeti shrugged. "Still..."
"Yes... Still... The timing was perfect and there is thrift in Kol'la's movement," Flarathir said, obviously finding it a bit difficult to either believe or admit. "He is a natural at fighting with magic – and brings honour to the Mage's Court. Such power... we have not seen in many years."

Odin nodded slowly – and then everyone stopped talking as Malo's seithr flared with brilliant flame, bursting outward in a wave of fire which pressed up hotly against the Mage's barricade. The barrier remained firm, particularly with the added presence of the Mage's council who had placed their own sigils of protection on the Ring's inner walls, but Kol'la would not be so lucky. However, although the flames swept around as if carried on an invisible wind, as if guided by the strings of a master puppeteer, they could not seem to get close enough to Kol'la. From within the young warrior-mage slender figure a green surge burst outward and then, twirling his staff, sweeping his left arm up, down and then from left to right, Kol'la spoke three terse words and the fire increased by tenfold and widened its thickness to something more similar to a wall.

"What is the fool-"
"Kol'la! You idiot-"
"Malo – turn it now-"
"Hit him now!"
"Get it over and done with-"
"Crush him, Malo!"

Suggestions, roars of approval and excitement rose as the flames surged upward, burning hotter than ever as the seithrmasters fought for control of the flames. Then, with a tremendous roar, the flames began to turn darker. The barricade began to flicker from the force of Kol'la's magical power and several of the standing-room crowd eased back. Being mainly Aesir, they had heard rumours, if not seen for themselves the vicious strength of Kol'la's workings - and fire, being the most volatile element, was no laughing matter in a seithrmaster duel.

Stabbing his spear's blade into the ground at his side, Kol'la raised both hands and then with a twisting motion of his hands and arms, brought the fire down on Malo's head. Now, they could all see it – the fire had changed. No longer was its heart a yellow-red – now it burned a blue and green in its hottest core. Fire wings spread outward as a long neck and head formed.

"The fool has summoned Fiendfyre!" Hrotha was jumping up from his seat, beard bristling with anxiety and pride. "There is no way-"
"Fiendfyre born out of a Wall of Flame... impressive," Agaeti could barely keep his seat in his excitement. "Few can turn the workings of Skjald-borhyyrr into Fiendfyre. Especially since the bridging spell he used was Hiti-mothr. I recognized the Wall of Flame right away. Surprising, but smart, seeing as High-Mage Hiti - whom the spell was named after - was Half-Elvish himself and often utilized a measure of both magicks in his workings."

Malo was already backing up against the barrier as the fire dived in closer – and then, with a surge of inspiration, he darted forward, grabbing his spear, summoned a thin veil of water and a cloud of dark
– which cloaked him for a moment. Kol'la's Fiendfyre threw itself through the water-veil easily and swallowed the dark, burning away the cloud, revealing no sign of Malo. Malo had, beneath his cover, made his way closer to the left of Kol'la – bringing him into closer range with the Asgardian warrior-mage. There was no way Kol'la would wish to bring the Fiendfyre so close.

Kol'la winked out of sight and reappeared far on the other side of the ring, bringing another cry of surprise from the crowd.

"Flauguna," Agaeti said. "A form of moving from one place to another – a kind of travelling, similar to using the Ways... Flaugun'esporna is the full term. Flying feet, as it were. Incredible. Malo will never get close now. Surely he must see that... and look-"

The Fiendfyre was now circling the Dark Elf, forming an impenetrable wall of flame – and leaping upward, Kol'la pitched himself easily through the open centre, downwards, bearing Malo to the ground, forcing the Elf to his knees with Kol'la's dagger blade at his opponent's throat. The two combatants disappeared from view as the flames rose again. Everyone held their breath - even Thor was leaning forward anxiously.

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Within the circle of fire, there was nothing but the soft panting of Malo and Kol'la as they froze for a few minutes - Kol'la standing behind Malo, his dagger at the Dark Elf's throat.

"You win, curunar," Malo breathed softly. "It is your triumph... for now..."
"Did you not give me your all?" Kol'la's green eyes skewed the Dark Elf sharply. "Tell me you did not stay your hand for diplomacy's sake – and I will let you go with honour."
"Let me go with honour," laughed Malo. "What a strange Aesir, you are! Asgard holds a shadow over many folk, but Svartalfheim will not bow for such niceties, skreyppa. I do not need your honour or your empty words, caitahto-"
"And I do not need yours," Kol'la replied coldly, jerked away, stunning Malo with a mild binding spell - and immediately the Fiendfyre began to disappate around them, revealing Malo's surrender easily. A surrender with no apparent cost to himself. Kol'la smiled as he glanced over at Thor, while he reclaimed his spear.

Thor looked proudly down at Kol'la – as did the Mages, the All-Father, the generals – and from far away he could hear someone yelling, "That's my boy!" Commander Farfin, perhaps. Yet, Kol'la's eyes searched only for Frigga's and seeing her pride and joy – and relief – he allowed himself to smile, to raise his spear and fists and to accept the acclaim showered upon him. Uneasy praise, he thought, there will be some who doubt the veracity of such a victory, but for now, this is enough for me... and those who matter know... those who matter, Kol'la glanced at Frigga and Odin and the Court about him, those who matter, understand. He looked over at Thor who was climbing over the barricade for some unknown reason. Well, all most all who are important understand, he sighed and his eyes suddenly landed on the rest of the Dark Elf delegation behind the All-Father and to the All-Father's left.

Behind High-Mage Agaeti (who was talking with excitement to Master Hrotha and Master Flarathir), a pale face with deep-set glittering eyes stood out among the warm colours and rosy coloration of the Aesir. Malekith, smooth-faced and calm – an odd smile on his face. Kol'la shivered. Then, the crowds cheers rose even higher and louder (if possible) as Thor joined him in the ring, clapping him on the shoulder and shaking him in a congratulatory fashion and calling him dull-witted and a dishonourable bastard for the unheralded blow and saying he must smile and accept the posy wench Ethelyn had thrown at him and that in all, it was very well done of him and mead was in order.

Kol'la smiled and noticed Ethelyn, but his mind was far from the ring. And his victory.
It always surprised Thor how swiftly hours flew in the heat of passionate moments. Moments such as when one found delight in the arms of a generous woman – or in the fleeting minutes of combat when one faced one's foe on the field or in tournament. *Why were hours of delight so transitory, Thor wondered, and the minutes of boredom so eternal?*

In the cool of the early morning, when dew glistened like diamonds on the blades of grass, they had begun. His time for glory had come and gone soon enough – although, during Kol'la's bout, time had seemed to crawl. Only Hogun silently standing at his side seemed to understand. He had said something about such duels entwined with magic lasting longer since the endurance of either opponent was often similar... *Small comfort, but comfort all the same*, Thor thought, remembering his friend's rough hand which had wordlessly stayed when him when the Prince subconsciously tensed and leaned forward as if to jump in and rescue the one he considered as shield-mate.

*Or something closer, Thor frowned. Something different, something I cannot name. Sif would say I am a lummox. Kol'la would agree... Both so perceptive... and not here... At any rate, Hogun saved my life, since Kol'la dislikes being treated as though he were a damsel in distress.*

Thor smiled then, imagining Kol'la as a sharp-tongued maid. *Ha! A maid?* It seemed improbable. Impossible. *More like a fisherman's wife!* Kol'la took care of himself, and that, deep down, both comforted and distressed Thor. He passed down the hall of the Palace, wandering aimlessly, deep in thought. *In the end, Kol'la acquitted himself well, proving his worth in battle, however dishonourable it may seem to the others – however vicious he is. And Kol'la is vicious. The rough and tumble Prince grinned widely then and shook his head. Mother thinks him soft, perhaps treats him too gently... does she know... does she understand... how the layer of civility lies thin upon him?*

*And Father*, Thor thought of Odin's sharp looks often cast upon his friend, his shield-mate, his closer than a shield-mate... *whatever he is, Father also sees what lies beneath. Hmmm... Thor shrugged to himself. It matters not in the end, really, he chuckled, making up his mind to see what his mother had planned for that evening's entertainment at the celebratory Feast. *He is at my side and that is all that matters.*

On knocking at the great doors of his mother's suite, Thor was permitted entrance – but the maid who had opened the door told him the Queen was not in, but was resting in her garden. Taking tea, the maid said with a bow and graceful tilt of her head and Thor nodded, knowing his gentle mother's habits well and brushed past, ignoring the girl's startled 'oh!'...

*It was a familiar path for Thor – the same path he had trod since he could walk, wending past his mother's soft couches, low tables and rich, rust red and blue patterned rugs. Bars of sunlight moved in long stripes across the quiet room in the late afternoon, shining through the lattice of shutters which had been partially closed to protect the more sensitive flowers in his mother's personal window garden.*
The next room was her weaving room, a large spacious area where the Queen and her maidens sat working on various projects. Eyeing the loom's current cloth – a deep green, Thor skirted around the wooden frames, careful not to touch anything. The last time he had attempted to help her seemed eons ago... *and I tangled the spindle and broke her favourite dark-wood shuttle,* Thor shook his head and found his way out the small back door into the mudroom. It was cool and dim in the mudroom, which was filled with various shoes and coats and other gardening equipment. Just beyond the second small door, outside, was a small grey path of carefully carved stones which fit each other in a whimsical way, half set in grass and wood shavings, leading in a circular manner around the Queen's private garden.

As he passed the small pond, filled with lily pads and solemnly croaking toads, which he had used to enjoy catching and tormenting as a child, Thor looked about for any sign of his mother – and then paused at the sound of low-cast voices. His eyes, following his keen ears, moved off the path into his mother's favourite small clearing under her blue and peach-pink pavilion. Underneath, standing by the usual intricately carved table complete with tea-set, stood his father and mother – and Kol'lã, obviously just rising from afternoon tea.

Yet there was something about their demeanour that gave Thor pause. For the first time, Thor did not blunder forward in his usual manner. Odin looked more serious than usual, his face holding the look more suited to Court and those (not so few) times Thor had gotten injured or in serious trouble abroad. Frigga looked... *Mother looks...* Thor tilted his head and blinked, puzzled. *Is she going to cry? Or laugh?*

*And Kol'lã...* Kol'lã's face was what halted Thor's feet. Kol'lã looked so strange. *It is as if he is frightened, worried and triumphantly excited all at the same time...* From his position, Thor found himself looking his shield-mate over again – noting the somber dark clothing which Kol'lã now favoured, how it still remained stylish and rather fashionable. The way the dark hair had already been washed and combed back carefully in preparation for the feast – with no sign of the hard battle he had endured earlier that morning. The short, dark hair, pale, thin face and cool, green eyes... *He looks like Hogun, in a way – but not...* Thor scratched his chin thoughtfully. *Kol'lã always did look different... and acted differently too... I hope he isn't in trouble.*

Kol'lã was nodding now as Frigga said something. Frigga added something more and Kol'lã looked down at his feet and then nodded again, but this time even more subdued. Thor's eyes widened as the blonde-haired woman leaned forward, drawing Kol'lã into a tight embrace. Noting how Kol'lã took a few minutes to relax and return the hug, Thor found it difficult to stifle a laugh. Kol'lã was even more surprised than he!

*And yet, he responded to her, Thor realized. I guess Kol'lã and my mother have much in common... and Father...* 

Odin clasped Kol'lã's shoulder, said something which Kol'lã responded to quickly – and Odin then slapped Kol'lã on the back and gripped the slender, young man's shoulder in a fierce sideways embrace. Frigga looked so happy – her face seemed to glow like the sun and Thor was just about to open his mouth and greet them, when Odin poked Kol'lã familiarly in the chest and said something, ending his words with a loud burst of chuckles. Kol'lã eased away, blushing – but he did smile, while Frigga laughed.

"Mother! Father! Kol'lã!" Thor suddenly couldn't bear it anymore. *What is happening?* His chest tightened with worry as he remembered how Kol'lã had been mentioning a desire to go travelling on his own. *Was Kol'lã leaving?* Thor found he couldn't get to their circle soon enough to find out. However, before he could say anything, Kol'lã glanced at him uncertainly and then slipped away.
Thor opened his mouth in protest, about to chide his friend for the impoliteness of leaving him in the company of his parents so soon, when Odin said in that serious tone of voice rarely used before:

"Thor, we need to talk."

[...takes victory in the arena of Life...]

[...and Fate...]

[...become what was meant to be...]

Music from the side gallery, where the Royal musicians sat playing, filtered down, filling the gaps between raucous hurrahs, shifting conversations, story-telling of battles long since fought and won (or lost) and various toasts. Servants bustled about, bearing large platters of roast boar, deer, duck and other meats and vegetables. Wine spilled out endlessly from casket after casket which was rolled out from Odin's plenteous cellars. Of course, all of them were carefully watched over by the ever watchful Volstagg, who was more than ready to ensure all had their fair share. Guests, seated and standing on the lower floor, spoke with much animation, recounting the days events and boasting of future conquests.

Meanwhile, on the broad dais at the front of the room, the Royal Family hosted a variety of important guests, carefully seated so as to ease any lingering political tensions between the various races. On one side sat the ever gracious Vanir lord, Frey, with Lord Rhumathil, brother to the King Dain of Alfheim. Freya's wife, Gerd, was more than happy to chat with Lady Aislinn, Rhumathil's wife. The conversation meandered from flower gardens and inter-Realm fashion to what the men really wanted to discuss – court gossip and smithy techniques. Here, Thor sat as well, better suited to the less difficult intrigues of the Light Elves and Vanir – if he remained in his seat. For Thor was ever fond of roving the large feasting hall, finding his friends and an adoring audience in the lower-seated crowds. Tonight was no exception and Thor seemed to have been infused with extra energy and excitement, his blue eyes literally glowing with some secret joy - and no Aesir or visitor could gainsay him.

Even the Fire Giants Thor defeated joined him in a boisterous toast. The ever neutral folk of Muspelheim, like Thor, enjoyed moving about - and followed Thor's lead. The few sitting on the head table spoke a little with a few of the Mages and Lords sitting on either side of them, no doubt feeling uncomfortable restraining their natural fire-infused forms, yet trying to find some common ground with their Asgardian warrior hosts and the other guests. Frigga approved.

On the other end of the table, however, matters were not so simple. Frigga sat there, the better to soothe troubled waters by smiling graciously at the ever brusque dwarven folk, led by the dwarf chieftain Lord Dvalin and the perpetually uneasy, currently leaderless Dark Elves. As Odin had warned Thor and Frigga (and his Court and Kol'la and anybody else who would listen), the Dark Elves felt more defensive thanks to their political disunity – and the five representatives at Odin's long table were even less thankful that the dark-haired warrior-mage known as Kol'la was to be their host for the evening.

Odin, watching the young man navigate the dangerous waters of Elvish politics and the courtesies demanded by conflicting cultures, found himself rather impressed by Kol'la's smooth words and careful replies. Toross and Vaeril, two powerful Dark Elf lords, dark eyes glittering and pale faces blank, seemed to be enjoying themselves regardless of their environment. *The boy is a natural, as I had guessed*, Odin smiled. *Even Malekith is impressed by his abilities... and Malekith is a difficult Elf to please, for certain. Particularly after such a decisive battle as we had seen earlier today. Dark Elves dislike losing, but if one loses to one such as he, the loss seems less... humiliating.*
Yes, this is as it should be – as it should have been – he will become a mighty player in the Fate of our Realms... a worthy son of Odin... and with that thought, the white-haired King rose to his feet, blue eyes stern and serious. Gugnir, which had sat propped by his throne-like dining chair was now clasped in his right hand and the end, descending on the marble floor, resounded throughout the hall commanding everyone's attention.

Odin smiled, raised a hand to gesture at the table and then began -

"Today, we gather to celebrate the unity of the Realms... Unity, such as it is – fragile and new – must be guided as a young colt is trained, must be strengthened as a warrior's page learns to hold his weapon... and, here I think of my gracious wife, tended... as a beautiful flower which will bear fruit in its season. This day, we met in glorious combat, our swords and spears clashed, our steel was tested and our fortitude borne out in the trials of battle. In these moments, in these days, let us then cherish in the making of a new kind of peace, a new kind of relationship between our Realms... and in doing so, secure a future for our children. This brings to mind how we are all connected, through the Norn's work, through Fate – how we are all bound invisibly together. In a way, we can look at our neighbours and no matter what they may seem, they must be considered as family. And with that in mind, I wish to make an important announcement concerning this matter-"

Here, Thor, who had paid even more attention to his father's speech than was usual, shared a quick glance with Kol'la who sat further down the table. Kol'la who sat stiffly, face suddenly blank as he watched the King's face. Odin's younger brother, Frest, and several high-ranking courtiers as well as other members of the extended Royal Family sat up straighter as well. If possible, the hall got even more quiet as even the servants stilled and the music petered off.

"This day will mark for us an important celebration of unity," Odin said solemnly. "My lady wife, Frigga, and I have held this desire for too long in secret and today, our dreams and hopes will be made reality – as we bring into our family one who should have been with us since the beginning. I wish to announce to Asgard and our neighbours and friends of the Nine Realms the adoption of our second son: Loki."

Chapter End Notes

Wow. Well, that took about 3 days to write... longer than usual since I had teaching going on and I had to do some super planning for each bit of this chapter... Craziness–

Let me know what you think–
Be sure to ask questions and stuff if something confuses you. xD
Update in 5 days or so!
-KI

P.S. Visit my tumblr (kakashidiot) to read some responses to -new- reviewers!
P.P.S. Will update in a five days or so. XD

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'inka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
Ginnung – the Void
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa’a’vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjaldborhyrrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col’ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col’ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Wow... Huge response for the last chapter... Haha. Now to keep them... now to keep them...

ANYWAYS! Thanks to readers and alerters and followers~! THANKS TO EVERYONE WHO CHATTED AND WERE SO ENCOURAGING! Thanks to: Snakecharmed79, Skywinder, rawr_balrog, Kai_Maciel, lemomina, iBlameGlobalWarming, Crazy_Cat_Lady, Uriko, Dragonanzar, Addict to Fanfics, raye, Danea and Anths-Girl~!

Well, I had written this thing... and it's final word count had stood at about 5500, but then you guys started to ask some seriously awesome questions that had me really double-thinking what I had written and I just couldn't let what I had wrote go at that... I don't want this to be a sub-par fic. Even if it doesn't get tons and tons and tons of reviews, I want this to be a great effort - and you guys really push me to write better... so I went back and rewrote large portions of this chapter and - VOILA~! Almost 9K chapter~!

At any rate, be sure to double-back and read the last section of the previous chapter, because that too was changed.

There is a flashback - or two - in this chapter. I am not going to write the word - flashback- to dilineate it. I think you can figure it out. XD

SO MANY PEOPLE ARE EXCITED ABOUT THIS MOMENT... I... I am so worried this chapter isn't going to live up to the hype... (edges out)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 43
Hitched To The Stars

[...Rise...]

[...soar...]

Soft petals fall and drift – like a child’s tale, a fairy tale, a legend of long ago. You stand on the edge of the world and sing of what surges within your breast, dare to share the dream.

This is the new world laid before you – go forth and partake of those grand adventures that await for you. Yet, at journey's end, return to me.

Return...
We are waiting...

[...for this is the time to stretch your wings...]

[...and seek...]

The new Prince's eyes couldn't seem to focus as he blindly guided his horse alongside Frigga's down the wide street. Above, the sun's glare blinded him - until there was nothing but white. And memory... It rose before him then, the afternoon of the day before when High-Mage Agaeti, Mage Hrotha and Mage Flarathir alongside the rest of Odin's Council had gathered with Frigga and Thor.

Never before had the sound of pen scritch-scritching across vellum sounded more alien. The small room - the All-Father's study - seemed to be airless to the young warrior-mage. So small and so stifling, he thought, despite its size. The wood-panelled room was hushed with reverent silence as the All-Father sat and signed his signature, applied his seal (with a noiseless melting of wax which filled the room with a hint of honey) and offered his seat to his wife. With a long look at Kol'la, Frigga signed her name and several other witnesses followed after.

With Thor at his side, standing to the left of Odin's wide oak desk (carefully cleared of everything but two candlesticks, a pot of quills and two pots of ink) and back to the beginning of a room-wide set of bookshelves, Kol'la felt more like a spectator than an actual participator in this, this ceremony which would, he knew, change his life forever. For a moment, he stood there, attempting to disappate the tension which built up within his shoulders, suppressing the urge to break the silence with an irreverent joke. Now was not the time for pranks or tricks - now was his time to grab a hold of Chance and make it work to his advantage.

There was nothing for him to sign - he was lower class, not quite a prisoner of war nor a thrall, but a servant nonetheless and with little agency - until it was given to him. Soon, he thought, so soon.

So he stood as High-Mage Agaeti and Lord General Tyr spoke several words of binding, bringing the adoption to its conclusion. Later on, Kol'la knew his official name would be given - whatever Odin had chosen for him - and the people would participate in another brief set of rites. For now, his eyes were drawn to the flickering flames as he found himself unable to meet Thor's eyes. Unwilling to see there - what, he mused, what do I think will be there? Anger? Jealousy? The usual lack-witted happiness? Unable to meet Frigga or Odin's eyes - or the eyes of the rest who were watching. The burden of their gazes threatened to weigh him down, but Kol'la stood firm, hands crossed and clasped in front of him, feet apart and shoulders stiff and straight.

He stared at the flame until his eyes ached and there was nothing but an overwhelming blur of red-orange-white.

[...your destiny...]

[...is here...]

The sound of feasting happily dimmed when Kol'la followed Frigga out of the room and down the side passageway to a small room where the King could take rest from the festivities if need be. Red and gold rugs muffled his footsteps and the brilliant tapestries gave the small chamber a warm feeling. Several soft chairs were scattered before the hearth of a small fireplace and a small set of bookshelves sat in the corner of the room. To one side there was another door to a conveniently placed privy. The one table in the room was currently piled with a variety of objects, some of which were born away in large-sized packaging.

"Here we go," Frigga began to bustle about, her peach-pink, dusk blue and white-lined dress,
comfortably cinched at the waist with a glimmering gold belt rustled as she moved toward the table and picked up a few pieces of Kol'la's best light armour. "They have everything prepared – just as I hoped. Come. Let us get you into this. There is little time. The All – your Father – your Father will begin the speech soon."

Without further ado, hands fumbling, fingers trembling, Kol'la took off his upper tunic, replaced it with a new green one and then placed on top of it the small, light-weight, black breastplate he preferred to use. His mother tugged at the interweaving of the green tunic and his under-coat, ensuring that it set off his waist properly, meeting as it should in the middle. His rather worn black coat went on top and then Frigga began to help him with the gauntlets, nudging his fumbling fingers out of the way to do the clasps for him.

"I can do it on my own," Kol'la grumbled quietly. "I am no child."
"That is true," Frigga rose then to adjust her new son's collar, "but you are my son..."

She paused and then caught his chin, turning his gaze to meet hers.

"Is this – do you –" Frigga sighed at the crinkle in his dark eyebrows. "Are we... is this... is this what you really want, Kol'la, dear? This is a big change – and thrust upon you so suddenly. For us, we looked toward this day for quite some time, but for you..."
"And Thor," Kol'la said quickly. "For the both of us."
"Yes, it will be – it will be quite hard, I should think... and I do not wish you to be forced into this if there are any doubts on your part-"
"There are no doubts."
"You are not smiling, my son."
"I – I – ah – Perhaps," Kol'la admitted reluctantly, "I do not know what to think... and smiling is not my strong suite..."
"Now, that," Frigga replied tartly, combing his rebellious hair back with her fingers, straightening it as best as she could, knowing how he hated its wavy nature. "Now that is a lie, dear. I know there is a smile in you... somewhere..."

Kol'la looked down and nodded and then glanced upward quickly and then away, trying to hide the tears which glimmered there.

"I – I am afraid," he finally said.

Frigga said nothing. She did what she always did best – waited in patient silence, taking his hand in hers again and squeezing it encouragingly.

"I am afraid," Kol'la finally whispered, "that this is but a dream..."
"Then it is a good dream," Frigga replied, soothingly.
"Yes, yes, it is, and one I would not have end... and I fear that I will end it with some ill-managed thing-"
"Kol'la, Kol'la, dear heart," she said serenely, drawing him in, trying to press her warmth and her love into his hard, stiff figure. Frigga eased back, still keeping him in her arms. "We are family now. This means that, well, disappointment will happen – but family hold onto each other through the good and the bad. It is a commitment that can never be broken. When it grows as it should, this love, this bond of family, is stronger than the roots of an oak tree – as strong as Yggdrasil itself. A kind of love not easily swayed by circumstance or appearance. Do you understand?"
"No," was the whispered reply. A pause... and then, hesitantly, he asked, "Can you teach me then?"
"Of course," Frigga replied, heart clenching at the sight of his still-wet eyes and unending uncertainty. "We shall learn – together."

With that, she forced his attention to the details of the matter – how to hold the chalice of Ithunn's apple mead while also clasping the symbolic leash of well-woven sheep and goat wool. In his right
hand, were seven pieces of silver stamped with particular runes to be given to the All-Father. Adoption was rare in Asgard, a land blessed by peace, seeming eternal life and a strong sense of community, yet there existed some ancient rituals which marked the occasion. The meanings had been all but lost, yet they continued onward, unchanged.

_Such is Asgard_, Kol'la thought, standing there while the Queen – _his mother_ – bustled out to get some more black polish for his worn boots. _So full of tradition and yet, so alive_

"Hey, hey, Kol'la!"

It was Thor, sneaking in now, a task difficult for the brawny young man. Setting the wool leash, the chalice of mead and the pieces of silver aside, Kol'la eased back cautiously. He had yet to talk to Thor and part of him wondered what Thor really thought about this whole matter – and that part of him felt fear.

"Are you nervous?"

Kol'la stared at Thor in disbelief. _The stupid – the idiotic – argghhh!_ The warrior-mage found himself speechless with _– with – I am not angry, nor anxious, nor_... Kol'la sighed, closing his eyes and then rubbing his forehead with resignation. _Thor is...

"Well, are you well, Kol'la? Does your head pain you? Have you already taken your fill of mead?"
"Thor, Thor," Kol'la suddenly had to force down a rising need to giggle. "Never – never mind. I am well."
"Brother."
"What?"
"You should say 'I am well, brother'."
"Why?"
"Because we are. I mean, we are brothers now," Thor said, gripping Kol'la's shoulders, forcing the green eyes to rise and meet his blue ones. "I am so happy. For you. And myself as well."
"Thor, you—" Kol'la whispered. "You have no... no reservations for some complete stranger to just come in and – and—" Here, he waved his hand incoherently. "Just be a part of it?"
"You are no stranger, Kol'la!" Thor said. "How long have we known each other? These many long years – and have grown together, played together, fought together... and that is enough for me."
"Idiot," Kol'la sniffled then, allowing himself to be drawn into a tight embrace from Thor which nearly drove the air out of his lungs. "This will not be so easy."
"No," Thor replied slowly. "But maybe it will not be so difficult either." He shrugged, "Besides, now you will be my little brother. I always wanted one – one to push about and be that one upon whom I can play a prank or two..."
"You mean, annoy the living daylights out of," Kol'la grumbled, finally managing to extricate himself from Thor's grasp. "You should go."
"I am going. I will see you," Thor said with another quick smile, his blue eyes suddenly serious. "Soon... brother."

With that, Thor left, bumping up against his mother – their mother – and protesting at her sharp scolding. Tuning out their hurried conversation, Kol'la considered Thor's words.

...maybe it will not be so difficult either...

_As usual_, Kol'la sighed, _Thor deals only with the superficial... or perhaps he is unable to be moved by the storms Fate brings him. He is, after all, a survivor – and his confidence within himself is as unmovable as a rock, which is another problem all to itself. Still... it will not be easy, Thor, Kol'la watched as Frigga let her wayward first son go and turned inside with a young maid trailing behind, holding a pot of boot black. While the maid industriously set to quickly shining the scuffed heels of
his boots, Frigga carefully raised a vibrant green cloak out of a small chest and with his help attached it to his shoulders straps. The green wool felt so soft beneath his fingers, as Kol'la's fingertips slowly drifted over the fabric. Smiling at Frigga and whispering a quiet thanks to her, Kol'la decided to consider the whole issue of Thor's denial later. *We will speak of this again, I warrant... It is not over...*

"Today, we gather to celebrate the unity of the Realms... Unity, such as it is – fragile and new – must be guided as a young colt is trained, must be strengthened as a warrior's page learns to hold his weapon... and, here I think of my gracious wife, tended... as a beautiful flower which will bear fruit in its season. This day, we met in glorious combat, our swords and spears clashed, our steel was tested and our fortitude borne out in the trials of battle. In these moments, in these days, let us then cherish in the making of a new kind of peace, a new kind of relationship between our Realms... and in doing so, secure a future for our children. This brings to mind how we are all connected, through the Norn's work, through Fate – how we are all bound invisibly together. In a way, we can look at our neighbours and no matter what they may seem, they must be considered as family. And with that in mind, I wish to make an important announcement concerning this matter-"

Here, Thor, who had been away somewhere, slipped into his paid even more attention to his father's speech than was usual, glanced upward at his father, a smile pasted on his face and his eyes suddenly serious. His gaze darted down the table. The seats where Frigga and Kol'la had been sitting were still vacant and soon they would be filled – but this time with something entirely new and yet, familiar.

Odin's younger brother, Frest, and several high-ranking courtiers as well as other members of the extended Royal Family sat up straighter as well. If possible, the hall got even more quiet as even the servants stilled and the music petered off.

"This day will mark for us an important celebration of unity," Odin said solemnly. "My lady wife, Frigga, and I have held this desire for too long in secret and today, our dreams and hopes will be made reality – as we bring into our family one who should have been with us since the beginning. I wish to announce to Asgard and our neighbours and friends of the Nine Realms the adoption of our second son: Loki."

For a moment, there was silence among the lower tables – or rather near silence as heads bent together, whispering, murmuring the unfamiliar name. *Loki*, they said, *Loki? Who is that?* Among the Aesir, interspersed in the crowd, Fire Giants, Elves (both Light and Dark), Vanir and Dwarves sat silently, looking on with interest and surprise. Some looked calculating. *Loki*, they wondered, *that was an odd Aesir name... surely?*

"Loki," he whispered, looked down at Frigga who smiled back at him encouragingly. "Loki?"

"My idea," she replied, noting the look of puzzlement on his face. "It suits you, I think. The name I would have given you if you had come to us as a babe. My Loki... My gentle-hearted Loki. I am so..."
glad you are finally here, my son."

Before Loki could enquire as to what she meant, Odin was speaking again.

"Let us now conclude what has been started..."

Odin – his father – my father, the newly named Loki thought incoherently – looked to his right.

"My first son, Prince Thor. It is your time. Rise, now and let us welcome your younger brother."

With that, Thor rose to his feet a little clumsily, no doubt feeling within a bit more awkward than usual, and made his way with his father to the front of the dais where High-Mage Agaeti was also standing, already prepared with the short oaths they would all speak. All three men turned a little and at that small signal, Frigga started forward, drawing Kol'la, now Loki, after her. Finding their way over to the front of the dais, Frigga took her place at her husband's side while, Kol'la – Loki – knelt on one knee facing them.

So placed, his left side bearing the chalice and wool collar to the crowd, the new Prince waited as Agaeti opened the small volume and began to intone a variety of oaths which Thor, Frigga and then Odin swore to. At first, his nerves threatened to completely overwhelm him and the mead cup he offered to Thor, then Frigga and then Odin shook a little. Yet, as the oaths continued, as he spoke his own short promises, Loki gained peace knowing that he had full support from those in front of him – Thor, Lady Frigga, the All-Father – and the other members of the High Council of the Royal Court seated about the High Table and the other tables in the larger area of the feast hall floor.

Shifting only slightly, Kol'la – Loki, he thought, my name is Loki now – met Thor's triumphant, blue gaze (with a hint of mischief as though they had pulled off a magnificent trick). Odin, pocketing the seven silver coins, turned to the side and motioned two servants to bring over a largish box set on a rolling table. The grey-haired king turned to Loki, still kneeling on the dais, and smiled gently.

"Now, my son, it is customary on one's second millenial birthday to receive a prize of great worth – but seeing as that time is fast approaching and this moment is a matter of great... importance to our hearts, your mother and I," here, Odin's voice set no small emphasis on the name, "we decided to present you ahead of time a token of our hope for you, Loki, and for our family and for our Realm."

With that, his father opened the box revealing a helmet like Loki had never seen before. Similar to the guards of the palace, it proudly curved upward in two great horns – but this helmet was a gleaming gold and crafted, he could tell, by the best smithy to be had in Asgard. With nothing short of reverence, Loki looked upward, green eyes shining and glittering in turn, as Odin approached and fit the helmet onto his younger son's dark head.

Loki, allowing the helmet to be placed, accepted the weight and raised his chin to meet Odin's gaze, finding a small wave of pride and happiness unfurl within him, such as he had not felt in quite some time. My horns, he thought, how odd – that I should find them here...my horns, my pride, my home...

Loki glanced at Odin, Frigga and then Thor in turn.

Extending a hand downward, Odin raised Loki to his feet and said authoritatively as he turned to the crowd, "We now present Prince Loki Odinsson. A toast to the long-life and health and happiness of my son!" A pause and with a smile at Loki's encouraging nod. "To both my sons! Prince Thor and Prince Loki!"

There was no hesitation allowed as the Royal Court stood, bringing everyone else to their feet. Glasses rose – the glittering glass goblets better suited to the smooth grape wine and cordials and the larger pints more favoured by mead drinkers – as all shouted a chorus of acceptance. They drank and
the tables vibrated with a thousand thuds as the glasses met the table. Odin sat then, releasing the hall's attention. Immediately, a wave of sound came crashing down. A roar of epic proportion rose as servants gasped and huddled together, temporarily forgetting their duties, as lords and ladies and officials burst out in shocked, surprised, delighted or excited chatter. Those visiting Asgard glanced at each other and up at the Head Table where the dark-haired, newly appointed Prince Loki had resumed his seat.

"This was an unprecedented move on the All-Father's part," everyone murmured. "What does the young man offer in reality?"
"Did you know him?"
"He was a strange one. Once he-"
"I heard from the High-Mage that his abilities are-"
"His coloration-"
"Hava! Hava! I just heard from that nice serving lad, Thorsa, that the papers were signed just this afternoon?"
"No! So quickly!"
"They really must have been prepared for some time..."
"I wonder why they waited..."
"I guess, we will have to call him Prince now."
"What a shock!"
"Those abilities he displayed during that duel perhaps..."
"I wonder how the Prince Thor first responded-"
"Mayhap this was the ever motherly Queen at work. You know she has a soft spot for strays."
"Not like this!"
"Perhaps she has Seen something..."

Kol'la – no, I'm Loki now, Prince Loki – an Odinsson and of Asgard – Loki knew that not everyone could or would accept him so easily. Thor will be uncertain of how this will change what has bound us together before now... More than ever, it will be important to show him - and the rest of the Realm - that I am no threat - that nothing has changed... Nothing has changed - but it has - and yet, it must not appear to be so. The new Prince, however, bearing the helmet so proudly, found himself more determined than ever. Judging by the pole-axed expression on the heavily bearded face of Volstagg, Fandral's thoughtful expression and Sif's suspicious gaze, Thor's friends would find it difficult to be supportive. Hogun's face appears even more blank than usual, Ko-Loki noted. Well, it is understandable. I'd be worried if I was them... it is not every century a King takes a son not his own. Particularly one of dubious origins such as I... but the Queen – my mother is right – it is more important to dwell on who I am now – and who I may become... they will come to understand in time. I will make them understand. I will bring Asgard honour and guard its gates for all time.

"Congratulations, young Kol'la – ah! A thousand pardons," a cool voice broke into Loki's thoughts. "I should say, Prince Loki, should I not?"
"It is... still new to me," admitted Loki graciously. "I would imagine it will be even more difficult for others."
"Everyone will be wondering as to Odin's reasons," Malekith continued smoothly, "but I am sure those will become apparent... with time."
"No doubt."
"Or perhaps the Queen was gifted with a vision. Such is the mysterious ways of the Norns, of Fate."
"Perhaps," Loki replied noncommittally.
"Hm."

Relative silence fell and the two sat before their plates, surrounded by the quiet murmur of the Dark Elves mixing with the huskier bass of their neighbours and good friends, the Svartalfheim Dwarves. Frigga's lighter tones washed over them as she laughed over a joke told by the ever ebullient Lord
"And you were renamed," Malekith added thoughtfully. "Understandable when one is reborn as it were−" He reached for his goblet and swilled about his mead. "Loki." Pause. "An odd name – an ancient one known by few – so old, one could almost say primeval, until it was lost and even the written word no longer held record of it."

"Yet, you apparently know it," Loki's eyebrow rose slowly, his sharp green gaze pinning the enigmatic Dark Elf with a hard stare.

"Know of it. In passing," Malekith corrected slowly. His smile was not pleasant in the slightest as he added, "The memory of the Elves is long and deep and our Race prizes knowledge above all – what is or is not considered... important or useful." Rising, he looked down at the young Prince. "A worthy consideration nonetheless." He smiled again and then added peremptorily: "I must go. A good day to you, Prince Loki, and... a long life."

Malekith inclined his head. Loki followed suit stiffly and silently – filled with disquiet. Nothing more was said.

[...yet seeds are planted...]

[...waiting for soft soil, gentle rain and the bright sun...]

[...illuminating all...]

Watching the tall Dark Elf wend his way down among the boisterous diners on the main floor to the side of a group of Elvish compatriots, Loki mused over what the man had said.

*Odin and Frigga named me – she told me it was the name which suited me best – the name she would have given me had I come to them, had they found me as a babe. Loki frowned as he stabbed his short knife into the beef which laid before him. What prompted her... what were Odin's real motivations to take me in and make me one of his own? I am no one and they have never asked about my past... There was only those few questions during that conversation of so long ago... and since then, they have never asked me anything. What do they think they know? Why does it not matter to them? And... they said they waited for some time... Since then, since that time – surely All-Father and Lady Frigga had not intended to adopt me so long ago! And yet, they continue to imply that they had waited... To hold that wish, that dream for all those years..."

Loki did not know what to think. His thoughts chased each other about in an endless loop, an unordered whirl. *Lady Frigga must... must...* He found it impossible to consider the word 'love' so easily. And that name they chose for me... Perhaps Malekith is trying to tell me something. Perhaps I can find some clues in the Royal Archives.

With that decision made, Loki turned to the task at hand – ensuring the comfort of his remaining guests.

[...but what we will and what we achieve...]

[...between those two things...]

[...therein...]

[...lies a chasm...]

Pale pink, velvet purple and vivid red petals drifted, wafted, hung momentarily within the gentle breeze as if caught magic and frozen in time, as if the entire scene had been paused, stilled, to gift the
onlookers with a glimpse, a vision of something so beautiful, so glorious as to be rare, even in this, the golden Realm of Asgard. This was a moment like no other, hauntingly beauteous in its passing.

The Royal Family of Asgard, the Realm Eternal, was riding in stately array down the spacious, statue-lined promenade now crowded with the citizens who were agog to see the new Prince. Town criers had announced the official adoption the day before – around the time of the initial celebratory feast – and now, in the cool of the early morning on the following day, before the sun had fully risen, the Royal Family with their honoured guests made their way around the longest, busiest circular road in the Capital.

Odin, in fine armour and a long, well-pressed cape, astride his favoured eight-legged mount, Sleipnir, looked as august, stern and wise as ever. His blue eye, both proud and sharp, drew everyone's gaze upward in respect and awe. At his side, resplendent in his own silver and gold armour, long, red cape falling back regally from wide, firm shoulders, Thor rode. As usual, the cheery Prince smiled and waved, catching the posies of fair maidens thrown to him. The pink, purple and brighter red petals caught in his blonde curls and lit on his cape unheeded.

And they passed by. A space. A short one. And then, Frigga followed on a gentle white mare, long blonde locks falling gracefully over her peach-pink gown and cream cape. Her blue eyes, bright and warm, passed over the masses of her people. Her people. Once upon a time, they had not been, but now they were. Her adopted land, the place she had learned to call home. With that thought, Frigga's gaze landed on the slender, newly instated Prince at her side: Loki. Her adopted son – the young man she had long desired to call her own.

Yet, I must tread with caution, for his heart opens slowly – and only to the tenderest touch. For him, this is a new thing... and so I must be patient. From the first day he had come to me, silently, stoically suffering, Frigga recalled, I had felt something, a feeling so inexplicable, yet familiar; so strange, yet so... right. As if it was meant to be.

And now, tears blurred the gay colours together in a palate of soft hues, he is my son. One day, he will come to understand that he is where he was meant to be – at my side.

-0-0-0-

Loki gazed about him dazedly as if the world had been turned on its head. In a way, he mused, it has. You are a Prince – you, the child of No One, the Unwanted, the Abandoned, the Unnameable, the Vaetki and the Wolf's Child... You are a Prince... and a son...

He raised his face into the soft wind and smiled briefly as a new shower of petals drifted across his skin. Catching a flower in a pale, long-fingered hand, cradling the foreign softness, he considered the fragile, vivid thing. It was too easy to recall the first day he had arrived in Asgard. Another day that seemed so unreal. Coming here had become a reality in such a sudden way. Such an improbability realized, such a dream come true – all these events appear as an illusion... an ephemeral dream, yes, ephemeral, but so beautiful.

Stirring in the soft breeze, the rose shifted, brushing against his skin and Loki – no longer Kol'la – Loki's heart filled with something he could not name, could not identify or catalogue. Suddenly he was on the edge of the Eybjarg Falls, wind at his back, wolves at his side, facing the Void and finding song. A new verse to fit the old. A new chapter to follow the previous.

Rise above the Realms and soar,
for this is the time to stretch your wings and seek new lands.
Return home, little one,
and rest.
We are waiting here, little one,
come.

He wanted to laugh. He wanted to cry. He wanted to dance. He wanted to sing.

He wanted to grow wings and fly.

-0-0-0-

The following four days brought feasts and hunts and dances and late night carousing and impromptu duels and all manner of frivolity that would build such wonderful memories as would never be forgotten. There was no time for Loki to get away to the Archives to research anything. Even worse, Thor was proposing yet another nonsensical quest to some world called Uxor IV in order to best some attacking vagrants who had taken residents in the plundered homes they had robbed. Loki found no spare time to take the boisterous young Prince – my brother, he reminded himself, he is my brother now – aside and talk some sense into him.

Instead, Loki found himself caught up in another whirlwind as the finale to the entire week ended with a grand parade through the streets of Asgard. Afterwards was the farewell banquet (just another excuse to get excruciatingly drunk and tumble some wenches) – and the next day's early morning found Loki nursing a mild hangover in the cool shade of Lady Frigga's – his mother's – garden.

[...in the cool morning hours...]

[...there is peace...]

Frigga was on her knees contemplating a series of flowers which were not growing as well as she had hoped. After moving them to a pot temporarily, she sat back, cleaned off her small trowels, drew off her leather gardening gloves and gardening smock, cast a quick glance at her new son and shook her head with an air of incredibly tried patience. Loki, leaning against a fine ash tree, had closed his eyes, his dark eyebrows knitted and forehead lined no doubt thanks to the pressure of his headache. Once again, standard Asgardian medication did not appear to aid him as readily as it did Thor.

Without a word, Frigga found a spare cloth, moved to the small tap further down the path and briskly soaked the rough towelling in the cool rush of water. After wringing out most of the water, she folded it carefully and, returning to her son's side, laid it across his eyes, blocking out the gentle morning sunlight and cooling him down further.

Loki sighed in response and he raised a hand blindly. Reaching across, her fingers found his and she squeezed him comfortingly, drawing her chair closer. Her son's thin lips drew up in unspoken delight – then drew back in a grimace - her kettle began to screech over the small outdoor stone oven she had set up by her pavilion. Frigga stifled a laugh at Loki's vain attempt to hide his discomfort, drew away to remove her kettle and make up some tea. Placing a cup and saucer in his, knowing that he would soon be drawn to the comfit tea she had prepared, Frigga took her seat with her own teapot, tea cup and saucer at the ready.

Picking up her stitching, she glanced over at Loki. The dark-haired young man's fingerstoyed with the delicate edge of her tea cup, a fine pale blue and green set made out of the finest stone-fired china available in Vanaheim.

"You had a long night, I see," she finally said, voice low and quiet.

Loki nodded slowly, laughed shortly – a deprecating kind of laugh – and then grimaced sourly.
Slowly, he raised the cup to his lips, inhaled the sweet scent of camomile before sipping carefully. Immediately, the tension began to ease out of his shoulders. Frigga approved and went back to her sewing.

"It was good," Loki finally said, voice a little rusty – obviously he had not yet spoken since he had risen from his bed earlier that morning. "I think. I mean... I think it was good... I – I – ah – cannot remember a good part of it."
"Yes, well," Frigga chuckled dryly. "That is the foolishness of youth for you."
"Hm."
A pause. Then Loki added, "I thought I was above it all... Apparently not."
"It is good to relax – and a little folly harmed no one. Not really."
"Really," Loki replied, a little deadpan. "Well, you may not regret, but I am currently very much rue the moment I took Thor up on a drinking challenge."
"Who won?"
"You know... I do not know."

Both chuckled a little and Loki took another sip of tea for comfort.

"What will you do now?" Frigga finally asked. "It has only been a week. Less than a week, really... and settling in will be difficult, despite the fact that you were practically living with us toward the end."
"Yes. Well," Loki shifted a little, "I have a few plans. Going to Uxor IV is not part of them. I will have to try to explain why to Thor. Again."
"Oh dear. He is not listening to you?"
"He has his moments." Loki stopped and then started again. "We all do... but this time, this time, there is much - there is much for him with which to come to grips..."
"I can talk to him as well."
"That may help. Perhaps. If you could reassure him - of his place." Loki's long fingers toyed with the edge of the saucer and he sighed then. "Underneath his smiles and jokes, there is... there is uncertainty, I think. He does not realize, not yet – but I think this quest is a way for him to come to a better understanding of what happened – to tell himself that nothing has really changed."
"And it has not!" Frigga said firmly. "Not for Thor, not in the important ways... He will always be close to my heart."
"No, but some need more time to realize that," Loki shrugged, "and Thor will understand – eventually."
"What will you do?"
"Not go to Uxor IV, that is for certain. It is a volcanic planet and too hot for my liking."
"Yes. And it will be summer soon here in Asgard. Perhaps you should flee while you can."
"I thought you would wish to have me close by you," Loki turned his head then to stare sightlessly in Frigga's direction.
"I do," she smiled, leaning forward to caress his cheek reassuringly, "but if you are happy elsewhere, I can wait. I have waited so long already."
"So long," echoed Loki and then asked nonchalantly as if the answer did not truly matter. "How long?"
"Since the first day I saw you," Frigga admitted, "when you came into the Healing House borne by Thor in his arms, covered in blood. I knew then – when you opened your eyes, when we talked that you were the son I always wanted. Now... you are here. Finally here – and so I am content."
"So long," repeated Loki. "Why did you not say anything earlier?"
"Well, I could tell you were not ready to hear such things, dear. You would not have understood. You would not have trusted me enough – and rightly so. Who was I to force you into such a huge decision?"
"You waited so long."
"It was worth it... was it not?"
"Yes," Loki admitted, squeezing her hand which had slipped once again into his. "Yes."
"I know you have many questions," the Queen finally added, easing back to take up her stitching again. "One by one, they will be answered – in time."
"Such as why you would really want one such as I standing as brother to your son?"
"That could be a reason, but that is not the full answer. Even I cannot know the why of everything... I can only follow my heart."
"Your heart." Two quiet words full of disbelief.
"Yes, my heart."
"I – I am not..." Loki shifted uneasily, his teacup rattling warningly in its saucer. He stilled. "Matters of the heart are difficult, I find."
"They can be."
"What did your heart tell you?"
"That we needed each other, that this was meant to be, that you were the one I was waiting for all this time – the hole in our family which needed to be filled – and not just by anyone. Not just anyone would do. It had to be you."
"This is a mother's intuition?" he hazarded.
She laughed, "Perhaps. Your father asked me the same question."

Frigga watched as Loki's lips parted suddenly at those words and soundlessly moved a little as he repeated the words silently – 'your father'. It was apparent the young man still had not processed the entire episode with as much ease as he projected.

"Your future holds great promise, Loki," she said softly. "You were meant for remarkable things... and in more ways than one, you stand as Thor's equal."
"That cannot be," Loki shook his head dismissively.
"Nevertheless it is true."
"There is only one throne in Asgard," he replied softly, "and it can never be my place. That I know."
"The throne in Asgard is not... is not necessarily the end of all things," Frigga replied carefully, picking her way through the minefield of a conversation. "There are other... destinies just as important."
"What did the Norns say?" He blurted out then, setting down his cup unsteadily. "What do they say of Prince Loki?"
"Oh, Loki," Frigga set aside her stitching, rose and took her place by the young man on the soft rug placed between the wide spread roots. Her arm slid about his tense shoulders, bringing wordless comfort and her hand rose to gently ease his head under her chin, fingers running through the now wild disarray of wavy hair which curled up at the ends. "They told me that there is only one throne in Asgard, but you and Thor... the both of you are blessed with glorious destiny, both were meant to be kings."
"Meant to be," Loki pointed out meaningfully, voice low.

What he was thinking, Frigga could only guess. What did he see? Some memory of long ago... the ones who abandoned him? The ones who were his parents before they died or disappeared? The homeland to which he belonged and to which he appeared to have no inclination to revisit? Oh... Loki... She said nothing more, but cradled him in her arms until he fell asleep.

After, he woke in a better mood. Accepting his slightly awkward, yet earnest apology gravely, trying to hide a smile, Frigga embraced him and drew him back into her suite for a much needed lunch of white wheat bread, honey, fruit, thin slices of tenderloin and a light apple cordial. They discussed Loki's plans to visit Vanheim and Alfheim, to research in their libraries and discuss some magick theories he had about the infusion of Life force into inanimate objects. Joking and laughing, they remained there – and when Loki rose to leave, in order to allow Frigga some rest in the afternoon, the Queen drew him aside to a chest, and opening it revealed a stack of neatly folded garments.
Drawing them out, Frigga carefully unfolded them, revealing a well-tailored, hand-woven, deep-green tunic, which he saw would hang quite nice and low about his hips, easily cinched by his belt. A well-padded leather over-tunic – gleaming black and already supple beneath his hands.

"This is..." He murmured astounded as several more tunics, another deep green over-tunic fell open. He blushed over the small stock of white drawers. My underpants will have been handmade by the Queen and her handmaidens... The cotton seemed so soft to his tough – soft, not rough or slinky or cheap like his usual wardrobe. As a Prince, Loki realized, I will have to learn to dress in a more formal fashion...

"...too much..." He found himself saying a little incoherently. "Oh-

The last exclamation he could not withhold as Frigga, with proud and shining eyes, slowly unfurled the most amazing coat he had ever seen. Immediately, Loki wished to try it on – instead, his fingers ran along the small metal teeth edging the lapel and the soft woven cloth, also a dark green, which lined the entire coat. Below, the coat split onto various flaps which he knew would enable him to move and ride more freely.

"It is... beautiful..." Loki said, eyes meeting Frigga's finally, glimmering with unshed tears. "How – why – I – I mean..." A pause.

"You are welcome," Frigga replied softly, laying the coat aside and drawing Loki into another embrace.

"I – I am sorry. Thank you," Loki finally managed to choke out. "Many... many... thanks... I do not know how I deserved this..."

"This is what any mother does for her boy," she replied, "especially when she wants to help him – to support him as he goes out into the world on his own."

Loki stilled and then eased back, eyes fastened on the ground at his feet.

"You know that I will go, and you will... understand, then..."

"Yes," Frigga smiled and laughed lightly. "Of course. In fact, I said earlier that you should feel free to go. This is a gift. I hope you – I know you will wear it well."

"Thank you," Loki repeated.

For a moment, they stood together, hands clasped and Frigga found herself reciting the words she often spoke before Loki travelled on a mission or went on a quest with Thor.

"As far as you travel, no matter into what dark places you stray, no matter what terrible workings you weave," Frigga whispered, "know that you are always welcome at my side."

"I know," he replied as was tradition, words replacing the ones he still could not speak, "I will always come back."

Chapter End Notes

So, there you go. I didn't put in the garden conversation after all - but I will write that as a side-story. Sorry about that. Still, I got in some other important moments, and I hope that it feels more realistic as a result~ ALSO~ HORNS~ Just saying...

Let me know what you think~

Update in 5 days or so!

-KI
Several people last chapter mentioned the following issues/questions...

a) Would Odin & Frigga not talk about Loki's past? I think they would have... normally... but this is not a normal situation. Also, you may want to assume that they know more than they are letting on. I think they've given enough hints to Loki and to us about how much they may/may not know... what is more interesting to me, as an authoress, is how does Loki respond to the fact that they aren't asking him questions?... DUN DUN DUN...

b) Thor's response. Thor's response isn't going to be clear cut anywhere in this fic - because he's not going to be in touch with his feelings enough to know what's going on. Well, that is to say, like all of these situations, feelings are complicated and all messy - and Thor is going to show a whole gamut of "this is fine!", "I love you, brother!", "I always wanted a brother!" to (later on) "GAH! BROTHERS ARE SO ANNOYING!" and other things like that. Typical young male stuff - and I am not able to show all of that in this chapter... but I promise that Loki is going to be a BAMF pain in the butt for Thor and Thor will respond.

c) What is Loki's stance in relation to the Royal Family at this stage? I would say it's a legal adoption and Odin's plans for Loki to be advisor and etc is still in effect! Ambassadorship would also be a natural course for Loki. We'll see how that turns out...

Author's Note - On Loki's Years and Resultant Feelings: If you take a look at the timeline link I put up on my profile, you can see that Kol'la was on Jotunheim for a good chunk of time. In Earth age years, he was there until he was 13. He was in Asgard from 14 years to the present, more or less... and thus, been on Asgard for 5 "years" or so (but in Asgardian years, that's a LONG TIME). As a result, he feels like Asgard is home - but it's a push-pull situation. Yeah... Unfortunately, how he was treated on Jotunheim makes it easier for him to move on. Also - I think Asgardian years flow a little slower... or something...

Author's Note - Time Issues: As for Earth years, I didn't see the point of calculating that in regards to this fic, but if you watch Thor, they put a date on the Jotun incursion onto Earth at about 965 AD (!). Loki was born ALMOST A THOUSAND YEARS AFTER Christ! (Whoa... crazy, right?) This really threw me, so I have to approach this a few ways...

Either a) time flows differently (aka slower) in some of the realms or b) it doesn't and Loki is only (assuming Avengers is somewhere in our future or something) 1200 years old. This isn't good b/c I have planned out his age to the max regarding the plotline. Sigh. So this means we have to go with option A. So, time flows differently. I'm going to arbitrarily say that given Loki was born in 965 AD, while Loki was Ulfrbarn, it was probably around 1350s AD (Renaissance's era). When he was made Prince, it was around the 1700s/1800s or so. Therefore there are more years in the Nine Realms than on Earth. (Yay for time manipulation. Not.)

Author's Note - On Format: In this story the normal font is someone's point of view. The point of view is almost always pointed out by who's thoughts are shown. Ie. If Frigga is thinking in italics, that scene is her POV. The bold AND italicized fonts are the Souls of Realms or Magick or the Dead speaking - take your pick. They may be all one and the same. I'll also be using BOLD AND CAPITALS later (and going back to change a few sentences) to show the voice of the Void. The bold font in the BRACKETS [brackets] are something else entirely which you aren't necessarily supposed to know. If it's
keeping you awake at night, then ask me and I'll tell you what's up with those. But what those are will be revealed in time. XD

Use the vocab from last chapter for this one, if you need to. XD
Thanks to everyone reading this and giving it kudos~ Thanks to: lemomina, Kai_Maciel, iBlameGlobalWarming, Danea, Dragonanzar, and Snakecharmed79.

I'm updating a little early because I seriously need to wallow in my Loki and Hiddleston feels. Between the downturn in the Thor-Loki relationship that appears to be going on in the clips, the fact that Hiddles was in Beijing (so close, yet so far!) and the fact that I may seriously be harbouring a crush which is depressing for a woman of my age... Yeah. I just wanna put myself into a coma that lasts until December, so I can wake up in time for Christmas and going home. And going home (Ontario, Canada) for winter vacation (Jan/Feb) will be so interesting b/c I will be surrounded by people who don't care about like Loki... (sigh)

ALSO - soon I'll reach 300 comments~! I'm so excited! So, when I get there, I'll post the first side-story publically and I will privately PM reviewers (or email) a link to the 2nd side-story... only for reviewers who reviewed chapter 40 and beyond! Let me know which side story you'd like the most! ["A Day With Elska", "Loki and Kayra The Healer", "First Days" (Kol'la's Asgardian culture shock), "Birthday" (Loki's 2000 year birthday)]

Thanks to my good friend Kate who told me that most Americans must read "Weldon's Pond" (or at least, lit majors) and is the most beautifully written book, but also the most useless. So, it turns up here... sort of. Thanks, Kate~!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 44
Star-farer I

The soul of Alfheim is sweet and clear, pure as a mountain stream flowing with newly melted snow. Sweet, pure and a little cool, promising rain and green grass and joyous dances in purple twilight beneath the shelter of ancient yew. A soft world, an ethereal place and the embodiment of its Soul rather different from the boisterous wind of Asgard or the lonely spirit of Jotunheim. Alfheim, Vanahem and their smaller, less well-known sister Realm, Nornheim, shared the echoes, the Sages tell, of the organic magick which flowed about at the Dawn of Time before the years were counted, before the First People rose to take note of Time. Thus born together, they shared the gifts of plenty and grew, broad and green, as lands of light, dimmer visions of Asgard which formed above.

How the worlds met each other, how space and time held them together and yet apart, how these three moved relative to the rest of the Nine Realms – these were the great mysteries which many pondered over. The Seithrmasters of Asgard, gifted as they were with the powers of the Bifrost, having a complicated mechanism with which to travel, did not consider the matter of the relativity of time, space and the Realms too deeply. The Elves and dwarves, however, spent much thought and energy learning how to bridge the Spaces Between and so found the Dark Ways, bypassing the
monopoly of the Bifrost neatly, albeit at great Risk.

For, Loki read in yet another tome, another treatise on the matter, the Spaces Between span vast distances through the Dark, which even the armies of Hel and our other Kin also fear to tread. This Dark is empty, if tales are to be believed. Yet, some aver that they have heard the Voice of the Dark, the Voice of the Dark that whispers in the night. It craves all things, these mystics say, for it is eternally hungry. It is calling.

Loki leaned back in the sturdy wood chair, gracefully carved which he had occupied for the last few weeks. Elbows propped on the chair's rounded arms, relaxed as he was against the lightly padded back, Loki's fingers met, steepled in thought before his lips as the warrior-mage contemplated the book's words.

...these mystics say...

...for it is eternally...

...it is calling...

...the mystics...

...calling...

The mystics, Loki recalled, are those few Elves, Light or Dark, who tie themselves ever closer to Yggdrasil's magickal stream of Life – and thereby tap into the dangerous knowledge that may one day tear the soul apart... Loki thought of the kind-hearted, clear-eyed Hluti, thought of himself drinking deeply from the Well. What destruction would such power wreak in you... and the mystics as such were ever bound to solitude and wandering... Few are left... but some works remain, surely...

Loki sat forward, shut the thick, heavy books before him carefully and set them aside before securing his ever-thickening journal. Then, sweeping away, candlestick in hand, Loki began to peruse the furthest case of books which he knew, thanks to the ever helpful, knowledgeable librarian, held the original copies of various famous Elves not published for the masses due to their "esoteric nature".

The ramblings of mad-men, Flarathir would say, Loki smiled to himself, amused at the thought, well, more like mad-Elves. Still... The image of Hluti's silhouette cast against the morning sky above a small dugout hut rose in his mind's eye. Still... they meant no harm... for they sat too close to the Souls of the Realms and drank deeply of Yggdrasil's magick but they answer to no one – not even the Norns and heed only the call of Life. As such, they offer no harm to any living thing... can we judge them for it?

Loki set the candlestick down, reached for the top shelf and the book on the right-most side. He would start there – methodically scanning one book at a time. The first, at a glance, appeared to be a low-level magick notebook on the elements; the second, a cookbook; the third, another book of notes on magickal shields; the fourth, on Elvish myths; the fifth, Vaerildon's Pond. He pressed onward (raising an eyebrow over the last), perusing each small book and scanning the table of contents (if there were any) or the first few pages to get the gist of the main content. It was around the three-quarter mark when Loki finally stumbled on four rambling texts written by three separate Elves. The one Elf who had written two notebooks seemed particularly verbose on all matters arcane and forgotten concerning the Void. One was labeled The Mystick's Dream.

Before he sat down with his finds, Loki double-checked the rest – but nothing stood out as pertinent to his two-fold quest – to find the origin of his name and to find more information on the Void. With
the four books which did indeed seem to fit his needs, Loki began to read the esoteric ramblings of the Ancient Elves who had dared to tie themselves so closely to Yggdrasil and its magick.

[...and so knowledge is mined...]

[...as a precious jewel...]

[...power and old, these words take root and breed...]

At some point of time, just after the second watch, Loki dozed off into a fitful, head nestled in his arms on top of *The Mystick's Dream*. For the first time in years, he dreamed of the Void and what lay between the stars – the black pits which devoured all, even the Light. It was as he remembered it: dark, haunting, seemingly empty and cold. Loki was, as always, standing on the edge – the edge of the Eybjarg, the edge of Nowhere and, looking in, he could hear it - the Voice which called from the Abyss –

...YOU ARE MINE...

– deep and dark, it beckoned –

...COME, LITTLE PRINCE...

– it knew him by name –

...I AM WAITING...

– always there – always within reach and Loki wondered why he had to hear it so persistently. He thought desperately of Elska's rough hands, Hluti's wide palms and Frigga's soft fingers. He thought of wide, blue skies, vast plains of ice and snow and a golden realm and the ever, cloud-tipped Skythurs, sheltering a brilliant city which welcomed the Rainbow Bridge and the promise of the stars.

Jotunheim. Asgard. Home. Home is where the heart lies, Frigga once said... and she promised, she promised to welcome me always to her side.

*Loki.*

...EMPTY WORDS, LIE-SMITH. YOU KNOW WHO YOU REALLY ARE...

*Loki.*


*Loki.*

*No!*

*Loki!*

Loki woke up with a startled jump, gasping – and for a moment, he stared at the empty room before him and then down at the open books strewn about on the wide oak table. The white tapered candles, now burning low in the candlesticks guttered warningly.

"My lord?" A soft voice asked from the dark, causing the young Prince to flinch.
"Ah... Elethed." Loki rose a little jerkily thanks to lingering stiffness caused by his uncomfortable
posture.

The Elf paid him on heed and raised a hand, beckoning fire, for a fresh set of candlesticks, which Loki now saw he was holding.

"I did not see you there."
"There was a... shout," Elethed replied to the unspoken question diplomatically.
"It was nothing."
"I see you found the Mystick's verse. Listening to those who answer the Call of the Deep... difficult reading before one's sleep."
"What happened – happens to them... the Mysticks... exactly?" Loki asked carefully, easing the books shut, but setting aside *The Mystick's Dream* for further perusal.
"It is difficult to say – for certain... for they do not return, those who fall to the Shadow... and those who remain are driven mad by it or turn to acts of evil in obedience to those dark urges... or they-"
Here, the Elf sighed and gestured toward the books Loki had found. "Or they take refuge beneath the sheltering boughs of Yggdrasil. We all choose, you understand, in the end. However, they understood the process better – or perhaps see it clearer."
"They were the first," Loki surmised. "The first to cross the Void."
"Indeed," Elethed took a stack of Loki's finished tomes and laid them on a small cart to the side of the table. "For some, to face their fears; for others, to succumb to them."

Loki shuddered. The Elf nodded thoughtfully and, after adding two more stacks of books, pushed the cart along down the wide aisle adjoining Loki's favoured nook.

"Yes... it is a fearsome thing."
"I am not afraid," Loki said quickly, pulling his journal and the remaining book toward him.
"You should be," Elethed's voice faded as he moved away, falling into shadow. "You should be."

-0-0-0-

Loki returned to his rooms, after signing *The Mystick's Dream* out, and fell into dreamless sleep against all expectations. The next morning, he spent a rare leisurely amount of time in bed, easing out all the kinks he had gained the weeks before from sleeping in the library's chair. Shifting underneath the light sheets, which did not press so heavily on his cool skin, Loki curled up with his notes and read through what he had written the night before. There was much food for thought.

As of yet, he mused, laying the leather bound book aside on the small night table to his left, no information can be found on my name. Loki sighed as he reviewed his options. I could just ask Odin. Or Frey... And... what would they say? Hmmm... Or perhaps that damned Elf was just toying with me... Knowing the uncertainty would eat at me. Reading my aloofness as isolation and mistrust of Asgard, he may have been attempting to sow seeds of discord between Odin and I... and Thor.

...and it is working...

Loki sighed, turned and then stretched, enjoying the luxurious curl of his toes, the perfect ambient temperature of the room and the silence. It was a warm quiet. Far away, he could hear a bell clanging, the chatter of the outer Courtyard now bustling as the business of the day got well underway. A door slammed loudly somewhere, the escalating sound of trotting hooves announced a company of horsemen, feet pattered with increasing frequency and urgency outside his door and voices murmured – growing louder and fading quickly – as the speakers hurried past. Loki propped himself up on an elbow, frowning, the blue silk sheet slipping off one pale shoulder. Tilting his head, he contemplated what he had heard.

*Something has happened?* Quickly he rose, drew a quick bath, washed swiftly his hair, combed and
slicked back his unruly short hair, donned his usual traveling gear which had been recently washed and mended – and then, he carefully poked his head out the room allotted to him, peering up and down the hallway. A few Elves were scurrying up and down, fluently speaking their mother-tongue in hurried undertones.

As he passed one open door, Loki paused at the sound of his name, softly called.

"Prince Loki!

It was one of the airy parlours where many of the Elf-maids enjoyed taking their tea or light cordials in the mid-morning or mid-afternoon. Decorated with soft peaches, creams and pale blues, the large room, full of light, gave the impression of softness and fragility. Entering slowly and carefully, Loki felt, even more so than ever, a little out of place in his dark leathers and green-lined travelling coat. Compared to the varying gold and white gold hair of the Elves with their blue or blue-grey eyes, Loki was as foreign as a Dwarf would be. Or a Jotun. He shuddered. Yet, he kept his shoulders straight, his chin up and wound his way into the centre of the room gracefully.

"Prince Loki," Lady Ilyrana rose to take him by the hand, her brow slightly wrinkled with worry. It was an odd look for the usually serene woman. "Such sad tidings for our fair folk!" "Sad tidings, my lady?" asked Loki carefully, glancing at the other Elf-maidens' faces. "I have not heard."
"Very grievous indeed," sighed the older woman, shaking her head. "We fear the worst for our cousins."
"Where-
"In the outer reaches of Alfheim - a good ways north and east," a younger Elf-lady spoke up, her blue-grey eyes tearing up. "I must go then to the King," Loki eased back, offering the women a small smile, offering a little comfort. "I will offer what help I may give."
"May the Norns bless such a kind heart," sighed Syviis and the other ladies returned Loki's smile and bowed gracefully as he reached the door, saluted them again and left.

Shaking his head, Loki made his way to where he supposed the King would be. Making his way inward and down, Loki found the Great Hall Of Spring was in no small pandemonium. The King of Alfheim, Dain, was to one side, confering with a band of lords and at the sight of Loki standing in the door, King Dain's face lit up.

"Ah. Prince Loki – I see you are already prepared – as to be expected, I suppose of an Asgardian warrior, but you should not trouble yourself needlessly."
"Something happened?" Loki strode up to the table, worry writ all over his face as he caught sight of maps and familiar script of Elvish. Svartalfheim.
"Marauders, I'm afraid," supplied Lord Halflar helpfully. He spoke quickly and concisely as was his wont. "They came in the night – the usual time – looted, and pillaged the peaceful town of Tyrneladhelu, which lies most unprotected on the edges of our Realm. Unfortunately, it was also the annual visitation of Lord Durothil and his family. With him were his two youngest – twins – Lord Alinar and Lady Alynda. Lord Durothil lost his life protecting the Keep and his son Alinar was injured in battle."
"And the Lady?" Loki asked.
"She was taken along with two Elf-lads as hostage. A growing practice among space-faring folk, I am afraid, as a means of income. We wish to give pursuit – or at least meet for a truce to exchange with monies as requested – but the spells of tracking laid upon them have told us they departed to Svartalfheim."
"I see," Loki nodded. "Neutral territory and depending where they rest, a desolate place – unfamiliar and unfriendly."
"Have you traveled there then?" asked the King hopefully.
"Only a handful of times and never visibly... It is a harsh land and severe – and full of many dangers for the unwary."
"Such as?" asked Lord Elaith.
"In such a land, at the advantage, even the most scattered team of bandits may successfully ambush a large force."
"He speaks well," Lord Halflar nodded.
"Perhaps..." The King paused uncertainly.
"Sire?" asked another Elf-Lord tentatively.
"Perhaps Prince Loki – but no, this is no quarrel of his..."
"It may be no personal quarrel," Loki agreed easily as the situation became clear to him. "As they say, the enemy of one is more easily overcome by two. A scouting mission would be a simple task, easily accomplished."
"But, my lord – the risk-"
"If the All-Father hears we risked his son-"
"Yet, he is capable, experience – and willing-"
"Lindros is right," Loki interjected. "I will go and see where they rest and report back as soon as may be. If Alfheim is in need of aid, Asgard can but answer the call. What little help I may offer, I extend."

With that, Loki Odinsson, Prince of Asgard, departed.

[...to Svartalfheim...]

[...the land of Dark Elves and Dark Dwarves...]

[...the land of broad skies and bleak...]

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah, there we go. Some of Loki in Alfheim - and Svartalfheim... SOON~! Coming up is more of Loki kicking butt... maybe?

OK. So in recap for format, we have these CAPITAL BOLD LETTERS which is the Voice of the Void (or someone else... dun dun dun).

At any rate... so sorry - this chappie is a shorter one... VV;; but I'll update sooner next week - around Tuesday or something like that...
Please let me know what you think~
-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ima – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effing
oto'o'a - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
Ginnung – the Void
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa'a'vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Summary: The war between Jotunheim and Asgard draws to a close, but thanks to a horrible twist of Fate (or perhaps not), the nameless runt of Laufey-King is not discovered by Odin and so begins a remarkable journey of life that should not have been. Jotun!Loki AU. Set pre-/during-/after Thor/Avengers Assemble. MCU-verse only.

Warnings: ANGST! Loki-whump! Language, adult situations, violence, child abuse, dub-con, sexual assault (also of a minor), substance abuse, one abortion scene (sort of), slavery, sex trade (maybe), some mild original character/Loki M/M pairings.

Comments: This is not a slash fic. Sorry. It's Loki-centric, although I definitely show the rest of the Avengers and etc. Please review! Constructive criticism welcome.

Disclaimer: I do not own Avengers. Marvel owns it. I do not get paid for this piece of work. Sadly, but understandably. LOL.

Well, once again, thanks to all who reviewed~ Thanks to all who have been so faithful in encouraging me to keep writing - and a warm welcome to new reviewers! Thanks to: Petreska, Danea, lemomina, Dragonanzar, Holdt, iBlameGlobalWarming, Ninjathrowingstork, Uriko and Kai_Macial. I don't get a ton of reviews, so each and everyone of your posts is a real encouragement and pleasure to read~!

A longer one~! YAY~! You'll see how I've been affected by recent tutoring stuff in Earth Sciences. LOL. And also from watching my friend play FABLE once too many times. Hahaha.

Also... some mildly sexy times ahead... (=_= Loki! You're a naughty boy~!)

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 45
Star-farer II

The world of Svartalfheim, the more critical scholars say, is a land of very little life. In the Chaos of Creation, it gathered to itself neither magick nor organic life in great quantities. Rather, it put value in hidden things, in the physical world and therein grew many materials – ores and precious stones and the like. A gravelly world with hard-bitten spirit, as the tales tell, it drew those fascinated with the treasures and dark things of the underworld. Dwarves came and the pale folk who had first been born at the Dawn of Time – an Elven race which was enchanted by technology, metal and the workings of inorganic things. Thus drawn to Svartalfheim, they built shadowy kingdoms in the desolate world.

For Svartalfheim is desolate, some say, a sister realm to icy Jotunheim – a study in contrast and filled
with hidden fire. In other terms, a picture of contradiction, for there is promise in their steel-blue skies and blackened mountains and hills and plains of heather and gorse.

Yes, there is beauty to be found, even here. Within the few forests and groves of twisted trees, wildlife teemed. The sedge thrush and brown sparrow made their way from purple-headed clover to wild thyme to the rare meadow buttercup. Far above, hawks and various dark-feathered eagles or vultures soared, keen gold eyes searching the land for any sign of their usual prey – field mice, brown hare, the black-spotted grey snake or the wild ferret.

A quiet world in many ways and expansive – for the Dwarves dug deep into the mountains and there lived peacefully, building a kingdom safely protected against any who would dare attack Svartalfheim. Their neighbours and neutral partners, the Dark Elves, rarely built cities in their turn, relying on smaller networks of middling-sized villages and roaming clans who lived in the towers of technology which were their ships and, for some, the only places they could call home.

When Loki arrived, following the invisible, except to him, trail, he was struck again by how brisk the wind was on Svartalfheim – low and cool and fresh, yet slightly menacing as it spoke of dark places, the fate of those lost in the deep of the mountains and the destruction of the fires which poured out from the belly of the Realm.

...what shall we lay waste to, traveller...

...what Destiny do you twist...

...and turn within...

...seeking to escape?

It is an endless cycle, Loki mused, as with Muspelheim. With each eruption, with the churning of its internal fires, new ores and stones and crystals are formed. Destruction and creation all in one process.

He looked about him – but there were no signs of any volcanic activity about – only desolate grey-black mountains, running down with gravelly, boulder-filled slopes to a mainly flat plain of gorse, heather, grasses and reeds. The sun was now quite risen – showing it to be mid-morning, yet everything looked bleak to Loki’s eyes, thanks to grey clouds which hung low, promising rain. A fretful wind tugged at his tailcoats infrequently – and from faraway borne on the uncertain gusts came the scent of rain.

The golden trail of the Alfheim spell turned upward and Loki moved forward, slowly and silently, until a black cave entrance came into sight, half-way up a mountain spur. Even invisible, the warriormage was certain he could not approach without alerting the Marauders to his presence. Furthermore, he sighed, no doubt they have some who wield magick or at least are able to sense more intrusive forms... With that in mind, Loki twisted his fingers inward while his other hand formed the Vanir run for ‘transformation’. With a quick whisper, Loki’s tall, spare form dwindled into that of a common field mouse. Scuttling around the grey rocks nimbly, ever aware of the passing shadows of cloud and birds of prey, Loki made his way up the mountainside and arrived at the cave entrance without notice. Past two guards, one to the right of the entrance just inside and the other further back and to the left, Loki darted, hugging to the shadows. Within minutes, he was beside the captives – the fair-haired Lady Alynda, two young Elflings and another he did not recognize.

A Dark Elf captive... Loki considered the matter quickly, knowing time was not on his side. Now that complicates matters, particularly if I judge the boy’s clothing aright – and the heraldic symbol on his bracers... if he is indeed a Dark Elf child related to fierce clansmen such as Toross, Vaeril or
Malekith, there may be trouble ahead – for all of us.

The Dark Elf captive in question had been gifted with a shock of iron grey – white hair and dark skin. Black eyes glittered dimly in the faint glow of the large fire which burned merrily across the cave and around which the Marauders had gathered for a rest. Rough chatter and curses filled the cavern as the group retold their story, toasting the memory of three fallen comrades and recalling the glorious battle he had endured against the hard-bitten Elf Lord they had eventually slain. Food and drink passed hands – none offered to the captives who huddled in the opposite corner.

Loki contemplated his options: do only as he promised – to scout and report back, thereby leaving all to the mercy of the angry Dark Elves no doubt on their way, OR steal away the captives before any real harm could come to them. Eleven, he thought, only eleven bandits… but there look to be several experienced in some sort of magickal warfare… best move the captives first, then turn and fight...

With his mind now made up, Loki hastily scurried about and, using his tiny paws, scratched out five Dwarven runes in a half-circle about the captives. Behind him, one of the captives moved, startled no doubt at the sight of his activity, but then fell silent at a glance from Lady Alynda. Loki sighed, relieved that at least the Lady seemed to have commonsense, and moved on. As he surmised, the three Marauder mages did not react to the flare of Dwarven power, since most of Svartalfheim’s mountains had long since been imbued with their essence. Although weaker than he would like and not as robust a spell as other workings, the image the barrier held would stand up to casual scrutiny and would project enough detail not to arouse suspicion. It was tricky, but Loki took an additional minute to weave a second layer of Alfhheim magicks to create a sound barrier, hoping that the Marauders would attribute it to Lady Alynda.

Waiting for a minute or two, Loki watched the Marauders continue discussing their plans and pour out even more drink as they envisioned what they would do with their hostage money.

"O'chai'tho won't be pleased though," a tall Skrull hissed coolly.
"That is true…" agreed a grumbly, bearded half-human from Akarza, easily identified by his tel-tale purple skin.
"O'chai'tho has no sense of business," spat another. "Selling out and trading with Dark Elves and Dwarves, the o'ma'auzha!"
"Come, it is a good long-term strategy."
"And the pay isn't bad."
"Not as good as this payout! Heh heh heh!"

They all laughed.

"Those light Elves pack a punch though."
"Good thing there weren't any of those damned Asgardians."
"Ha! I could take'em all on."

More laughter ensued, happily drowning out any tell-tale noise as Loki completed his workings, firmed up the visual and sound barriers before transforming to his usual form of Prince Loki.

One of the Elflings gave a startled squeak and was immediately silenced by the rough hand of the Dark Elf who glared up at the tall, slender, pale-faced man who now loomed over them. Loki, looking into the Dark Elf’s shadowed eyes, knew that beneath the bravado lay a deep well of fear and suspicion, so without further ado, he knelt before the ever calm, if worn-looking Elf-maid and bowed his head respectfully, speaking in fluent Elvish:

"Well-met, Lady Alynda." He smiled smoothly, tracing a sigil on the back of her hand with his thumbs he raised one of her still shackled hands to his lips. "This is a dark hour, but I have come to
aid you as best as I may."
"You have me at a disadvantage, sir," the young, yet serene Elf replied.

Blue eyes met green – revealing unforeseen age and deep-founded courage. Loki breathed a sigh of relief. *No hysterical maiden to rescue*, he thought as he cast a mild charm over the hobble about her ankles, releasing them. *Things will go much easier.*

"I am Prince Loki… Odinsson."

The words still felt odd on his tongue.

"Well-met, Prince Loki, Son of Odin. I am glad to make your acquaintance," Here, she cast a glance at the fire and then the other guards who were much more preoccupied by the song a half-Dark Elf, half-Thosan had struck up. "However, we must make haste – for they will soon realize the truth of your workings and the capture of a Prince-"

"I will get you all away at once-" Loki went to work on the other foot bindings, ignoring the manacles about their wrists. Binding sigils also pressed against their skin, allowing him greater power to take them with him when he attempted long-distance movement. "I will take you to another place not far from here and from thence, return home – excepting the young Elf lord."

At this, Loki completed his working on the Dark Elf who glared at him silently and with continued suspicion.

"Yes. Haste is of essence, for we spoke earlier," Alynda shook her head, lips tightening. "This is Palin, son of Malo, kinsman of Malekith – you understand–" "I understand," Loki said swiftly. "Take each other's hands. Now."

Once the circle was complete, Loki shut his eyes and created a facsimile of himself which rose to stand back to wall, at the ready for any necessary fighting or distraction. *This will be tricky*, he thought and plunged into his work. On his own, he would have escaped long before then, but travel with others – even for a short distance – was filled with complications. Complications he usually gave little to no thought to. Murmuring the requisite incantations, Loki's grip tightened a little around Lady Alynda's fingers, but her hand remained steady.

He delved in and down – suddenly.

Plunging – diving – head first into the flow of magic about him – the streams and wide rivers of Yggdrasill itself. As he let the refreshing power flow through him, Loki felt himself connect just that much more deeply to Svartalfheim's Source, to its Soul, its power. From far away, as he could hear the warning call of his copy as the barrier fizzed in reaction to the green aura now pouring off of him. The soft voice of Alynda rose sharply – barely heard over the roar – and as if from far away, there was a loud shout, a sharp BANG as the shielding popped, a clash of metal and then, a brief cold moment of darkness before Loki found himself falling forward, gasping, releasing the hands he had clung to.

A few seconds later, the world came crashing down into painful focus and, raising himself back to his knees and then his feet with the help of a few strong hands, Loki was able to take stock of his surroundings.

The four captives had gathered around, sharp faces drawn with worry. Even Palin appeared to be torn between disgruntlement, concern and unwilling respect. Loki closed his eyes again, breathed in and out deeply, letting the world stabilize further before opening his eyes gain. Eyes darting about, Loki noted the markers – he had landed where had hoped – his initial landing spot further down and by the edge of the mountain spur. Above them, two bands of dark Elves were pouring into the cave...
from which emitted smoke and tremours, the sound of blasts and shouting.

"They are going at it," one of the Elflings finally managed to say, "but will they manage to subdue the bandits?"

"I am a clansman of one of the greatest clans of the Dark Elves – and my people are more than capable of-"

"Well, then, what was Lord Malo doing allowing such riff-raff to feel comfortable about finding respite in his lands-"

"Not thinking as usual, I daresay," the second, younger Elfling snorted.

"My father-"

"And what would you know of your father's intentions, second son-"

"Cousins!" Lady Alynda's light voice cut through the bluster of the youths like a knife slicing through hot butter. "This is no time to encourage pointless quarrels. We are safe here at the grace of Young Master Palin-"

"And not for long," Loki added with a murmur as a third company topped the mountain's edge and, catching sight of their small group, began to encircle them warily.

At the sight of their kind still bound in chains, several shorter, no doubt younger and more hot-tempered Dark Elves rushed forward. A blast of energy just barely missed Loki's head – which he dodged gracefully by tipping his head sideways but a hand's span, infuriatingly easily.

"They think you are-" Lady Alynda's words were drowned out by a roar of wind and rattle of stones which had been raised by a young Dark Elf mage at the edge of the group. "Idiots," Loki grunted, already noticing the sigils and subtle shiftings of energy. "They will harm Palin at this rate – and we may end up bearing the blame."

Turning to his right, offering his side – a less easy target for any marksman or archer – Loki raised his left hand, revealing a pale, empty palm while his right fingers twisted in another sigil, this time Dwarven as he manipulated the oncoming storm and turned it to his will. Before the wide eyes of the Elves, a large Cebir-Gondlhug, a Spike-Stone Dragon, formed, rattling about the party in warning. Its long tail, lashing about, knocked back several of the oncoming Dark Elf warriors. Long spikes shot outward as more rocks formed upon its scaly body as other boulders and pebbles were pulled into the storm.

"Dareth! Wyrran! Pull back this instant!"

"It is Father!" Palin turned to Loki, eyes widening at the flame of war and magic kindled within the warrior-mage's brilliant green eyes. "He – He-" The young Dark Elf faltered at the power of Loki's gaze, at the green tendrils of magicks pouring out of the Asgardian prince. On either side of the Dark Elf, the two Elflings stepped back hurriedly, casting worried, pleading looks at Lady Alynda. "Prince Loki," Alynda's voice spoke softly, soothingly. "I believe they are retreating. We are safe."

Immediately, the wind died down and the Spike-Stone Dragon subsided – crumbled in a rain of pebbles, a curtain of falling stone through which they could see the still ranks of the waiting Dark Elves now standing with their weapons sheathed or lowered. Finally, the sky cleared and all that remained was a resounding silence and a circular field of rubble.

A familiar looking pair of Elves stepped forward.

"Hail and well-met, Prince Loki Odinsson of Asgard."

It was Lord Malo and, at his side, Lord Cathor. Loki nodded stiffly, recognizing the two Dwarves whom he had bested at during the Bi-Centennial Inter-Realm Tournament.

"We meet again, Lord Malo... Lord Cathor."
"Indeed. Under such... auspicious circumstances, being what they are... I fear we may find common ground rare indeed and understanding a hard field to till."
"There is little to understand – or misunderstand – and I think you can already guess the half of it," Loki replied smoothly, gesturing to the three Light Elves at his side.
"A rogue group of Marauders, Father—"
"Silence, Palin."
"But... Father!"
"Silence!"

Palin, at his father's harsh tone, bit his lip, looked down and shrank back, taking the curt reprimand under advisement. No doubt the young Elf knew the consequences of speaking out in such exalted company, much less disagree with his Father's political tactics. *Causing dishonour for his clan would bring the youngling much grief,* Loki knew, *and no doubt Malo has a slew of complicated plans in hand... This could become disastrous very quickly indeed...* Loki said nothing, hoping the other Elves had the sense to follow his lead. *We need make no mention of the Marauder's words, nor their apparent disputed loyalties. Returning to Alfheim with no harm done to any is the goal – and easily obtained if we have the sense to keep our tongues still on the more complicated matters – if we promise no vengeance nor blame on the Dark Elves present here, deserved or not.*

"A rogue group of Marauders laid waste to a small village in Alfheim," Loki broke the silence smoothly, "and therein laid hands on Lady Alynda, daughter of Durothil, and two Elflings for hostage. A trail was laid by some Elf-mages and, leading here, King Dain and his court feared that they intended harm to their kinsmen – yourselves – as much as those of Alheim. I offered my services since reconnaissance is a particular skill of mine. Yet, when I arrived, I ascertained that your expected assault in aid of Young Master Palin would place the captives at risk, and so I removed the captives to this place and wish to continue onward unhindered."
"It is as the Prince says, fair cousin," Alynda stepped forward.

For the first time, Loki could finally take stock of the Elf-maid he had set out to rescue. He still did not recognize her, but found her blue, almond-shaped eyes, long deep-gold tresses and tall, slender figure pleasing. Her voice, soft yet firm, was smooth as honey and lilting like the song of a river. The Lords Malo and Cathor could only smile in response. Loki suppressed a smirk at how smoothly the words of the Light Elf-maiden eased the troubled waters. With bows, careful farewells were given. Palin joined his father and Malo gave Loki a hard look.

"We met in battle and tested your mettle, son of Odin. Today was another day – and again, you passed with flying colours. The clan of Malo is in your debt."
"There are not debts between... allies," Loki nodded graciously. "I look forward to our next meeting," he couldn't help but add a little smugly.
"May it be as... fair... and... successful as our last."
"Indeed."

With that, Loki joined hands with the Light Elves, opened the door to the Dark Ways and led the others through.

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Upon reaching Alfheim, Loki felt a deep fatigue weigh down heavily upon his shoulders. Such a sense of exhaustion he had not felt in so many years. For so long now, he had lived with little to no challenge to his skills bar that one competition on the day of his adoption and the odd quest with Thor. *I am out of practice,* he realized with no small annoyance. *I am out of practice... I have allowed myself to take this life, this peace for granted.*
Around him, courtiers bustled, the guards and servants congregated in groups about the courtyard gossiping and those who had been preparing for pursuit of their kidnapped kindred laid aside their weapons and prepared instead for a celebratory victory feast. Lady Alynda was carried off by a gaggle of young ladies to take rest in the Queen's quarters. The two Elflings had been carted off as well to return to their respective families. Loki, left with the King, could barely respond to the words of thanks and exclamations of praise effusively heaped upon him.

The afternoon was spent with a short rest – a quiet nap in his quarters – which did nothing to alleviate his soul-weariness. Soul-weariness such as he always felt after a particularly strenuous use of unfamiliar magicks or when he had been a starved youngling under the heavy hand of Mage Opna and unused to knowing his magickal limitations. Now, Loki knew better. Sleep was needed – but there was no sleep to be had any time soon.

In a whirl of bright colours, glowing fairy lights, energetic strains of music – in vivacious dances, witty repartee, savory dishes and endless goblets of wine or cordial, the feast spent itself. At one point in the proceedings, Loki found himself standing before the hall and, as was his wont, telling the tale for the guests who had come to celebrate his valorous deeds. This was no hall of Asgard with eyes fixed on Thor and the All-Father. This was an audience who could – and would – appreciate the intricacy and efficacy of his actions.

Loki was tired – but this moment was his and need to be savoured and treasured for what it was.

And so he began –

"The world of Svartalfheim, the more critical scholars say, is a land of very little..."

[...Svartalfheim, the land of Dark Elves and Dark Dwarves...]

[...the land of broad skies and bleak...]

[...soul of Alfheim is sweet and clear...]

[...pure as a mountain stream flowing with newly melted snow...]

[...and the glory of Alfheim is its joy in Life...]

[...so close to the Heart of All Things...]

[...Yggdrasil...]

[...thus comfort is found in gloriously simple things...]

Later on, much later on in the early hours of the morning, Loki was brought, stumbling and spent, laughing and swaying a little, with the aid of two servants supervised by Lady Alynda, to his rooms. Upon arrival, Lady Alynda smiled and dismissed the servants.

"He is mine to tend to," she said gravely, her perfect, pink bow-lips turned upward in a quiet smile. "As thanks."

The young Prince found himself at a loss, for the first time in many years. Finding himself alone with the young girl, Loki looked down at the Elf-maid with growing realization – equal parts uncertain and amused and tempted. She was tall for her kind and although gifted with the usual grace of the First People, walked with a firm stride, showing a kind of ranginess more appropriate for a young Lord. He had inquired that evening about her and her family and had heard tell that, having lost her
mother in an unfortunate accident at an early age, Lady Alynda had grown up closely with her twin brother in the company of Elvish warriors on the edges of the Realm. A rational, composed girl, wise beyond her years, she was entirely aware of what she needed or wanted. Loki could see the resolve in her bright blue eyes and in the swift movements of her hands as she helped him undress.

His hands were shaking a little. Fatigue, Loki thought. ...or something else. Long hours alone in the libraries of Alfheim and Vanaheim rose in his mind. It has been so long...

A brief kiss then as their lips met tentatively, Loki swayed forward, pulling her into his arms as they deepened the kiss, as her hands rose to curl at the nape of his neck. Dizziness swamped him then – either passion of the moment or the heady wine still running through his veins or the realization he had won or the surge of magic he had felt as he tapped into the foreign magicks of Elf and Dwarf. Loki did not know. Perhaps it is all of them combined... perhaps none...

Fingers fumbling, Loki managed to partially undress the girl before falling into the bed. They lay there – allowing the silences to speak and kissed again – and again. Loki, lowering his lips and tracing his tongue along the tantalizing cream of her long neck, paused there, muttering something incoherent about the lilies of the Valley of Alyndor for which she had been undoubtedly named.

He remembered laying his head on her shoulder, breathing in her flowery scent, face buried where her shoulder (her delicate collarbones) lay and then rose to meet her graceful neck and rounded jawline. He remembered closing his eyes.

He remembered no more.

-0-0-0-

The next morning was spent quietly – and much more fruitfully – once Loki dealt with the massive headache he woke up to. The two of them, after finding delight within each other and mining pleasure where it could be had, talked quietly on and off, glad to find enjoyment in each others company, discussing all manner of things beneath the sun.

Better than Glo-Glo, Loki had to admit, perhaps what could have been with Vessa... if... if...

He dismissed those melancholy thoughts and turned his attention back to the quiet girl, told another story and brought a small smile to her face. Many days would pass before the horror of her memory would fade – before grief for her lost father would ease. Loki understood what she sought and offered it gladly, taking nothing but the simple pleasure mutual comfort could bring. Later, their lips met and desire woke again, bringing with it a surprising, yet welcomed, renewal of bliss. Afterwards, she lay in his arms and cried a little and he cradled her, realizing again how easily words could fail one in such times. Perhaps, he thought, because words have no place in such a place, at such a time.

Parting ways after lunch, they made no promises and a week later, Loki left for places unknown, saying farewell quietly and respectfully. He clasped the arm of the King and offered words of peace to further bind the Realm of Asgard to its ally. He bowed to the Queen and kissed her hand, fashioning such fair words as to bring a blush to her cheeks – and those of her maidens as well. Lady Alynda, clad now in the simple blacks and greens of mourning, alongside her convalescing brother, offered thanks again and accepted a small kiss.

Before he vanished, he looked about the garden he had sought out for departure. A green place and full of variegated colours – above, a bright sun and pure blue skies. Such a Realm - who could not wish but to call it his own?
...soul of Alfheim is sweet and clear...
...pure as a mountain stream flowing with newly melted snow...
...and the glory of Alfheim is its joy in Life...
...so close to the Heart of All Things...
...but it was not, never could be...
...home...

Chapter End Notes

HA! LOKI IS THE BOSS~!

So, some of you might be, like, "Why are we doing this side-story and not other ones?"
Well, this sets up for later on when I write the sequel relating to Thor The Dark World
and why Loki would know Svartalfheim to be the one chosen to go. Also, I just want to
show how Loki has a) super awesome powers that extend throughout the universe (HA!
TAKE THAT THOR~!) and I also want to show him in situations where he is winning
and not losing and just being a nice good guy (if a bit awkward).

DiT: BECAUSE DARK TIMES ARE AHEAD.
KI: Um. Dark times? What dark times? (flips much further ahead) Ohhhh... those... dark
times.
DiT: (looks smug)

Anyway, will take a week break here and go back and polish up the future chapters to
make sure I've got the Thor-Loki stuff down pat. Heh. And also to recover from the
overwhelming Tom-ness of my Tumblr dash... (Who thought it was a good idea to have
him front publicity for Thor 2?) (No. Seriously. Who?) (Are they trying to kill me before
I get a copy of the thing?) (DEATH)

Let me know what you guys think! Remember to review and vote on what side-story
you'd like to see!
See ya round~!
-KI

Alien Glossary:
'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
Ginnung – the Void
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa'a'vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
I apologize for the wait, guys. Life has been crazy.

Firstly, work has ramped up a bit. I teach 18 hours and tutor around 22... and that's not including travel time or prep time... so yeah. TIREDNESS!

Secondly, have been doing more writing in hopes that I can create enough buffer to continue updating through November during which time I will have stopped writing as I take part in the annual NaNoWriMo. If you guys wanna cheer me on for that, be sure to check in with my original fic account. I may post what I write there. XD More info on that later. If I don't buffer enough, I may end up only updating twice in November. Sorryee!

Thirdly, loss of energy thanks to cold which is still hanging about. SIGH.

Fourthly, general depression and sadness as I miss home a bit more this year than usual and as Hiddles continues to trample on my heart with his perfect face and killer dance moves and attempts at speaking Chinese and Korean. Excuse me while I contemplate my Hiddles-less existence.

At any rate, thank you to all for hanging in there! I appreciate the love and thoughts that go into your reviews! Thanks to: dragonanzar, Kai_Maciel, lemomina, iBlameGlobalWarming, Danea, trippuchi!

Of course, as you know, I'm on tumblr in a big way - dappled-things, hiddlesayings and kakashidiot. If you are following me, let me know and I'll friend you back! Tell me your tumblr name in your tag. XD

And up ahead... an action-packed adventure chapter. Heh heh. But... PLOT HAPPENS!

I just wanna thank those reviewers out there who really pushed me in new directions with their constructive comments/criticism/questions and this chapter just became... better... I think and became more than what I hoped. Thank you guys! You know who you are! You rock!

Let me know what you think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 46
Early Bird Gets the Worm

Returning to Vanaheim, Loki double-checked his time, knowing that if he was late for his second millenia Day of Birthing feast, the Queen – Lady Frigga – Mother would be most displeased. She
has been planning this for sometime, no doubt, he smiled fondly at the memory of Thor's own second millenia Day of Birthing Feast, which had turned out to be an affair all unto its own. If I miss it... He hesitated and then shook his head. I won't miss it... I'll get home – in time.

Home. The word gave him pause and then, a slow smile graced his sharp features. Home. Somehow Asgard had found a place in his heart after all – inconsistencies and annoyances and everything else which combined to make one glorious Realm. The shat heap of the stable-yard. His home.

Yet, I cannot return without some answers, Loki sighed. Since that day... since that fateful day, Malekith's words have lingered – like festering sores, suspicion take root, like weeds taking hold of fertile soil, the imagination. So many questions... and no adventure in Svartalfheim has answered them – only raising more.

How does Malekith hint at something which the Vanir or the Elves do not know, which even Asgard has forgotten? And the matter of the Marauders... Were they holding some kind of pact with the Dark Elves? In some kind of collusion? And if so, why would they take hostage the son, the second son, of a well-known Dark Elf chief? Were they rogue Marauders? Really? It appeared so – yet... and yet... I have a feeling there was more going on there than met the eye... Loki recalled Palin – young, brash and inexperienced. The perfect pawn... He shuddered. To be a pawn... a mere pawn, so easily disposed of – Palin, the second son... Someone you must never become. Never a pawn, always a player...

With that thought, Loki left his allotted guest quarters and went in search of Lord Frey to ask his opinion on the Marauders. Frey, King of Vanaheim and older brother to Frigga, had been rather delighted to find himself gifted with such a talented young man for a nephew. Vanaheim, he had said, would always welcome such a son of Odin.

Such a son, Loki had smirked, amused and his eyebrow had risen sardonically at Frey's choice of words. Such a son... indeed...

Loki found his way to the King's Great Hall – a stylish, harmonious rectangular room with airy, well-carved columns and sparse, yet delicately wrought gold inlay. A smaller, yet more appealing version of Gladheim, Odin's Hall. Upon arrival, he was greeted by a rather unwelcome sight – the tall, well-muscled, tan figure of Thor in armour, clearly out on some adventure. Beside him, his ever loyal companions stood about with other Vanir nobles, looking grave and a little attentive – hiding their boredom well as Frey rambled on about something with his usual subdued animation.

"Ah!" Frey's face lit up at the sight of Loki striding down the red carpet to meet them. "But here, the hero of the hour comes himself! Loki – we just heard word from Alfheim – why did you say nothing of what you achieved this past week?"

"It was nothing, Uncle," Loki shook his head, trying to force down a rising blush to his pale cheeks. "Such modesty! You saved a fair maiden, out-thought every bandit about you and stood up to three companies of Dark Elves led by the Lords Malo and Cathor themselves! We would have thrown a feast in your honour had we but known!"

"You slew three companies of Dark Elves as well as bandits?" Thor asked, pride and respect shining from his bright eyes. "As any great warrior of Asgard should – although Father may not be pleased."

"There was no slaying of anyone – by my hand at any rate," Loki replied coolly trying not to allow himself to be too rattled from Thor's usual lung-crushing embrace.

"Loki, you jest-"

"Even better!" Lord Frey raised a hand to clap Loki heartily on the back after the younger Prince had managed to untangle himself from Thor's arms. "To win by wits as well as strength is a great day indeed. Peace will be upheld after all. Svartalfheim is a dangerous place and yet, you appear to have an affinity for dealing with such as them... admirable!"
"You did not even slay one bandit?" Volstagg looked openly disappointed.
"It was a band of Marauders trespassing on Dark Elf soil – so, no - I did not. The Dark Elves did."
"Interesting," Fandral mused. "Making others do your dirty work – as usual, Loki? Was the fair maiden impressed nonetheless?" A pause. "How fair was she?"

Sif smacked Fandral about the head with her leather glove.

"She was fair – and pleasing." Loki grinned then, a slow, lecherous look which he knew would answer them with what they wished to hear and held nothing of the more sensitive truth. "-and pleased and pleasurable as well."
"Ohohoho – that is my boy- OW! Sif! What was that for?"
"You were about to ask for details! I know you, Fandral!"
"A gentleman does not kiss and tell, Sif," Loki said primly.
"Indeed," Sif's lips thinned. "Then speak no more of it. Restrained yourself, Fandral."
"Restrainment is a word missing from his vocabulary," Hognur murmured.
"As always," Volstagg rumbled.
"Speak for yourself," Sif rolled her eyes.
"All of you," Loki added, trying to subdue a rising swell of annoyance as he usually felt when spending time too long in their presence. "What are you up to now, Thor?" He switched the subject swiftly.
"Ah. Yes," Thor's smile grew wider, if possible. "We are on a quest for treasure – and adventure in which we shall brave the dread beast Nidhoggr to regain a treasure of unimaginable worth!"

Frey's eyebrows rose comically at Thor's words and Loki grimaced, resisting the urge to smack himself on the face at the sheer idiocy of what Thor was proposing. The small group of Vanir nobles, who had also grouped about, stood, slack-jawed in astonishment at Thor's cheerful proclamation. Loki understood their incredulity for Thor had just proposed one of the most dangerous ventures of all time – to accost a Dragon Sire in his lair.

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In the Nine Realms and beyond, it is universally acknowledged that the dragon is, without doubt, one of the most dangerous beasts to roam the lands which they inhabit. Varying in size, magical ability, physical prowess and sentience, the Drakka Thyod, the Dragon Race as they are often called, have time and again proved themselves a threat against all other living things. To battle a dragon and live to tell the tale – particularly when one battled the Eldest, the more experienced and thus more powerful beasts.

Of the Drakka Thyod, tales say, the most powerful were the Great Sires – the Eldest – who had been born with the other creatures when Time was uncounted. They lived on, many believed, in the Nine Realms close to the more powerful magicks. Nine there were – nine for each Realm – or was it ten? Depending on the story, the names of the Great Sires go thusly: Fafnir, Gesta, Goinn and Moinn, Ofnir, Nidhoggr, Iormangund, Grafvitnir, Graback and Svafnir.

Tales tell of battles lost and a few won. For certain, no dragons live on Alfheim, Asgard, Nornheim or Vanheim – but Dragonfolk thrive in the wilds of Niflheim and Muspelheim and only the Norns know what ancient horrors thrive in Helheim. As for Svartalfheim and Jotunheim, who knew? The mysteries of the deep, beneath ice and stone, remained hidden and undisturbed. At any rate, of all the Dragon-Sires, Nidhoggr remained the most active, siring dragons which left for other Realms by their own secret Ways. Treasures of great price remained in his grasp for hundreds of thousands of millennia until even their names were forgotten. Thus dragons were named the Time-Keeprs, the Treasure-Watchers and the Word-Seers.
"Thor," Loki declared, once he had sequestered his brother down a small corridor, a little ways away from King Frey's court hall. "This is madness. You cannot go to Niflheim."
"Cannot go?" Thor asked puzzled. "Cannot go? And why not?"
"Because – because-" Loki repeated also befuddled by Thor's apparent lack of realization of what he was really saying. "This is – this is Nidhogg – which – which well, we do not know if he lives on – and – and – and why is that? What is that, Thor? It is because no one who goes to that place lives to return to tell the tale – and if they do, they are, they are not the same…"

Clasping Thor's shoulder, leaning close, Loki's green eyes flashed with worry and annoyance mixed together in equal parts. His brow wrinkled, Thor saw, a sure sign of Loki's troubled feelings. As always, he worries. As always, he is thinking too much on such simple matters. Thor smiled at his brother, clasped him in his familiar way at the neck, firming the younger man and reminding Loki of how much they had survived together – how much he had survived before they had met.

"Loki," Thor then said, "you worry too much. Surely in this matter you take too much after Mother-"
"Does she know?"
"Does who know?"
"Does Mother know?" Loki asked, exasperated at Thor's obvious obstinacy.
"Well, no… but that is no cause for concern-"
"No cause for conc- Thor – Mother would never give you leave to poke about a dragon's den much less a mythic one holding one of the Grand Sires, Nidhogg, the Dragon Sire of Niflheim, the Seer of all Seers and the-"
"I know all about the Grand Sires," Thor cut off his younger brother impatiently. "And Nidhogg as well, Loki. What do you think of me? I did read books, you know, once upon a time. When I was young, I studied such things and if they are true – and surely, there must be at least a grain of veracity to the tale – then this is a great thing to accomplish. A true test of the sons of Odin, our courage and our-"
"Sons of Odin?" Loki's voice rose several octaves while falling into a harsh whisper. "'Our'? Thor, there is no 'we' in this matter – I cannot go."
"Why not?" Thor found it impossible to keep the disappointment out of his voice. "Of course you may come. You are always welcome, Loki-"
"It is not a matter of feeling welcome, dou'ma. It is a matter of – of being rational. Discretion before valour-"
"Cowardice is-"
"If you say one word about being a coward, I will call you out now," Loki replied coldly, a long finger poking Thor in the chest with great emphasis. "This is beyond insanity, Thor. You cannot go."
"Oh ho! So you tell me what I can and cannot do now? As if you can order about your older brother! I will go if I wish to. I wish to and so I will go," Thor said, stubbornly. "Do not even think of trying to stop me, Loki. It will be done. I shall return to Asgard with a treasure of great price and all of the Nine Realms and beyond will know the power of our Realm and-"
"I cannot believe you are actually going to do this-"
"I cannot believe you are unable to even pretend to do your duty."
"What do you mean?" asked Loki, voice dangerously soft.
"I am not speaking of it anymore," Thor replied stiffly and stalked off, red cape snapping behind him.

Meanwhile, listening to the echoes of the two brothers quarrelling down the side-passage off the Great Hall, Frey and the others waited uncomfortably in silence. Politely, the other nobles had drifted off to deal with various duties assigned them for the day, leaving the Royals in peace. It was best not to meddle in the affairs of the royalty, particularly those of Asgard. After all, everyone knew that to step in the way of Loki's sharp tongue was only asking for public verbal flogging and Thor's fist often flew before he thought.

"They will make amends," King Frey said comfortingly to his wife who looked on, worriedly. "That is what brothers do."
"They are hardly brothers!" Sif frowned. "At the best of times, they are hardly friends, I think."
"That is your understanding?" Frey asked, eyebrow rising. "How limited it must be – but surely not. You must know the truth as shield mate to my hot-tempered nephews."
"The truth?" Fandral asked, curiously.
"They were born to be brothers," Frey replied calmly. "They will learn," he added after a moment's thought.
"Well, I cannot see it," Fandral sniffed.
Sif rolled her eyes, "Well, that is no mystery considering you are too busy looking in a mirror."
"She got you there, friend," chuckled Volstagg.
"I do not like it," Hogun said in his usual understated way.
"It makes me nervous too," Frey's wife, Sylmae, agreed. "They should not be fighting so."
"Fighting is important," Frey shook his head.
"That is true," Hogun replied evenly. "However, as brothers, they are but newly bonded – and having no real understanding of family, may not know the proper way to fight."
"The proper way to fight with one's siblings?" Fandral blinked. As the only boy of a family with five girls, Fandral had always wondered how one usually conducted oneself with one's siblings. His memories of growing up involved scratching, biting and underhanded combat he was ashamed to admit to this very day. "How so?"
"Ah, I should say, they may know how to fight, but to apologize, to make amends... that is a difficult thing indeed. Perhaps they do not know it as well as we may think."
"Very perceptive, young Hogun," Frey mused. "You may have a point there... well, if they show no signs of letting up within the hour, I will go speak with them."

"You cannot walk away from this!"
"Ah! So speaks the one who is so adept at running," Thor turned to glare at now rather annoying younger brother.
"Running? When have I run away?"
"How about that time I had planned that quest just after your adoption ceremony – and you disappeared to who knows where… without a word."
"I spoke to Mother and everyone who was listening to me at the feast knew I was headed for Vanaheim, which is why I thought you had come here – nevermind – that was ages ago. And I was not running away."
"You ran away-"
"I did not. I was merely trying deter you from another witless scheme-"
"As if your absence could stop me-"
"And?"
"And?"
"How did it go?" Loki asked, knowingly.
"How did what go?"

Loki rolled his eyes at his brother's recalcitrant response.

"Uxor IV."
"Oh. It went well enough-"
"Well enough? Well enough? Thor, we heard that you ended up destroying an entire herd of-"
"You heard!" Thor bellowed. "You were not there – how can you judge when you were absent? Once again, Loki, you make judgement on something that you have no right to – since you were hiding in your books. As usual."
"Where else would I be? At your side risking life and limb for some foolish venture only to be forgotten when it comes time to tell tales. Tales which end up as nothing more than hour long sagas praising your heroic deeds!"
"Hour – hour long?" Thor's voice was now rising in might and power as he attempted to loom over his slighter younger brother. "Hour long? Is this what it is all about? You are jealous about the fact that I earn my praise and take it where it is due?"
"I – what – Thor... No..." Loki shuffled his feet and add grudgingly. "I am not jealous – about that – not about that at all." A pause, then a halting admittance. "Not entirely jealous. I am annoyed, perhaps."
"I thought brothers were supposed to support each other-"
"Do. Not. Dare," Loki hissed, drawing back, suddenly wishing he hadn't shown his guilt the moment before. "This has nothing to do with-"
"It has everything to do with being brothers. As my brother, you should be there for me," Thor sighed. "Do you know nothing of family?"

Before he could stop himself, Loki lashed out, hitting Thor rather suddenly and quickly in the chest, driving the air out of the taller, muscular god momentarily and moving him back a foot or two until his back hit the grey stone wall. For a moment, there was nothing but silence as Loki stood there, panting heavily, eyes wild and angry – and distant – as though he were seeing something. Thor's gut tightened – and for the first time ever, the impetuous god regretted his actions.

"Loki," Thor said softly, finding his voice again and then stepping forward to clasp Loki's shoulder. Shock was settling now on the younger god's face as Loki realized what he had done and Thor worried that he would jerk away. Yet Loki stayed, jaw tense and eyes downcast. Thor found himself unsure of what to say next. This Loki, he thought, I can never understand. I do not like this Loki. If only Mother were here...

Uncertain of what to say next, Thor considered what kind of words would bring his brother around.

"Loki," he said, "I am sure you have your reasons, but they have no sense to them. You should have faith in your brother – and yourself. We can gain the treasure easily enough and-

Loki only stiffened further, drawing back and shaking his head.

"No, Thor," he whispered. "I will not go with you. Not this time." The green-eyed warrior-mage glanced at Thor then. "But... but next time," here, Loki smiled painfully, "I will go. I promise."
"Very well," Thor's voice hardened. "We will go alone."
"Thor, look I-"
"No, Loki."

Fighting to keep further rough words down and less honourable actions from spilling forth, Thor found his way back to the main hall. Turning slightly, he caught a glimpse of Loki's still figure standing there in the half-light of the small corridor, face half cast into shadow. Then, he swivelled
on his heels with finality and continued onward, feeling as though the chasm between them was wider than ever. What could I say? Sighing, he contemplated Loki's words. As usual, he disagrees and never gives us a chance to prove ourselves. Always he thinks he will fail, he thinks we will fail – why can he not have hope? Why can he not have faith? In us? In himself? Thor bit his lip, shook his head and banished the frightened, anxious look on Loki's face from his mind.

"We are going," he said to the others tersely.
"And Loki?" asked Fandral looking about curiously for the dark-haired Prince. "Where is the rascal?"
"He is staying," Hogun said with quiet disapproval.
"Rather wield a pen than a sword, as usual, hm," grumbled Volstagg. "That is our Silvertongue for you..."
"It matters not," Thor shrugged. "We go tonight."

And so, they left. In silence, the dark-haired, slender, second son of Odin took position on the castle walls, ignoring the guards mutterings as he looked out. Loki, watching from the northern ramparts of Lord Frey's castle, trained his far-sighted eyes upon the five warriors until they and their mounts were nothing but blurs in the fast falling twilight. Without a word, he spun on his heel and, coat swirling on the night breeze, disappeared inside the castle. In twenty minutes, Loki found his uncle holding state with his wife in their private parlour.

"So he went," Frey said heavily. "Heimdall retrieved them?"
"Yes, and guessing what has happened based on past experience, they should be camping down for the night in Niflheim."
"If they stray too close to the borders of Helheim, they may end up distracted by the Undead Hoarde," Queen Sylmae shuddered. "Unsavoury but a sight lot better than Nidhoggr himself."
"Thor has no interest in seeking combat with Helheim's Army. He had already attempted that before he had met me," Loki rubbed his eyes, pacing back and forth by the open window which carried a soothingly cool breeze. "No, he will go straight to the mythic sight of Nidhoggr's lair – the Hall of Dwinbbelherest."

A heavy silence ensued at the dread name – the Hall of Dwinbbelherest, the site of an ancient battle between the power-hungry race of Ancient Dwarves and the Grand Sire Nidhoggr himself. The site of a massacre wherein, the Saga-Vefr said, the bodies of the dead piled as high as mountains and the cold rivers ran with blood, freezing vivid red for a thousand winters afterwards. The Hall of Dwinbbelherest, a place so beautiful, tales said, men would go mad at the sight and remaining there, would find death amongst the treasures they sought. The Hall of Dwinbbeleherest, in many circles was also called the Hall of the Dead and its proximity to Helheim a dark portent of what must be.

"I must go after them – or before them," Loki sighed. " Alone, might will not save them – and I would be able to pull them temporarily away if their need becomes dire."
"He will not be happy with you," Queen Sylmae sighed, "but it is what must be... and it shows to me what a true brother you are."
"True brothers do not spoil each others fun-"
"True brothers do what they must, even if it must hurt the ones they love – and themselves in the process," King Frey smiled, rising to approach Loki. "But Nidhoggr is a treacherous beast and even if you were able to pull them away, who is to say he will not follow-"
"If he lives, if he exists," Loki said, fingers fiddling nervously as he ran various scenarios through his head, all of them not ending well for him.
"Tales of the Ancient Elves and Ancient Dwarves do not lie, Loki. This you know. Deep down, you know... This is not something you can face either."
"You must send word to Asgard – to – to Father, to the All-Father," Loki said, raising his head and meeting his uncle's eyes firmly. "Have him prepare three companies at the ready on the Bifrost – so
that we will have some to aid us should the need be great. Let Heimdall watch and be on guard for such an eventuality. Can you – can you do this... Uncle?"
"Of course," Frey smiled, glancing at his wife with ill-concealed worry. "This very evening, I shall send word. I would not let my nephews disappear into the wild beyond without telling their father."
"Thank you," Loki smiled then quickly and sharply.
"Forget your father," Sylmae rose then, "think of what your mother would say."

Both Frey and Loki shuddered, caught each other's sharp flinching motion and then chuckled at the realization that both feared the ferocious mother who was Frigga.

"Yes, Mother will not... will not be pleased," sighed Loki, "but I must go." He looked at them seeking understanding. "He is my... my brother."

With that, he left. In their turn, Frey and Sylmae watched the young Prince set out – this time on foot – and then wink out of existence as he delved into the intricate, dangerous, yet speedy Ways through the Void.

"They are so close," Sylmae sighed, shaking her head ruefully. "Even adopted, their bonds bind them together so tightly... I can only hope our boys learn such a lesson."
"This is no lesson to be learned, Sylmae, beloved," Frey gathered his wife to his side and pensively looked toward the north. "This is Fate's working."
"The Norns wish to send them to their death?"
"Death does not always come to those who deserve it," Frey turned away with her still drawn close and they made their slow way around the top of the walls, surveying the large city which spread out to the south, west and east sides of their fortress. "And oft times shows mercy to the undeserving... No, I fear other things. For if Nidhoggr sleeps as he often does, or if he is indeed dead, then there is none to secure his treasures – those things which are better left undiscovered..."

The Queen shivered and they said no more on the matter. They could only hope.

[...Niflheim is a mysterious Realm...]

[...hanging as it does, some say, by the roots of Yggdrasil itself...]

Niflheim, the sister Realm of Muspelheim, is its opposite in every way. Where Muspelheim is hot, Niflheim freezes. Where Muspelheim is a glorious world of red and yellow and oranges, Niflheim is a shadowy world of black and grey and blue. So juxtaposed, they revolve around each other and feed the other Realms above, as they always have since the Dawn of Time.

And how different they are! Muspelheim is a living place, filled with strange creatures who thrive amongst the fiery fields of lava and slow-moving magma which pushed up through its pitted surface. Here, the Fire Giants grow, strong and proud, creating a prosperous kingdom for themselves. Niflheim, however, is mainly empty. The nomadic tribes of the Dragonfolk pass to and fro over the empty lands, traversing the Spaces Between Muspelheim and Niflheim as need drives them. Alongside, they cart the smaller more easily domesticated dragon-kind and other scavengings from a variety of Dragon breeds which they peddle to those who desire such rare items. There also dwell the Dark Dwarves, who do not interact well with the rest of the Realm including their own kin on Svartalfheim. Not much is made of that people, the bitter folk who remained in the shadow of their greatness. Other than those who rarely see the light of day, there is little life to be found in the dense thick brush, dead tree groves and barren mountainsides of Niflheim. It is a wasteland, the ruins of an ancient race of Dwarves – and the perfect place for a Dragon's treasure hall.

And within the famed Hall of Dwinbbeleherest, the Hall of Death, they say, there are laid many dark things best left alone, forgotten by time. All, all these fall into myth and their names are forgotten...
Yet some, yet some who read long and read deep and who heed the call of the Norns are drawn to
hidden knowledge and they know – they know the truth of what lies in Niflheim within the Hall of
Dwinbbeleherest. They unknowingly become its keepers, those who stumbled on the truth unwarily
and so must bear the burden which Time itself forgot.

[...long ago, before Time was measured by any being...]
[...this ancient Realm spawned life out of primordial darkness...]
[...combined with the fires of Muspelheim and the magic of Asgard...]
[...so they say – and so it remains...]
[...an empty, dead place – cold and remote...]

Loki knew – he knew without a shadow of a doubt. The mantra remained stuck in his mind like a
minstrel's everlasting round.

Thor must not enter the Hall.

Following his own paths, seeking a chance to arrive at the Grand Sire's lair before Thor arrived.
Quieter than the larger warrior and less prone to hot-headed battle, Loki was the perfect scout and
could walk as quietly as any mouse and as invisibly as the wind. He could enter the Hall of
Dwinbbeleherest and ensure the truth of the matter for himself.

For... Thor must not enter the Hall, must not take or seize the greatest treasure...

This was Niflheim, this was the Hall of Dwinbbeleherest, the Hall of Death and Nidhoggr dwelt
therein – and guarded the treasure, as was his duty.

[...an empty, dead place...]
[...but let us not forget...]
[...the heart of creation at the Dawn of Time...]
[...the heart of many things remains there...]
[...let them stay...]

"Some days, I cannot understand him," Thor sighed as he and his companions continued their
journey through the southern wastelands of Niflheim, far from the northern border which fronted on
the cursed Realm of Helheim.
"Who? Loki?" asked Fandral.
"Yes, he would not come – for the danger of it. Yet, how many times have we caught him up to
some mischief? You know what they say of him - Loki is the Trickster and Maker of all Mischief...
and yet... given this chance, he declined! It makes no sense!"
"Well, Loki never did well on the battlefield-"
"That is not true," Thor shook his head, disagreeing with Volstagg's mumbled remark, "and you
know it. He may not share the strength of our people naturally, but he has his own abilities... and...
Loki does well with what nature offered him. I think... I mean, sometimes, I wish he would try
harder – but... this was different..."
"You are having second thoughts?" Hogun said softly, trying to ignore the wind which blew
cuttingly into their faces as they rode toward the blackened sides of the too silent mountains ahead.
"No," Thor said quickly, giving Fandral and Sif a hard look, daring them to say anything. Sif shut her mouth with a snap. "I just wonder why he must overthink these things."
"Loki always loved plans," Sif shrugged. "It is his way. His way to control things, to compensate for his lack of natural strength. As you said," she added hastily in case Thor decided to suddenly take umbrage.

Thor sighed and shook his head.

"It is not as if we wish to slay the beast – if the tales are aright concerning the sleep of the Grand Sires, it will be a simple matter of walking in and taking what is ours."
"What is it exactly that we seek?"
"A glorious box made by my Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandfather Vírs – all covered with red blood-stones and gold filigree."
"I hope there are not too many red-and-gold boxes in that place," mumbled Fandral. "If the legends are true, we could be there forever..."
"It is on a pillar and is especially guarded by Nidhoggr. According to this picture." Here, Thor wrestled out a page depicting a grand dragon within a large stately hall thousands of spans high, "it is by Nidhoggr's head."
"It would be," sighed Sif.
"A box the span of two hands on a pillar by a dragon's head," Hogun said dead-pan voice drawing his horse closer so he could get a good look at the page. "Thor – this is not torn from some book in the library, is it?"
"And if it is?" Thor blustered, turning red. "It is practically my book!"
"Thor," Sif glared at the Prince, "that is – that is not going to go over well with Loki or your mother."
"Nothing goes over well with Loki these days," Thor said darkly. He continued on, stuffing the paper back unceremoniously inside his leather jerkin. "At any rate, this will be a simple matter and if there are any young dragons about, those will be easily disposed of."
"Hmmm... sounds like a plan," Fandral stroked his newest attempt at a moustache. "What part did Loki not like?"
"All of it."
"'Discretion before valour', I suppose," Hogun mused aloud.
"That is exactly what he said!"
"Sounds sensible to me," Sif shivered and snapped the reins and drove her horse onward even more quickly. "Let us get this over and done with. This place... does not seem so welcoming..."
Upon arrival at the largest mountain, following another map which Hogun had brought along, the small company arrived at a broad paved road which stretched into the mountains – wide and smooth with the occasional pothole and cracked stone. *An ancient road*, Hogun said, *once marched upon by armies of the Third People, the Dwarven Folk who woke within these very mountains and therein built a grand civilization supposed to outshine the Elves and other Races altogether*. It was not to be, for the Grand Sires had the Norns on their side and a cunning not found in any other beast. The proud race was cast down – small play for the Fates who say naught but play their mysterious games within the halls of Life itself – and Nidhoggr now ruled the ancient halls of the Dwarves.

On either side, in various stages of damage and decay, pillars rose – some cracked, some broken, clustered in rows like stunted white trees and some, untouched, remained as pictures of a glorious age – even rows of detailed symmetrical decoration running up their sides and then spreading out to march in severe lines around the square capitals and bases.

Down the wide colonnade, the five riders trotted and as they drew closer into the mountain city – the windows and shafts and vents and hall doors now empty like vacant eyes and empty, hungry mouths –

...you should not be here...

And the silence. It ate at one, feeding off the growing nerves of the travellers, the interlopers, and the horses shied and whinnied nervously, the sound of their hoofs echoing weirdly around the empty caverns of the mountain halls. When two young dragons flew in, relief fell upon the warriors, for the heavy quiet was shattered with the ring of metal, the roar and bellow of Asgardian and dragon alike and the blast of fire. It took a good half hour to slay the two dragons – and when the heads rested on the backs of Hogun's and Thor's saddles, everyone was just a bit out of breath. Lunch was taken at Volstagg's insistence and another half hour was spent awkwardly, as the group attempted to eat as fast as they could and keep up some rambling chatter in order to combat the dead stillness of the Dwarven mountain city.

"Do you know the name of this place?" Fandral asked at one point. "I do not."
"And thus, he easily admits to his own ignorance," Sif rolled her eyes.
"And thus, you sound like Loki," Fandral retorted.
"Ooohhh... he got you there, Sif," Volstagg chuckled around a leg of mutton, eyes twinkling.
"It is true! Everyone should know the name of this place," Sif protested, trying to ignore the men's chuckles.
"I know it," Thor said equably. "Dwinbbeleherest is the city's name – so named after the first King of Dwarves of the Ancient Dwarven Folk – that is, Dwin. King Dwin. I do not know how beleherest came to be added to it."
"He was a grandiose Dwarf," Hogun said. "My tutor said he gave himself that name... to lengthen the title for his city."
"Nonsense," snorted Sif.
"Sounds like a Dwarf to me," Volstagg shrugged.
"Sounds like a man."
"Ooohhh... she got you there, Volstagg," Fandral chortled.

So, they continued to banter as they made their way down the rest of the wide road – but as they began to approach smashed statues and, dismounting, pick their way around large boulders and the remains of ancient carvings and pieces of fallen houses and columns, their words dried up. Finally, they reached what they presumed would have been gigantic doors – if the iron and wood had remained intact over the millenia. Tying their skittish mounts to a stake, easily embedded by Mjolnir into a broken column, the group left the horses behind and entered through the vast doorway which could easily have allowed thirty Fire Giants in side by side. Along its sides, marching upward, much
rusted iron hinges still hung askew – half torn away as they had been on the day Nidhogggr had taken the hall.

Within, they passed various vestibules, each easily the size of Frey's main hall in Vanaheim. Thor found himself hard pressed not to be impressed. How many words could be used to describe the vastness of this place, he thought. I can only think of 'big', 'huge', 'impressive' and 'vast'... I am sure Loki could make more of this place... he would find this fascinating... He should have been here, Thor thought with heavy heart. Still, he pressed onward without saying a single word.

Instead, the five kept up a swift pace, necks turning in awe at the amount of decor and detail which swooped upward to a ceiling so high they could not see it in the late afternoon dimness. As with Asgard, gold and silver seemed to line everything in sight. Mounds of metal, gold, silver and bejeweled cups and necklaces and goblets and plates and armour pieces and shields and swords and trimmings and other nameless ancient things lay piled everywhere – intermingled with ancient skeletons both old and new.

Relatively new, Thor noted absently, nudging aside a desiccated corpse with his foot before continuing on. Those dragons are most likely not the only ones here... Nodding at his friends, Thor gave them the signal for 'look out' and continued onward. Now the mounds were beginning to converge into one large mountain of gold and silver and gems. Years later, Thor averred he saw an entire wall made of gold ingots stacked up – and the air literally felt thick with gold dust.

Then they saw him. It. Him. The dragon. Nidhogggr, if the tales were true. It was hard to say – since the creature was, happily, asleep upon its pile. And as the book had shown, there were several pillars by its head each holding various strange artifacts. At his second signal, the warriors spread out by the main door and Thor ventured onward alone, approaching the head of the ancient creature.

It was as he had imagined it – and yet not. There was no obvious warmth emanating from the beast. If its diamond and stone-studded flanks did not move up and down slightly and if there was no rumble emanating from its slightly gaping jaws, Thor would not have guessed it to be alive. The skin along its back appeared to have the quality of stone or iron plating – as though the dragon, the Grand Sire Nidhogggr, had been less organic and more of a mechanical thing itself. Himself. This is confusing, Thor thought, edging about the columns and peering at the various things stored there. If Nidhogggr is a 'he', how is it that he sires so many dragons – or do mates come to seek his favour? Thor wondered what dragon mating looked like – for all of five seconds before abandoning the notion as somewhere between undesirable and dull. That is more of Loki's domain, he shook his head, picking up three flashing diamonds the size of his hands and pocketing them in his satchel. And... and perhaps... perhaps when one spends so much time in a place like this, one begins to taken on the characteristics of what one treasures...

Speaking of treasures, Thor frowned, where is Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandfather Virs's box? It should be here... He paused and glared down at one empty column which held nothing on it's broken, jagged top. Well... this necklace would look lovely on Mother. With that, Thor picked up the necklace, turned to stow it away in his satchel and accidentally knocked a goblet off another column behind him.

Several things happened at once.

Nidhogggr woke up. Thor bellowed – rather wildly – and scrambled across the room, running after the others who had darted out the room at the flickering of Nidhogggr's eyelids. Nidhogggr roared – growling something in ancient Dragon-tongue, which Thor could barely understand, except for one word, which he knew was not for polite company.

They were racing out the doors – and beyond the wide doors, they could see the horses rearing and
whinnying, eyes white and rolling with panic. Jerking the reins away roughly, Thor mounted his horse swiftly and smoothly, forcing his stallion ahead when it threatened to revolt and began to race down the road, followed hard by the others. As they galloped down the road, Nidhogg’s furious roar could be heard and the ground shook as he lumbered after them, squeezing out the main door.

"He will catch up with us in no time, Thor!" Sif yelled at the laughing, blond prince. "We must turn and fight."
"Ignore Sif!" Fandral bellowed, all sense of propriety and decorum now thrown out the window as he panicked with his horse. "She is speaking no sense."
"We will be fine!" laughed Thor.
"Are you insane?" Volstagg glared at the Prince as well.

Thor only laughed again and pointed ahead.

"He came! He came!"

The other four stared ahead and gaped as a familiar black figure came into focus down at the far end of the long road. Loki. On foot, looking alarmed and annoyed and furious and mischievous, as was his wont when Thor and he were on some particularly dangerous venture together. Suddenly, he blinked out of sight and reappeared closer. His left arm cut up and then downward sharply in a familiar signal.

"When we reach him, we are to stop."
"WHAT?" hollered Sif, Volstagg and Fandral all together. Even Hogun did not look to pleased. "It will be fine!"
"Thor – are you sure that Loki can just – just fix this? This is Nidhogg we are speaking about – who is, I might add, taking to the skies and it is a matter of time–"
"He comes! Bring your horses to a halt at my signal..." Thor ignored Sif and Loki winked out of sight again and then reappeared even closer. "NOW!" And all four horses halted around Loki in a mass of confusion and skittishness. Then, the white-grey world of Niflheim blurred oddly.
"Calm yourselves and gather around," Loki said sharply, his face even paler than usual. "Rein your horses in and pull them closer. There is a barrier of invisibility about us – but you must keep close – or our presence will be revealed."
"Our scent-"
"You can do that with all of us?" Fandral said disbelievingly.
"With silence and less questions, yes." Loki etched invisible sigils on the horses and the backs of their hands, then stopped in the middle. "Join yourselves and the horses in a circle."

Without further word, Sif and Hogun arranged the others, while Fandral muttered and Volstagg harrumphed uneasily.

"I just hope that we all show up," Fandral mumbled to Thor over his horse's withers. "All of us show up with all of our parts intact."

Loki opened an eye and glared at Fandral before resuming his stance between Thor and Sif’s horse.

"Brace yourselves," he murmured and without warning the entire group was jerked away and found itself breathless, dizzy and slightly nauseous above the familiar circular symbol which denoted the mark of the Bifrost. No sooner did they set foot on the ground then a blinding pillar of light hit them, jerking them upwards and home to safety. Looking down as they tore away to the stars, they could see the large sinuous body of Nidhogg making his way toward them.
Thor thought he had never seen anything more terrifying – and beautiful. However, there was no time to savour the moment as the group soared back to Asgard. No sooner had they landed breathless and panting in the Observatory than Loki disappeared again, leaving behind a stunned group of Warriors and an unusually monosyllabic Heimdall.

"Loki?" Thor asked bewildered.

Yet, there was no sign anywhere of his brother. Like a ghost, he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

And Loki saves the day... This being a long(er) chapter, hopefully you'll forgive me if there is a bit of a wait for the next update. 6-8 days. Um, hopefully I'll get 5 chapters written in the next 2 weeks so that November will be more or less covered while I am busy with Nanowrimo. Let's hope!
Reviews are my writing-carbs~! Thanks in advance for reading!
Talk to you all later!
-KI

OK. A couple things, I just wanna talk about what I'm attempting here - and you let me know if you got that feeling too. If you didn't please be honest and tell me b/c I really wanna be clear and I'll go back and redo things if I have to.

1st: I want to show that Thor means well and isn't just a dumb-ass jock. He does know things - he just tends to underestimate stuff and he is proud and thinks he's immortal (which he isn't) (typical teenage/young adult beliefs) and as a result takes unhealthy risks.

2nd: I want to show that Loki and Thor find it difficult to apologize to each other - and both are capable of hurting each other.

3rd: I want to show that Loki is moving closer to the Thor!Loki we know (and love) - and that means he's bottling up stuff until he explodes. He has his own agenda. He feels the incredible pressure to "be in his place" and be what Asgard wants him to be... but at the same time, he wants to be free to be himself and pursue his own interests.

4th: "True brothers do what they must, even if it must hurt the ones they love – and themselves in the process". Frey's words solidify stuff...

5th: Despite all this, Thor and Loki have a strong bond and believe in each other and care for each other.

Other Author's Notes:

On Loki's Names (in response to a question about when Loki will be named God of Mischief): In my story, as many of you know, Norse Myth is really side-lined. Um. I really try to break away (as MCU-verse does) from Norse Myth. I don't see Loki as a god but as a space alien. His magic is just another form of science (as Jane and Thor put it)... and as a result, Loki just happens to be chronically mischievous and is known for it... but he won't have any particular abilities for lying or mischief above normal. I hope that makes sense... So he may not get the title per se, or if he does, it won't have the
weight that Lokeans or Norse Myth-loving fanfic writers give it. If it's any consolation, I don't think in my story anyone will refer to Thor as the God of Thunder except the humans (or aliens) who have stories about him/Mjolnir. In Thor (the movie), none of the Asgardians refer to actually refer to each other as gods because they know they aren't gods. In fact, I think it is Fandral who says 'this is not like when we go to Midgard where you show your thunder and people pronounce you a god, this is Jotunheim'. So, in my story, if anyone is going to get titles it'll only be within in the context of humans... (aka Selvig going "Oh! Loki! The God of Mischief!") and as such, I don't think it has much weight. If you want to hear more on this topic, head over to my kakashidiot tumblr and I'll put up some discussion points there. XD

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effr
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
Ginnung – the Void
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Run'a'vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
 gargani – snake
 fintalenir – trickster
 vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
 caitahto – liar
 curunar – fiery one
 Lachruth – Flame Fury
 Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
 Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
 Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
HAHAHAHA! YES! A VAULT SCENE! Not THE vault scene, but a vault scene... We're entering familiar territory for a bit. Ehehehe.

So, I've achieved emotional equilibrium thanks to spoiling myself re Thor 2's ending. My sanity has returned and I'm all fired up to watch the newest pixelated version of Thor 2. Bring it on! Or maybe I should just fly to Singapore or Hong Kong for the weekend... Hmmm... Seriously. I can't afford the money, but Loki... and I want to put money into the franchise and support Hiddles.

Anyways, onto thanking people who review and who rant about Hiddles and Loki and other stuff. You guys are awesome!

Thanks to: lemomina, iBlameGlobalWarming, Kai_Maciel, miravisu, nevar_walc, Dragonanzar, Anths-Girl, Danea! You guys rock!

AND THOR 2 ISN'T BEING RELEASED IN MY COUNTRY SO BE SURE TO LEAVE A RANT AFTER YOU WATCH IT - COMPLETE WITH YOUR REACTIONS (since I spoiled myself) BECAUSE I WANT TO HEAR IF IT WAS AWESOME... OR NOT...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 47
Hidden Worth, Uncertain Destinies

The Royal Palace of Asgard, embellished with gold and marbling and intricate carvings, is a grand place ever blessed with sunlight and the clean breezes which sweep up off the Asgarthaharr or down from the perpetually snow-tipped Sky-Thurs. A regular visitor to the King's Court or the other various government offices is usually overwhelmed by the grandiose nature of the great building and its massive halls and endless passages and corridors and hallways, never seeing the plain stone walls of the servants' quarters, the prisons and dungeons – or the other mysterious rooms which are only available for the Royal Family and the responsible few of the King's Court.

The Weapons Vault of Asgard, built by one of Odin All-Father's forebears, was a plain bronzed room with light traceries along the walls of ancient runes and the lines of the stars' courses. A long, rectangular quiet place, it glowed with dim light. One end ran up to a steeper set of stairs which rose to meet a pair of taller, yet less wide, doors which opened to one of the many halls running within the further reaches of Gladsheim. On the other end of the quiet room, a grill, allowing a patterned flood of light into the room, rose before, as rumours said, an indestructible metallic creature who guarded the weapons of the All-Father with a sleepless eye.

Earlier during his years at the Mage's Academy, Loki, upon hearing Thor boast of its power, had researched the "Destroyer" as it was called, out of curiosity, and found very little on the subject other
than the fact that it was composed of metal, blasted fire, obeyed the will of the King of Asgard and only activated at the removal of an object. There was nothing written about what the effect of placing an object within the Vault would be.

Upon entering the dimly lit room, there was no sign of Destroyer and Loki couldn't help but wonder what really activated it. Will my unauthorized entrance waken it? He suppressed a shiver. Or would stealing an artifact? Not that I intend to bear away any of these treasures... In such a quiet room, Loki felt as though his light footsteps sounded like the All-Father's Sleipnir's thundering hoofs. Behind him, the soldiers walked up the stairs and slipped out the great doors, standing on either side of the entrance.

Ignoring them and setting his shoulders stiffly as though Odin had allowed him to enter the dim room, Loki passed the guards and made his way down the stairs easily, striding past the various relics Odin had placed within the room. Relics – stolen relics from other Realms, Loki thought, but so much more than that. He counted off the powerful artifacts as he passed them. The Eternal Flame, the Warlock's Eye, the Orb of Agamotto, the Tablet of Life and the Infinity Gauntlet... The Infinity Gauntlet and further down... on a special podium of its own placed before the grill and the Destroyer, a blue box with metallic edging and mysterious swirls within. If rumours were correct, if Elska and Opna and the other Jotunn were correct, sat the famed Casket of Ancient Winters. The heart of Jotunheim stolen away.

...little one...

...at last, we meet...

...as we should have...

...so long ago...

Flinching at the whispers that suddenly seemed to flood the chamber, Loki turned away and then shifted a little as he twisted his hands, summoning from his magickal storage spot a red and gold box. The box which had been made by Thor's Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandfather, Virs, as a present for his wife. From generation to generation it had been passed down, until sometime during the Long War with Jotunheim –

...at last, little one...

...we meet...

...and Jotunheim's skies will be filled again...

...a Time of Renewal awaits...

...for all...

- sometime during the Long War with Jotunheim, Loki steered his thoughts and awareness away from the far end of the room and focused on the seemingly innocuous box within his hands. Sometime during the Long War, it disappeared... and it appears as though it had been with Nidhogg all this time – and within it, a treasure of great price, a terrible weapon and best kept out of Thor's unwary hands.

A gem, Loki opened the box and looked at the small glittering thing, but no ordinary gem. Born with highly concentrated properties from the magical flow of the Tree itself, of Yggdrasil, it had once been set in the most powerful gauntlet of all Time. Wielded by the Titans and then Thanos the
Terrible himself, the Infinity Gauntlet was captured and dismantled by Odin All-Father, or so the Saga-Vefr said, and the Gems were hidden by him for all Time, far from the grasp of the Death-Worshipper.

Closing the lid with a hard snap, Loki looked about, pursing his lips in thought as he considered where he could store it. Where could it- Loki froze as he realized that he was no longer alone. Odin now stood a few paces away, face blank, hands clasped behind his back.

"This is an auspicious day," Odin said softly.

Loki unstuck, coughed and suppressed a ridiculous urge to hide the box behind his back.

"My first son brings me rare treasures from a dragon's hoard and an absurd story of where he has been to attain such rarities. And my other – my other son," Odin added thoughtfully, "skulks with a worthy find of his own – not in front of crowds of admirers, but within my supposedly secure weapons vault. I hardly know what to make of it, but I would know the truth of the matter from you, Loki, wordsmith that you are."

"It is not..." Loki glared at the box in his hand. "It is not a tale worth telling," he finally admitted. "The tale is a poor one and speaks of nothing but foolhardiness and a distinct lack of discretion."

"So the two of you led your friends into a dragon's lair?"

"Not just any dragon's lair," Loki gestured at the box now cradled in his left arm. "The Hall of Dwimbelhearest. The Hearth of Nidhoggr himself."

"Thor's idea," Odin guessed shrewdly.

"Indeed. I said I would not go. I did not go. At first."

"But you followed."

"I went ahead and took what Thor desired most."

"Because you could," Odin surmised, blue eyes showing the faintest twinkle.

"Perhaps," Loki admitted slowly. "Not only for that reason, but also because I knew – I had heard the rumours as a young – as a young man – and I had read of it in some book at the Archives when I was researching crystal-based energies. They said, the books... they spoke of the presence of King Virs's jewel box and the rumoured Mind Gem laid there by yourself."

"And you did not think to leave it there where I had put it?" Odin asked quietly.

"I considered – but Thor is nothing if not determined and would not listen to reason, and so I went ahead after ensuring that Asgard would be warned of Thor's intentions. I arrived, took the box and left as quickly and quietly as I came... then I waited for Thor to appear and then... and then I... I aided him to return safely home."

"That was all you took?"

Loki hesitated remembering the small nest of Dragon's eggs he had found as well further down the room. He had taken the three eggs in hand, after magically stowing away the box, and had gone in search of a Dragonfolk tribe. Thor would show no mercy to unhatched Dragon eggs, or even worse, attempt to smuggle them into Asgard. Loki had done his best to limit Thor's chances for misadventure.

"There were some Dragon's eggs which I took to a Dragonfolk tribe – a band of Elves – and gave them three yet unhatched... for care or proper disposal, as they saw fit."

Green eyes met blue defiantly.

"That was all I took," Loki ended a little lamely. Awkwardly, he shifted the box over to both hands and offered it to Odin. "I hoped to hide these in some safe place."

"This place is far from safe," Odin said a hint of a smile playing about his lips, at the sight of which Loki found himself able to relax a little. "It is best not to lay the Gems too close to their original
"Owner... nor place them in such proximity that the Gauntlet may gain power so easily after being found by those who seek Death."
"Then what shall you do with it?"
"We shall," here, Odin sighed, "we shall do as I had done before – lay it in a place no man nor being nor creature would think to look. Even better, in the care of one who Time has forgotten."
"Such as a Dragon."
"Yes, they are powerful Guardians and keep true to their posts and duties as Time-Keepers," Odin strode forward to look down at the now gem-less Infinity Gauntlet. "Highly intelligent, incredibly cultured – retaining sentience and self-awareness in more ways than their descendants could – the Grand Sires and their children are perfect candidates for such matters."
"So, you went to Nidhoggr."
"Once upon a time, war was so common, the battlefields never emptied and strife was rampant throughout the Realms, it seemed a natural state as breathing. In such conditions, a young lad grew, hating Asgard’s enemies and willing to lay down his life for his future people... and so in the flower of his youth, he met the Mad Titan, the One Who Courted Death – Thanos. After long hard battle, in which many souls were lost and warriors left for the Halls of Valhalla in throngs, the young man prevailed, the Mad Titan cast down and the Gauntlet taken and dismantled for the good of the Cosmos. Hiding the gems was a difficult task, but it was done. It had to be done, for the war with Jotunheim still struggled onward and any sign of weakness was an opportunity for the Enemy."

Loki stared at the metallic, shining, now still and silent Gauntlet which sat innocently on its podium as if it had never been worn by the unspeakable, as if it had never brought death to thousands of lives.

...and thousands of lives...

...depend upon you, beloved...

...upon you, little one...

...upon us, Other-Soul...

"Thus, the gems were hidden and Nidhoggr gladly took the task in hand," Odin continued on. "It took a few days of pleading, but he too hated and feared Thanos - as all living things must - and in the end, accepted the burden – as do all of us who know the truth of the matter, which now includes yourself."
"You spoke to him? To Nidhoggr?"
"Well, yes," Odin smiled then, again. "It is no small matter, but no great one either. Nidhoggr is a gracious host – if you approach him with the right amount of gifts and with honesty and with no intention of taking from his hoard. He is no mindless beast as other dragons are – or as the sometimes foul, sometimes majestic creatures who roamed Midgard and other planets. No, no, Loki, Nidhoggr was born at the Dawn of Time and will be here long after we are gone."
"Then we must return this to him," Loki bit his lip, wincing. "I should not have taken it."
"You had to – and now you must bow to Fate again and find a new way of disposing of the Mind Gem."
"Perhaps another Grand Sire would accept the task..."
"Hm. Yes. A good thought – and," here, Odin glanced further down the way toward the Casket of Ancient Winters, "- and it brings to mind another one who would take heed of our words."

...Other-Soul...

...the one who called to me...
Loki tore his eyes away from the mesmerizing swirl of deep and light blues which moved gently within the Jotunn artifact. The handles on either end, he supposed, would fit his hands easily – and the sides of the casket were etched with the swirls of Jotun art from long ago. A beautiful thing... so beautiful... to hold it... what would it feel like - but as if he were coming home... it was calling... so beautiful...

...as you are...

...as am I...

...I have been waiting...

...for so long...

...come, beloved...

...come...

"There is another," Odin's voice broke Loki's thoughts, causing him to twitch and nearly drop the Casket. "Another on Jotunheim, within the depths of the Lake Vithrvatn in the northern parts of Jotunheim, in the Utanheim, the Outer Realm, as it is called. Iormungand of Jotunheim still lives, they say, beneath Vithrvatn's icy shield and rules the Underseas of Jotunheim. He is a gentle spirit and would no doubt take care of such an artifact with ease – for no one travels in the Outer Realm of Jotunheim."

"Hm," Loki nodded, noncommittally, unwilling to speak of such things any further, but knowing he had no choice thanks to the problem at hand. "Jotunheim. That is... a dangerous realm for any Asgardian to visit."

"You are not just any Asgardian, Loki. My son, you, like no other, are best equipped for this quest – for you have the gift to walk without being seen, I have heard, and can scout an area with discretion and speed. Of course, you must hide your presence, for we must not break the Treaty or the peace which is tenuous at best between us."

"I have no wish to start another war," Loki shuddered.

"No one has that wish," agreed Odin. "Only those who court Death or lack sense... of which there are sadly many in these Realms... yet, this task falls to you – this is your burden, for you have taken a role in the Fate of the universe by attempting to rescue such artifacts."

"But I – I can hardly--"

"You can do this, Loki. I knew you had the ability since the first day I met you -"

...you are the Other-Soul...

...Destiny may yet bow its head to you...

"-the ability, the destiny, the power to – to change the Fates of many... and in so doing, bring forth a new kind of peace."

"By hiding the Gem and becoming another Guardian against the Titans and such dark things – by protecting Thor and aiding him in his duties?"

"Those are but a few of the many things you can achieve, Loki," Odin replied gravely. "Your ability to merge your magick with other Realms, the ability to not only shift your shape but the shape of your magick – that is a rare thing and speaks of a fundamental rooting within the very force of
Yggdrasil itself. If you go to Jotunheim, you would be able to bend what little magick remains there to your will."

...we are the Heart...

...you are the Mind...

...together, Other-Soul...

...what might we accomplish...

This is too much, Loki stepped back, shaking his head slowly back and forth, uncertain of what to say – uncertain of what to think. The whisper of the Casket, the words of Odin, the tugging of his heart, the faith of Frigga, the belief of Thor – it was all too much to handle and for a moment, Loki's mind went blank as he attempted to corral his thoughts which whirled about.

...bring us back, little one...

...to the place where we must belong...

...truly be...

Loki shivered and then, recognizing his fears and remembering Frigga's words, stiffened his shoulders and nodded curtly. He would show them his loyalties and his worth, he would prove himself as a son of Odin.

"I do not fear Jotunheim," he finally said. "I will do this."

"Good," Odin nodded and then hesitated, eyes wandering the Vault. "It will be a difficult quest for you to achieve alone. Perhaps there is a way I may aid you..."

After Odin had so armed Loki, the two discussed in more detail what Loki would need to pack in order survive the trial set before him. Loki once again felt the pressures of expectation weight heavily upon him as Odin outlined Asgard's current policies concerning contact with the Frost Giants. Revealing his status in Asgard would no doubt be something close to a death sentence, or, Loki thought, even worse - to be made a hostage and bring shame to Asgard and create trouble for Odin All-Father... He sighed, eyeing the box in his hands. Absently, he twisted his hands and allowed it to disappear to his most secret place among his older and newest treasures.

Fifteen minutes later, Thor burst into the room, running down the stairs, blue eyes lighting up with relief and joy at the sight of his younger brother and his father standing together in the middle of the Vault, obviously deep in conference concerning some quest. Loki had often gone on small trips before, so Thor hung back for a short moment, impatiently pacing back and forth until Odin nodded at his oldest son in silent invitation.

"Did you speak with your Mother yet?" asked Odin.

"No..." Thor's natural jubilation died a little at Odin's unspoken warning and reminder. His parents were still not pleased, apparently, about Thor's short trip to Niflheim. Almost immediately, Thor's mind strayed back in time to that one quest he had disappeared on – regarding the Hordes of the Helheim. His mother had been livid. Glancing at Loki, Thor sensed that his younger brother was also wary about their reception. "Not yet," Thor shook his head, "but seeing as we are safe, surely there is no cause for worry. Loki took care of us – as always with his useful invisibility trick and we were able to transport ourselves to-"

"Transport ourselves?" Loki snorted, giving Thor an evil glance. "The five of you did nothing this time around. I was the one doing all the heavy lifting!"
"With magic and your workings!" Thor protested. "Which is... you know, cheating!"
"Cheating? Cheating?! It was cheating that saved our lives back there-"
"Boys!" Odin's voice silenced the two young men. "We will talk with your Mother later on – and no
doubt there will be some kind of a feast in which the Court will want to hear all about your
dangerous venture into Niflheim-"
"And the Hall of Dwimbeleherest," Loki said.
"Although you did not get inside," Thor said smugly.

Loki moved as if to say something and then, catching Odin's warning eye, winced, nodded and shut
his mouth.

"But you can describe Nidhogg or show his power in one of those illusions of yours," Thor said
cheerfully. "None can tell a story like you, Loki."
"Arrogant auzha..." mumbled Loki to himself.
"Ah, was Father showing you our treasures? These artifacts are rather dangerous," Thor gestured at
the Casket which stood on its podium. "Some we cannot even think of touching, so dangerous are
they to the mind as well as the body."
"Yes," Loki kept his distance from the simple stone post and its treasure. "I am aware."

Muted whispers still slunk about the edges of his mind, scrabbling for purchase and muttering
promises. **Empty promises**, he thought, **impossible dreams.**

"Ah – such as the Casket of Ancient Winters," Thor said quietly. "A relic of the Long War against
Jotunheim. Come, Father, you must tell it as you used to tell me when I was a boy... that speech you
would always say when we walked here together."
"Speech?" Loki asked uneasily, while Odin chuckled.
"I thought you hated it, Thor, and I wonder how much you paid attention. Yet, it bears retelling."
"Tell Loki!"
"What was it?" Loki blinked at the old king, curiosity now kindled in his green eyes.
"Hmmm..." Odin stared down at the Casket, blue eyes vague with memory. "Once, mankind
accepted a simple truth - that they were not alone in this universe. Some worlds, man believed to be
home to their gods; others, they knew to fear."

Thor was smiling now, but Loki's gut clenched as Odin's words began to sink in, bringing to mind
the world which had abandoned him, the Realm from which he had been ripped so violently, the
home he no longer cared about nor considered.

"From a realm of cold and darkness came the Frost Giants," Odin continued on gravely, "threatening to plunge the world into a new Ice Age, but humanity would not face this threat alone.
Our armies drove the Frost Giants back into the heart of their own world." Here, he sighed. "The
cost was great. In the end, their King fell and the source of their power was taken from them."

At this, the elderly King glanced at the two young men who stood at his side, both of them staring
down with trepidation and awe at the small, yet powerful weapon before them. **More than weapon...**
**The very heart of Jotunheim stolen from its home and taken captive at the great cost of lives and an
entire civilization, perhaps. A hard necessity, Loki thought. Then he shrugged, for the good of many
outweigh the needs of the few.**

...but now we stand together...

...what great things can we do...

...you can do...
Odin's rough, slow timbre continued on unhindered, drowning out the mutterings of the Casket.

"With the last great war ended, we withdrew from the other worlds and returned home to the Realm Eternal - Asgard. Here," the King smiled, "we remain as a beacon of hope, shining out across the stars and although we have fallen into man's myths and legends and its warriors that brought peace to the universe. But the day will come when one of you will have to defend that peace."

One? Loki thought, but aloud he said, "Against whom? Surely not the Frost Giants. Since the taking of their Casket, they have become crippled."
"Crippled they may be," Thor grunted, "but a threat they remain. When I'm King, should they give me cause, I will hunt the monsters down and slay them all." Here, he met Odin's hard gaze and grinned. "Just as you did, Father."
"A wise King never seeks out war, but..." Odin paused for a few beats before turning and moving away, "he must always be ready for it."
"You always say that," Thor complained.

Loki agreed privately but held his tongue.

"You always say that," Thor repeated with a sigh. "And I say I will always be ready for war. I am ready for anything."
"As am I," Loki agreed quickly. "Even more so, since I think ahead and have plans for any and every eventuality."
"Really," Thor said, nettled. "No one can be prepared for everything, right, Father?"
"That is true, Thor, but a King must be more ready than most, due to the burden of the responsibility he bears toward his people. This burden, the both of you may bear," Odin nodded slowly, leading them away from the artifacts and toward the stairs. "For... only one of you can ascend to the Throne, but both of you were born to be Kings."

Mulling over Odin's cryptic words, Loki wondered if Odin really believed that his second son, his adopted son would really be able to take the Throne of Asgard. Thor would. Thor always was going to take the throne, Loki thought. It is his by right – surely... and Odin would never let a no name, however adopted, take such an important responsibility. To care for Asgard as a King... to take on such a burden... is that really what I want? is that something he would want?

It was a daunting prospect, and although Odin made no mention of it again and turned the conversation toward Loki's upcoming birthday feast, for which Frigga was now beginning to prepare in earnest, Loki found it difficult to forget. For the rest of the evening and many weeks after, it haunted his thoughts as unrelentingly as the call of the Casket, drowning out the voices of the Deep.

Chapter End Notes

Ha! A lot of talking. But very plotty and trez important. We can see some juxtaposition with the Thor film now for sure! Hope it is believable! Yes, that's right folks. We've finally arrived to what I'd call the "Thor" arc. Ha! Finally! But don't expect it to be ALL the same... but don't expect it to be ALL different. XP

OK, guys. From now on, things might be a bit slower - thanks to NaNoWriMo. If any are interested, visit my profile to follow the links therein in order to check out my original fic. XD I've put up links to some original fics, which you can look at... I will also post my NaNoWriMo story on a regular basis on my "kakashidiot" Fictionpress
I hope I can update again on Mondays or Wednesdays... We'll see. XD
Reviews are carbs for my writing, for realz!
Let me know what you think - or just rant about the Thor 2 film!

SERIOUSLY! CHAT AND RANT!
-KI

Alien Glossary:
'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:
bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
Ginnung – the Void
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ommiii-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa'a'vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)
Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
Bruno Coulais's soundtrack for "Oceans" went into the making of this chapter and the following. Watch it! The most beautiful documentary EVAH! WATCH IT NAOW!

Saw bits and pieces of "After Earth", while writing this chapter... and the part where Jaden Smith's character realizes that he's on the edge of the waterfall and can't go any further, I yelled at the screen, (inappropriately, admittedly): "You can do this – you're almost like Pocahontas!" Then it turned out that he did jump. HAHA. Pocahontas!

Thanks to everyone who chatted with me~ Thanks to: soupcan (thank you~), ClaMiAl, Chiharu-angel, Immortal Sailor Cosmos, Winter Cicada, ThePsychoticQueen and acidburned!

Also, a wonderful fanart was made by the lovely "trippuchi" BELOW! CHECK IT OUT! IT'S SUPER CUTE PICS OF VAETKI!/LOKI! Be sure to leave a comment~ I think it's so wonderful! The little Vaetki carrying the book definitely made me squee to high heaven~

Also - a map of Loki's bedroom for reference is available below under the link that goes to my fanfiction tumblr.

Also also also ALSO ALSO ALSO DISNEY GOT THOR 2 INTO THE FINAL FOREIGN FILM SLOT SO I'LL BE ABLE TO SEE THOR 2 AFTER ALL THIS WEEK AND I KNOW I'M GONNA DIE FROM FEELS SO BE SURE TO RANT WITH ME PEOPLE! WE CAN SURVIVE THIS AND THE HIDDLES TUMBLR 'SPLOSION!

Had to split this one... sadness...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 48
Return to the Shadows I

The halls of Gladsheim, the halls of the King, the All-Father, are many and at any one time, the corridors and rooms therein are filled with a good few hundred visitors, such as nobles, subjects or Court officials. Most servants walk in from the lower half of the city, but a few, living in the household, have rooms much lower in the earth, built into the cool rock of the mountains' lower reaches. On the eastern side, the King and Queens personal quarters lie and further north are also the Prince's and other guest rooms.

[...and to the east and south...]

To the east and south in a much quieter corner of the Palace, Loki's chambers were tucked away.
Unlike the grandiose nature and hues of the greater parlours and halls and ballrooms and guest quarters, his quarters were decorated in earthy tones of brown, black and green. Larger areas lay open and airy, while Loki appeared to have piled up papers and books up in every possible corner he could find within his chamber. They were ordered, he averred, but to those who visited, it seemed like a jumble of notes and illegible scribblings and scrawls in various languages.

Entering through the double-doors, on either side one was immediately greeted with tall, very crammed black-wood bookshelves. Further in, doors opened to a comfortable bathroom complete with tub and scrubbing stall and to the north, there adjoined a neat, clean privy, small and square. Both rooms open to the larger area which swept round, a little curved with the side of the Palace, built as it was into the rock.

By the privy door on the north-east corner, bookshelves were crammed in, nearly toppling with their variegated coloured burden. Beside the bookshelves, stretched a broad hearth cut into the thick walls with a kettle upon which to heat water alongside a pewter cauldron best suited for potion-making. Before the flat, broad paving stones, there were several chairs to relax in – and on the side of each armchair was a pile of books reaching waist-height. Behind the chairs, taking up what could have been a broad expanse of rug, were small tables littered with notes, crumpled paper, writing implements, potion bottles, glass vials, pastes, crushed gems, runestones, wires and etchings.

The great, grey hearth took up most of the north side with a battered oak table on its right as littered as the mantelpiece with bones, feathers, other bottles filled with nameless ingredients. Further along, an equally cluttered table, with four chairs around it, was buried beneath more papers, books, quills and ink pots tottering on top. Wedged in between, a tray precariously stuck out over the edge while holding the remains of some uneaten lunch or breakfast – for Loki often wished to eat in privacy while jotting down notes or reading some treatise on magick. The table was situated close to the spacious windows and the light double-doors which opened onto the curving balcony outside which also held a small row of pots growing a variety of herbs.

It opened to a great vista of the edges of the city which fell away into the sharp mountains’ sides which fell steep into the sea. From his height, the greenery of the thick woods seemed distant – and below, if he stretched out far enough, Loki could see the small white-capped waves of Asgarthaharr. Looking across, there was nothing but mountains and plains fading into the distance and then a great sea meeting a brilliant sky specked with a billion stars. Wisps of gas and space dust wavered like streams of brightly coloured smoke, ephemeral and beautiful in its seeming fragility.

A wondrous sight to behold and something Loki thought he could never take for granted.

To the right of the balcony doors further along the room, moving clockwise, there were more bookshelves offering Loki's bed beyond some privacy. Loki's "bedroom" walls were naught more than bookshelves and a few wardrobes, which suited him just fine, as he was wont to protest when visitors came and exclaimed in surprise over the lack of grandeur.

What was most important, Loki often said, were his books and the comfort of his bed. Thanks to Frigga, no expense was spared on Loki's 'harhvila'. Like Thor, Loki's bed was a wide expanse, easily able to fit himself and a wench – or two. However, unlike Thor's deep red sheets, Loki's colours were a dusky forest green with pale sage trimming and black. The bed, what some Asgardians called a harhvila, was a style more familiar to Vanir and Elves, also known as a raudhaust. Standing higher from the ground than most beds, it allowed for greater storage beneath, where Loki stored his travelling gear, favoured weaponry, winter garments and other bulkier belongings.

Stepping onto the fotr'ro, Loki climbed up and threw himself down on the familiar soft sheets which
had been woven for him from the finest threads Frigga could find. Two days ago, Loki had survived (somehow) his birthday feast, had received half-hearted accolades (from some), well-wishes (from others), a spear from Odin – his father, Loki reminded himself – and a set of new, Dwarven-wrought throwing knives from Thor. Frigga had given one of her gifts in public – a lovingly woven outfit, hand-stitched with leather and metal and his usual green, black and gold. Yet another gift he would wear with pride.

Summoning one of Thor's knives to his palm, Loki turned the metal over and over in his fingers and thought of what now lay before him. So much to ponder – what was before and what was behind.

*Two millenia*, he thought. *Well, two thousand of Asgard's years. To my – to the Jotunn, I am still a youngster...* Running his hand experimentally through his hair for any signs of thinning or molting, Loki sighed. *I still show no signs of age... perhaps, I will never be an adult...*

He turned over, banishing the knife back to its magickal storage spot and forced the unwelcome thought away. *It does not matter since Jotunheim is – was – never my home. There is only Loki now... Loki... Loki.*

An odd name – an ancient one known by few – so old, one could almost say primeval, until it was lost and even the written word no longer held record of it.

Malekith's words still gave Loki pause – however, thanks to the fallout from Thor's quest in Niflheim, political intrigues in the Royal and Mage's Courts, his birthday celebrations and obvious lack of information on the matter, Loki's research had come to a halt. *There are other things to consider,* the dark-haired warrior mage frowned, *such as my upcoming trip to Jotunheim to hide the Mind Gem. The possibility of you shouldering the responsibility of such a matter has never crossed your mind – and yet here you are...*

*...this is your destiny...*

*...you who were meant for great things...*

"And this is your chance," Loki murmured to himself in the cool silence of his room. "This is your chance to prove your worth as an Asgardian warrior, as a son of Odin... as a son..."

As a son, doing his duty and protecting the land he has come to call home. *Home.* At that word, Loki forced away a memory of hard deep blue skies and fields of white and the whispers of an ancient relic. It still spoke to him.

*...you cannot forget us...*

*...we are your Other-Soul...*

*...come...*

It wanted to be used. *I can never use it – should never use it – only at great cost and at great risk...* Loki turned again and growled at his own useless dithering. He considered the Voice, the Void which had haunted his dreams.

*...battle IT with us...*

*...we are One...*
No. No. Nonono. This is madness. Loki forced himself upright and glared at the arched, wood-panelled ceiling of his room. I must go.

He had decided.

It was time to stop thinking. It was time to go.

 [...Destiny was calling...]

 [...on Jotunheim...]

He said farewell to Frigga the following day in the early morning after a large breakfast of apples and grapes, eggs and rashers, bread and honey. They sat together, sipping her favourite tea and discussing in a general way what he had planned. Frigga, as usual, knew what Odin had planned. Loki wondered if the All-Father, if his father had told her, or if she had seen something while spinning or weaving.

"You will remember to wear your warmest jacket," she said anxiously. At his raised eyebrow, silent and amused, Frigga blushed and glanced down at her teacup, the delicate china handle of which she was nervously fiddling with. "I know – I know..."

"It is..." Loki's green eyes slid sideways and then he glanced upward quickly, offering a shy, comforting smile. "It is... very difficult for me to get cold..."

"Well, I still worry. Getting a cold – or falling prey to some wild beasts in the wastelands of Jotunheim... no one would come to your aid because of the delicate situation..."

"I will take care."

"I know you will. You always try your best to come out of your adventures unscathed," Frigga sighed. "That does not always mean you are successful."

Loki blushed and ran his hands through his hair nervously.

"Yet, I am certain you will accomplish the mission you have accepted," his mother smiled, patting him on the hand.

"You saw something?" Loki asked sharply.

"No," laughed Frigga. "Call it a mother's intuition. A mother's belief and pride in her son's abilities and achievements. I heard about your quest on Svartalfheim..."

"Ah..."

"When do you leave?"

"Soon," Loki glanced at his mother's timepiece and nodded. "Now." He rose slowly, took her hand and kissed it carefully. "I will return – as quickly as I may..."

"Do not return so speedily," Frigga hastened to add, coming to her feet and clasping his arms, staying her younger son. "Loki... I know your curiosity knows no bounds. To explore such a place may... prove enlightening for... some of your research pertaining to Inter-Realm travel. I heard that Jotunn magicks are quite hardy... and considering your ability to, well, weave your workings with other magicks, it might aid you in building endurance."

"You will not worry?"

"Of course I will worry, my son," Frigga smiled, "but I know the desires of young men – to explore, to conquer... and to find pleasure in what they may find whether it is in battle or with some wench-"

"Ah..." Loki's cheeks tinged pink just a little. "That is – I – Mother..." He managed to say in a strangled fashion, eyes fastened to his feet. "I hardly think that Jotunheim has much to offer other than the usual research... and, and by that," he stumbled onward, "by that I mean, scholarly inquiry."

At the sound of Frigga's light laugh, Loki looked up again and then found a smile of his own. Drawing him into a close embrace, Frigga let her arms creep about his slight frame, glad to feel...
reassuring muscle under his well-fitted leathers and light armour. For a moment, he remained stiff in her arms before finally melting a little and allowing his hands to encircle her and pull her closer. Then, Frigga pulled back a bit, let her hand rise to brush back a stray lock of black hair.

"As far as you travel," she whispered, "no matter into what dark places you stray, no matter what terrible workings you weave..." A pause and then the blonde-haired Queen and mother added, "know that you are always welcome at my side."
"I know," Loki replied softly, as was tradition, words replacing the ones he still could not speak, "I will always come back."

[The skies are empty on Jotunheim...]
[... so wrong...]
[... there is life even here...]
[... and beyond...]

The Saga-Vefr tell of the day Odin's guard removed the Casket of Ancient Winters. It was a day of joy for Asgard, a day of ruin for Jotunheim. With their heart taken captive, the icy realm fell into silence and whatever creatures had struggled previously to survive found living so much more difficult. Sharper, longer winters and shorter, unfruitful "summers" limited the growth of Jotunheim's native creatures and plants, resulting in food shortages for the Jotunn and increased dependency upon outside neutral resources – Dwarf and Elf traders.

A long time ago, Elska had told Loki, the land of Jotunheim had flourished with cities spreading into the Utanheim. Now, the Outer Realm was empty save for the great beasts of whom few now remained, the smaller wildlife and scraggly fauna amidst vast fields of ice and crystal and snow. Jotunheim had fallen into a sleep – such a deep slumber as it would seem to be dead. Loki remembered how the cycles of hibernation would lengthen as the years had passed.

As he landed by the grey shores of the ever dark Vithrvatn, Loki shivered. The small grove of trees which had started to grow on the north-western edges of the large sea were now tall and strong with the years time had blessed them. Spindly and naked, clearly hibernating, the sparse ironwood forest did not herald any positive change within Jotunheim. Listening to the wind, Loki stood there.

There was nothing. Nothing. Nothingness. Silence. As heavy and empty as the Void.

Loki resisted the urge to call out. Call out what? Call out to what? He snorted to himself. There is no one to hear you... No one...

[... and the land of Jotunheim fell silent...]
[... can you hear it?]
[... it is even here... in the silence...]

The wind howled, but it was wordless – and after a few minutes, Loki stirred, shifted his form, his figure, until he was wearing nothing but his blue skin, his leather pants and boots and a rough wolf's cloak.

If I stay here long enough, he mused, I could make a new wolf's cloak... From grarulfr, of course, he amended, remembering his old... his old family. Will I see them again - the Great Thurblakulfr Pack? Great-Father... Great-Mother... and the others – youthful Groenn. Paunchy Feitr. Cautious
Pushing away the memories of running with the pack, riding on the rough furred back of Great-Mother, hacking at fish with a sharp flint knife and hiding in the Offaer Skogr woods, Loki made his way over the uneven ice through the creaking trees toward the vast sea that was Vithrvatn.

As always, it looked daunting – and Loki remembered the few time, when the cold suns had moved far enough away in the heavens to gift Jotunheim with a short summer, allowing the ice to thin enough for the youngling to break through and test out Vithrvatn's dark waters. A treacherous sea and full of unknown creatures, best left alone. Today, however, I must plumb its depths, winter cold or no, Loki sighed.

Weaving a working carefully over himself, Loki ensured that the cold which could stop a Jotunn in its tracks would not penetrate his skin, allowing him a measure of comfort and protection against the icy waters of Vithrvatn. Making his way across the sea, Loki was once again struck with how difficult it was to tell where the shoreline lay – the ice hid everything like a thick blue-grey-white blanket of smoky glass. Hard beneath his feet, small pebbles of ice stones, snow crystals and hardened snow crunched, magnified by a hundred in the unnerving quiet.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Loki walked inward further still, testing the ice with his summoned spear's sharper end, looking for any sign of weakness in the hard shell which covered the lake. There was none apparent. After walking an hour toward the centre of the sea, Loki stopped recognizing the impossibility of finding any natural breakage through which he could slip. With that admission, the warrior-mage, looking about to see if anyone was about to see his dark figure upon the ice (there was no one in sight), began a new working – first, his cloak of invisibility, which he extended to several spans about him in a rough circle, and then a magickal spell designed to create a small burst of flame and heat within a designated set of runes.

Summoning one of Thor's throwing knives, Loki scratched out radiating lines of runes and then another set encircling the centre, creating a rough depiction of a sun with energy bursting from its middle. The small pillar of heat and flame would be limited to the area covered by the runes and, he knew from hard-learned experience, would burn bright and long for a period of five minutes before ending rapidly. With the ability to burn through ice and even puncture soft soil, it was a useful kind of magick used by Dwarves for general mining blasts in large operations.

With a short gutteral utterance of the Dwarven tongue, Loki activated the working and shielded his eyes. Minutes later, vision still a little spotty from the force of the glare, Loki dropped his shielding and surveyed the result. Judging by the dark shadow moving below, the blast had cut evenly and in a circular fashion straight down to the still-moving waters of Vithrvatn.

Success. Now... Loki reinforced his initial working, stored away his spear, knife and other important items which he had bound about his waist, removed his glamour wolf's skin cloak and dived in. Hitting the water, even though prepared and protected, still was a shock to the warrior-mage. So cold, he thought, cold and thick and murky... Shifting his form to that of a serpentine eel, Loki made his way through the waters slowly, extending his magickal senses outward in hopes of finding something similar reaching back.

Jotunheim is empty, he winced as he made his way around some black coloured sea plant which drifted up mournfully from some hidden embankment below. Empty of life... and slowly but surely... one day... it will be emptied of its magick and fall to the Void in its entirety.

...yet, there is hope...
...there is always hope, dear one...

Loki swam on, determinedly, trying not to imagine how long it would take him to find the Great Serpent Iormungand. If he still lives, a treacherous thought insinuated itself into his mind. If he ever existed. Shaking his slender black eel head, Loki brushed away his doubts and forged on in the darkness and in the silence.

...the silences of the depths...

...below, they are gaping...

...a picture of what is waiting...

...It is waiting...

Chapter End Notes

Loki/Iormungund sexy times up ahead! (joking) No Loki/Iormungand stuff. LOL. That'd be... weird. And. Just. No. Hahaha. I don't even know why I joked about it. Must be the night time crazy setting in...

OK. So... um... a short chapter. Sorry... but there will be more in a week. Hopefully.

As you know I'm doing NaNoWriMo - and I need to get that done as soon/quickly as I can. If you wanna follow that, be sure to visit my profile and follow the link! Thanks~

See ya round!
Let me know what you think of this story!
-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fot'r'o - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvila - high bed
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa a’vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
raudhaust – high bed
WHY AM I UPDATING THIS PEOPLE? I'M SO FALLING BEHIND IN MY
WRITING AND I'VE ONLY GOT ONE MORE CHAPTER WRITTEN FOR THIS
AND I'M TRYING NOT TO FREAK OUT - BUT I HAD TO UPDATE BECAUSE
I'M FULL OF THOR THE DARK WORLD LOKI FEELS AFTER WATCHING
IT. YEAHHH...

Yeah. I'm a mess - but thanks to those awesome folks who are chatting with me and just
being such great encouragement! Thanks to: Kai_Maciei, Crazy_Cat_Lady, lemomina,
iBlameGlobalWarming, Danea. I appreciate your thoughts and cheery words! So much!

Well, now we have some more Jotunheim stuff... Heh.

And remember to check out my "kakashidiot" idiot for links to maps and things - as well
as fanart provided by lovely people~! If you want a taste of Tom & Loki friendship fic-
ness, go to the same tumblr and click on the page link to fanfictions right below the
header. XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 49
Return to the Shadows II

[...the silences of the depths...]

[...below, they are gaping...]

[...a picture of what is waiting...]

[...It is waiting...]

How long he spent there, Loki afterwards would admit, he did not know. Feeding off of small
transparent sea creatures and bitter tasting underwater herbs, thriving still off of the strength of
Frigga's orchard apples, Loki pressed onward, swimming up and down the large Lake, carefully
resonating his magick in and out, an unseen sonar seeking out its kind.

This underwater world was a realm which Time had forgotten – and Loki was wondering how long
it had been since he had first submerged when a high pitched chime reflected back towards him
within the weak flow of Jotunheim's magickal life stream. Another chime – and then another – Loki
dived further down and to his left, following the sound, weaving through a small forest of seaweed
and dodging past a school of silvrfiskr.

He sent out another burst of magick and this time, the response was a keening call, sharp and clear,
travelling through the water, Loki surmised, at a very fast rate. Perhaps the giant serpent was moving.
Darting over a sudden outcropping, Loki nearly bowled himself into a bristling crystalline reef with surprise. Before him spread a valley falling sharply, deeply and widely and the water below, Loki could see was almost black before his sharp eel's eyes. Yet, there was a glimmer of light below – a glow of blue-green, soft and indistinct.

It shifted and swayed and then the glimmer rippled brighter for a moment before fading again and Loki felt as well as heard the responding chime of magick followed by another echo of a keening cry. The shadows below shifted, some parts becoming murkier and around him a visible increase in warmth and light. *Not light*, he thought, *a glow – of magic... Magic resonating purely from such an ancient creature. Such a creature as Iormungand, who relies on no Realm for sustenance.*

The glimmer, the soft glow, resolved itself into sharper definition – a line of blue-green emanating from the rough sides of an ancient Sea-Serpent. *Iormungand.* Glittering black eyes blinked open, revealing a slight blurriness as the usual viscous layer protecting the wide, faintly blue-green rimmed pupils. For a moment, the eel hung lower before unfurling its long length, revealing even longer coils of black hide – but unlike Loki's own thin eel skin, Iormungand's age and durability showed in his plated scales, *hard,* Loki guessed, *like armour or stone.*

As Loki sent another signal, the mouth of the eel gaped open a little, emitting another cry – this time lower and gentler.

Loki hesitated, his tail moving slower as he allowed himself to drift above Iormungand's head. *He does not appear to be angry,* the Jotunn thought. *Perhaps he will be willing to hear our request.*

With no little amount of apprehension, Loki eased himself over another rough outcropping, held a lungful of oxygen, switched into his original form, forced a bubble of oxygen to form about him and then settled a little more firmly on a conveniently close piece of crystalline reef. Holding out his hands, palm upward, and allowing them to breach his bubble, Loki offered his hand, palm held out - flat and nonthreatening, the universal sign of peace.

For a moment, Iormungand hung back and then Loki felt a press of magick roll over him. He smiled and said softly, "Well met, great Grand-Sire Iormungand, who commands the waters of the deep and drinks from the Well of Jotunheim."

Iormungand, at his words, nosed upward and then, his giant head, dwarfing Loki's suddenly rather miniscule hands, drew close. The sea serpent's immense jaw opened again, this time revealing even rows of teeth, which Loki did his best not to flinch at, and a long thin tongue darted out to run along the Jotunn's blue fingers. What Iormungand tasted, Loki did not know, but apparently the Grand-Sire was appeased and eased back a moment, the water filled with a low growling, humming sound not entirely reassuring.

Another wave of magick then followed and Loki, opening up to the gentle pressure applied to his mind, let the words of the ancient creature soak into his own thoughts.

"Well met, Blue-Skinned One... or should I say... Frost Giant... such names as Time brings, I cannot remember them all. My apologies."

"No offence is taken," Loki replied carefully. "Few would look at me and think Frost Giant to begin with... considering my size."

"Ahhh... but that is another thing lost to Time," Iormungand's return voice deepened with something that felt like regret to the warrior-mage. "The truth is so often forgotten and thus, history with all its errors must be doomed to repeat itself."

"The truth? What truth is that?"

"It is a long tale... and perhaps," Iormungand said slowly, ruminatively, "perhaps it is not mine to tell. There are others – those who dwelt in Meerauk remembered, if Meerauk still stands. I know not. Therein lived the Sages and those who forget not Time and the secrets it holds."

"Meerauk..." Loki ransacked his early memories, trying to remember any mention of the place. The
only thing he could recall was Elska – memories no longer painful, yet still weighty with loss – Elska before a bright blaze recalling an ancient time of peace and growth. When, he had said, Meerauk was set alight with a thousand crystals and Jotunheim was a land of light. "Meerauk."

"A place of legend now, perhaps," Iormungand sighed. He leaned forward then, twitching his head to the side to get better glimpse of his visitor. "And you, little Frost Giant, are on that same Road of Destiny yourself."

Gazing upward at the sagacious creature, Loki felt an overwhelming urge to blurt out his anxieties, his fears and his plans, but, biting his tongue, the Jotunn warrior-mage nodded uncertainly and glared down at his hands.

"Some years ago – long years ago," he finally admitted, "I thought I saw something... and recently... recently it was weighed heavily on me. I stood by the Casket of Ancient Winters – that is, the Kero Fornvetr, and heard its call."

"The call of Realm's Soul is hard for any creature to resist," Iormungand hummed thoughtfully. "How can one resist? One cannot. How can one resist the call of Life itself? One cannot. One can but give in and not lose oneself in its flow. Yes, its flow - for its currents run as deep as any sea and those who cast themselves without thought may be swept away by it, tugged under and inward and gain the pleasures of knowledge... and the release of Death herself. Such lived the Mystics and the Sages and others before you – and such will live the favoured few long after you are gone. To take part of such mysteries – that is indeed a great honour, a terrible Destiny."

"There is also other... other Voices... Voices of Darkness, of the Deep... of the Void," Loki whispered. "Always they are before me, before my eyes as if I am standing on the edge of the Abyss and must always peer within..."

"To commune deeply with Life, one must fully plumb the depth of Death. One cannot enjoy the one without suffering the other. This is the push and pull of Existence. All must walk the road, swim the path, follow the stream – but you have been gifted with awareness, with the ability to make change, according to your strength of will and abilities – and thereby change the Cosmos itself in indefinable, incalculable ways." Iormungand brushed against Loki's bubble as if in comfort. "The only question is – will you rise to the challenge?"

"I am doing my best..."

"Sometimes," Iormungand replied gently, humming a little lower, "that is all we can expect of ourselves."

"Thank you."

"You are welcome, little Frost Giant."

"The name is – the name is Loki, Loki Odinsson. Of Asgard."

"Asgard," Iormungand drew back, tail swishing a little. "I had no knowledge that Asgard and Jotunheim had managed to bridge the chasm of hate."

"They have not," Loki said quickly, realizing that this could be potentially confusing if he didn't explain himself. "Yet, I have some ability with disguise and have thus been adopted into the Royal Family, taking place beside the Queen Frigga of Vanahem, Prince Thor and Odin All-Father himself – as a second son."

"They know of your heritage?"

"No," Loki shook his head. "I would they never find out. Asgard is – it is my home now."

"Well, well, well," Iormungand's mouth opened and a high-pitched keening call emitted forth, an approximation, Loki supposed, of an sea serpent's laugh. "That is most interesting – how you creatures surprise me! That Asgard should embrace a snake so close to its bosom and shower it with love... and thus named as well! Ha!"

"What of my name?" Loki asked, leaning forward, green eyes glittering with excitement.

"Ah! Another thing lost to Time, I am afraid – and perhaps best kept there... that an Ancient has survived Jotunheim's Law, and such a One, so gifted with Destiny and Magick, has taken itself to the bosom of Asgard... that smacks of Legend to me, and trust me, little one, having lived these long
years, I know the scent of things like these..."
"Please–"
"I will say no more," Iormungand replied dismissively.
"What about the danger of repeating the doom of history?" Loki pressed, hands gripping his leather-clad knees.
"Hmmm..." For a moment, there was silence as Iormungand considered the matter and Loki waited with barely concealed impatience. "Young Loki Odinsson of Asgard and, judging by your ancestral markings, Laufey's True Heir, what can you find in your heart for Jotunheim?"
"If it brings my home no harm," he replied truthfully, "it matters not to me."
"You will protect it – as is your duty?"
"I hold no duty to Jotunheim," Loki stated curtly, raising his chin sharply. "As a babe, it abandoned me – and holds no sway over me, heart or mind or magick." He bit his lip and then added slowly, "Yet, I do not hold any plans for its immediate destruction."
"Hm. Fair enough, I suppose," Iormungand sighed. "Not as well as I wished, but understandable..." A pause and then the Grand-Sire rumbled out a word. "Meerauk." Another pause. "Meerauk. That is the place you seek. Perhaps there you may be ready to hear the truth."
"Thank you," Loki half-bowed from his waist, while remaining seated. "I am in your debt."
"That is a dangerous thing to promise, little Frost Giant, but I hold you to your word. Now, why did you come to my watery halls in the first place. Not to explore such a dark world, surely?"
"I must admit I was always curious as a youngling as to what lived beneath the surface of Vithrvatn Sea... but I came on another matter – a matter of great consequence for the world in general." Here, Loki twisted his hands and summoned the jewel box of King Virs. It glittered oddly throughout the swirling mirky waters – now rather dim and tawdry looking in the green-blue world of Iormungand.
"Ahhhhhhhhh..." The Sea Serpent's voice rumbled now lower at the sight. "Now that is something I have not seen in a long, long, long, long, long, long time... and had never hoped to see it again..."
"I am sorry..."
"So Nidhoggr has passed on? Odd – I thought I would have felt it..."
"No," Loki chuckled then remembering the look on Thor's and the others' panicked faces as they raced out of the Hall of Dwinbbeleherest. "He still lies in Niflheim and there sires children and lays waste to the surrounding mountains. Of course, many do not believe the tale of his existence, but that matters not to such as he."
"Indeed. Then, why has he ceded guardianship of this... relic?"
"It was my brother – he knows no restraint and wished to retrieve the box for Mother... and I think he did not truly believe Nidhoggr was real. If he did believe Nidhoggr was real, it would not have stopped him, for Prince Thor desires battle as men desire air."
"Ah. So, you rescued the box and its cursed treasure and come here to ask me to watch it?"
"To bury it and watch it, yes," Loki nodded. "Place it where no being can find it – not even I – that is the will of All-Father."
"Hmmm..." Iormungand moved upward and peered down at the small Frost Giant before nodding slowly. "I understand the weight of this – and yet I bear it gladly. Thanos is one who I have never met, yet I heard tales from my kin in far lands... and lost adventuresome snakelets to his cruel desire to court Death."
"We thank you – Asgard thanks you as do the rest of those who live at peace in the Realms and beyond."
"I think not," Iormungand replied dryly – and Loki had to chuckle and laugh a little at the Sea Serpent's matter-of-fact response.

And so, the jewel box of King Virs and the Mind Gem within were transferred carefully onto a nearby flat rock, easily placed for Iormungand to take. After speaking further on other matters concerning Magick and Jotunheim and the disastrous effects of the Long War on Jotunheim's environment and such-like, Loki took his leave, bidding Iormungand a fond farewell and promising to return to tell him tall tales of Thor's adventures. Shifting his form easily, Loki took to the water and
swam upward, easily paced by the slow-moving, yet powerful and sinuous Iormungand. Nipping onto a small fin on Iormungand's side, Loki held on tightly as the large serpent sped through his home to where his visitor had first entered, where the ice was now weakest, although already grown over. Ramming his giant head against the spot where the hole had been burned through, Iormungand crashed upward through the ice, making a large enough hole for Loki to easily climb out.

Once there, Loki bid a solemn farewell again and then broke the surface, shifting form, gasping for fresh air and scrambling his way back up through the ice hole. Underneath his feet, Iormungand's head nudged, helping the short Frost Giant to reach the edge of the ice, and when Loki turned, letting his hand drift within the water, he fancied he could feel Iormungand's tongue run swiftly over his fingertips. Then the Grand-Sire was gone in another surge of magick. Standing on the ice, Loki stared down, hoping against hope that he could see the massive shape of sea serpent moving beneath the ice.

He could not.

-Meerawk. Meerawk. Loki mulled over the name as he sat among the scraggly ironwood trees the next morning. Meerawk. A foreign name to him. A name, he thought, fit for a dream. Not of this world... a name found in myths, in legends, in stories lost to Time. Meerawk. A name... I feel as though I have heard it before from Elska – but only in stories of the Ancient Times. The Ancient Times when our peoples first woke... surely... surely such a place had not survived the stretch of Time 'till now?

Over a breakfast of grilled eel and a loaf of bread he had brought with him, Loki decided a visit to Snjarhamr was in order. The Elders there may know of it, Loki mused, and here, he grinned wickedly – what a fright they will have at the sight of me... the unwanted creature they no doubt thought would never return... perhaps they no longer even remember me...

Loki forced away the memories of hard bargains, distrustful glances, cruel words and cold, lonely evenings outside looking in the broad windows – and wishing... Wishing... And I – I had responded the only way an untrained animal would... with ill-taught violence, mute sullenness and the occasional slur. Shaking his head, Loki packed his bag and stored it away in his magickal storage spot alongside other things he now kept in secret. But not the Mind Gem. No longer the Mind Gem, the warrior-mage sighed with relief.

Haste sped his way and Loki, using what skills magick had gifted him, transported himself to the place he had called home for so many years – the rickety flet in the tree hidden deep within the Offaer Forest.

He arrived in the now small-seeming clearing without a sound – and looked about for any sign of movement in the thick underbrush of thorn and bracken. No sound. Even here. Loki's suspicions thus confirmed, he made his way over to the thick, twisted jarnvithr tree which held the aged remains of his old home.

Like me, he thought, as he swung up easily to the flet, stunted, twisted and abnormal – a tree unlike its sky-reaching, straight-backed kin. Like me – and perfect for an outcast such as myself.

Glancing about the now derelict place he had called home with no small amount of disfavour, Loki noted how weathering had worn the wooden planks of the tree home, blown away or buried in snow and ice his few belongings. Such as they had been. The small chest he had raided from a collapsed trader's hut in Offaerdale still sat in the corner, unopened and frozen over. On top of it, encased in solid ice, sat his second-best tinderbox and six small crudely carved throwing knives beside a purloined whetstone.
Looking about at the remnants of his past life, Loki flinched as he recalled memories of abuse heaped upon the ever mute, witless Vaetki (how confused I had been – always working to curry favour that could never come and I never figured out why...) and of his even more savage existence as the Ulfrbarn.

It made him ill – and Loki discovered he could not remain there any longer – in the snows and ruins of his past.

If there had been any question, Loki knew now – he would never return. Not to this. Never to this, the now-Aesir Prince vowed. Frigga's words rose in his mind – her well-meaning, unwitting encouragement to explore his misbegotten roots. Jotunheim is not where I am supposed to be, Loki jerked away and stumbled off and down the tree, clumsy with barely restrained anger and shame. With that final decision, Loki disappeared again, not sparing a glance backward.

Behind him, half-dead trees creaked and, far away, its lone voice carried on the limp wind, a wolf howled disconsolantly.

[...and so Destiny changes...]

[...and so the Fates...]

[...countless others...]

[...all, all...]

[...shift and transform...]

Loki arrived unheralded in the midst of pandemonium.

[...thus are the distortions...]

[...of Time...]

[...made clearer...]

[...and more distinct. As one foretold...]

[...a new Destiny, great and terrible unfurled...]

[...a banner of blood and war...]

[...on Jotunheim...]

Offaerdale, where Loki had opted to appear, as if he were any ordinary trader or visitor, was in an uproar. Snow and ice rose in heavy sprays as hovercraft dipped and dug into the ground with their anti-gravity repulsors. Red, green and blue ion blasts hailed down – and then abruptly stopped as Loki appeared, giving two Elves a chance to snag a few blasters of their own from the dead bodies of a few unfortunate aliens and fire back.

Overhead, clouds were releasing their burden of snowflakes, heedless of the battle below, leaving a thin, fresh layer of white, which was now trampled underfoot by the heavy boots of traders. Muddy black soil and ice and snow churned up, creating an ugly sludge throughout the long dale. Elvish, Dwarvish, Jotunn and other alien tongue filled the air with harsh cries as the traders alongside the towering Jotunn clashed with the alien slavers.
Marauders? No, Loki decided as he quickly took in his surroundings. Slavers... not the traditional type certainly. The Mah'konai are a giant folk and have since remained in their Empire since Asgard's conquering of their home planet... There are other races who are willing to stoop to such trade, although I would have thought few would possess the temerity to raid within Asgard's purview, much less have the courage and witlessness to attack a Jotunn. Perhaps Jotunheim's power, now further sapped, cannot protect even its own people...

Whatever the case, Loki's ire rose, being naturally disinclined to take the part of the attackers. Without warning, he swept further into their midst in a flurry of mist and cutting sleet. Sharp needles of ice formed above his left hand and then flew forward as if they were a swarm of bees – an unending shower which sliced at the unprotected faces of the invaders. The warmly bundled Skrull were no match for Loki's pinpoint attack. Sudden cold slowed their movements and in a matter of minutes, three had succumbed to massive ice stab wounds as spikes drove upward from the ground.

Wisely retreating, the Jotunn and their more welcome guests and allies moved back to the edges of the dale, leaving the arena clear for Loki's capable, deft and vicious workings. With another sigil formed and a spell chanted, Loki began to weave a second working while twirling around to slice the sharp end of his spear across the front of a half-breed who had tried to sneak up on him and now reeled away, clutching at a growing stain of blood on his jacket.

For a moment as the slavers regrouped, Loki found enough breathing space to finish the working and, dipping into the shallow pool of Jotunheim's magickal energies, he drew in enough to augment his own power before conjuring and releasing five swirling comets of fire. Targeting the hovercraft, the hyper-intense fireballs crashed into the hulls and burnt their way through melting the thick metal as if it were paper. Then, exploding, the fire blew away the hovercraft, raining shrapnel of flesh, bone, leather, plastic, glass and other materials.

Releasing his summoned personal shield-wall of ice which had successfully risen and protected him from the brunt of the massive explosions, Loki watched as the remaining Skrull, Kree, Thor and Virax activated their suits and disappeared in blue vortex's of mechanical teleportation. For a moment, there was a taste of metal and ozone and then Jotunheim fell into silence once more.

[...fell...]

[...into silence...]

[...but all things have a beginning and an end and then...]

[...there is renewal...]

[...raise your head, Jotunheim...]

As Loki turned, the storm abated a little at his command, allowing a better view of the battlefield. At the sight of his blue skin, red eyes and black hair, there was a sharp gasp of horrified and awestruck recognition. Whispers rose (It is the lagreinn! The Vaetki returned! Curses! It survived!) - small rumbles of pebbles and ice, the first signs of an avalanche.

Then, the small huddled crowd of Jotunn on the south end of the dale turned as a newly arrived company of Jotunn warriors thundered in. From behind them, striding stiffly and bearing the obvious signs of Jotunn aging, emerged the familiar figure Elder Skyne. At his side, the dour Elder Esaf also paced.

Esaf, Loki remembered, who enjoyed black eel stew and blakkgrgras tea harvested from the sweet blakkgrgras of the Offaer forest. Skyne – the first to accept and the last Jotunn I glimpsed on the day
of my capture. He had looked regretful then... and proud... Elder Skyne...

Drawing himself up to his full height and letting his wolf-skin cloak hang back artfully, Loki gave
the newcomers a sharp, unappreciative glance which spoke volumes – finally you arrived! His green
eyes glinted from behind long locks of his dark hair which had fallen forward. The look was not lost
on Elder Esaf who scowled nor on Elder Skyne who snorted before nodding calmly at the sight of
the runt Jotunn. Loki blinked back equally serene, hiding his surprise at the sign of
acknowledgement and respect (if brief).

"So," Elder Skyne rumbled, staring down at the lithe runt before him. "The bandits, the slavers have
been repelled?"
"Yes, Elder," said one of the miners. "Some were slain but few escaped. They learned a lesson from
us today –"
"A lesson from our old ally, I warrant," Skyne guessed shrewdly. "The Ulfrbarn, after all these
years, has returned."
"Laufey-King must be notified of the lagrei- ACH!" Elder Esaf bit off suddenly as an ice dagger
stung warningly against his broad thigh, just above the knee. He cursed colourfully.
"It is Ulfrbarn," Loki sneered. "Ah – but then, I suppose allowances must be made for the toll of time
and correlating memory loss."
"And what of the vagaries of youth?" grunted Esaf snidely smiling down at the Jotunn youth. "There
is no sign of maturity upon you, Vaetki."

This time the Elder was able to deflect the responding ice dagger with a short laugh, but he nodded
in acceptance.

"Still a spitfire, I see. Hm."
"Come now, Esaf," Skyne scolded his long-time friend and partner, smiling indulgently at the two
who had subsided into burning glares. "We have already devolved this conversation to the quarrels
of babes after five minutes time? Tcha!"
"I am no babe," Loki said coolly.
"He was better mute," muttered a farmer.
"Yes, our Ulfrbarn has a sharp tongue on him," Skyne agreed. "He always had."
"A sharp tongue for a sharp mind," Loki said, lifting his chin and setting his feet apart in a wider
stance. He grinned then, wide and toothy, white teeth brilliantly set against the exotic blue of his
natural skin colour and darker lines.
"The Ulfrbarn?" A Dark Elf trader asked curiously.
"From whence he came, we knew not," Elder Skyne explained, "except that he belonged to no
Jotunn but the wilds of Utanheim. The Storr-Mithr of the Great Black Wolf Clan took him to suckle,
as stories told – and on a fateful night, we lost him to the dreaded Mah'konai."
"Dreaded no longer," added a Dark Dwarf of Niflheim gruffly. "A bigger fish swallowed them
whole if I remember correctly – long ago."
"Yes, well I remember that day," Loki shrugged nonchalantly.
"You bear your years easily," said the Dark Elf with a sly smile. "And... your size..."
"Such a creature," another spoke out from somewhere behind, "should have died in the weakness of
its infancy. What Father – what Mother allowed such a travesty to continue its painful existence?"

Then, as Loki slowly swept back his long black locks which had fallen forward, revealing his
matrilineal lines, the rough voice fell silent. Everyone froze – except for the visitors who understood
the gravity if not the particulars of the situation. Skyne and Esaf drew sharp breaths as Loki looked
up at them defiantly.

"Where I come from?" Loki's voice was as cold and bitter as the unfeeling wind which blew down
from the mountains. "That is a question only too easy to answer but I-
"That cannot be be," whispered Skyne, falling to one knee.
"Check," Esaf's voice had descended to a choked, guttural level.

Skyne held out a broad, rough palm lined with the deep etches only Time and a difficult life could bestow. Reluctantly, Loki extended his hand in response to the unspoken invitation. Gently, surprisingly gently, Skyne turned Loki's much smaller hand in his – wide, black-tipped fingers almost reverently tracing the other smaller wedge-like lines which ran up the length of Loki's inner forearm. More gasps rose as Skyne nodded and then bent down further to raise the back of Loki's hand to his broad forehead in the most ceremonial greeting one could grant royalty. Then the wise old Elder raised his eyes and sighed sadly.

"We beg apologies, Nameless One."

Loki wasn't exactly sure how to respond. For the first time in a long time, words failed him.

-0-0-0-

In the end, a celebration was held – at Loki's humble (and diplomatic) insistence – in honour of all the victors who had participated in the battle against the invaders. Divided consciences thus assuaged, Snjarhamr's Elders could pay respect to the Royal Family as need be without making it official. For Loki was – and would always be – in the eyes of more superstitious Jotunn, a threat to the Fortune's of Jotunheim no matter who bore him or how many invaders he annihilated.

Knowing his position full well, Loki discreetly cast poison-detecting charms over his meal of cold, thinly sliced fish, eel, wheat-bread and imported Vanir cordial. He understood. He was prepared.

After, when all had returned home, Loki found himself on the Great Hall's second floor, looking out over the now quiet Snjarhamr from the convenient view of the front balcony. At his side, Skyne stood, tall and silent. Snow still fell, its blanket growing thicker by the hour. Loki shivered – infinitesimally. The cold he had forgotten thanks to his time in the even temperatures of space, in the heated glow of club and arena lights – and beneath the intolerant sunshine of Asgard.

"You still find the cold uncomfortable, Ulfrbarn?"
"Somewhat, no doubt due to my absence," was Loki's absent reply. "I had grown used to enough when I was younger."
"You will remember ease within the snows again soon enough, I suppose," Skyne replied, comfortably with unspoken promise.
"Hm."
"But I sense..." Skyne hesitated. "I sense – a burden-
"A burden?" A pause. Then: "Perhaps."
"Why did you return to this dying Realm, little one?"
"I came in search of a name," Loki explained carefully, knowing that the best kind of lie was a half truth. "A name and a place. My path, I hope, will lead me to my goal."
"And that is?" Skyne asked with no little apprehension.
"A place lost to time, 'tis said," Loki mused aloud. "Meerauk."
"Ah. Meerauk."
"You know of it?"
"Only of it – it is the birth place of all Jotunheim – but mostly of Kings and thus a sacred place for the Jotunn... Your – Laufey-King would know of it."
"Laufey-King," Loki said the name slowly as if tasting it. His tongue felt heavy as lead - the two words sounded bitter.
"Laufey-King," Elder Skyne echoed before adding cautiously. "And by all accounts, your... Faetha."
"Birth lines do not lie," Loki sighed, turning his arms over to cast an eye on the markings there – markings which had fully formed during his stint in the shadowy planet of the mining colony. Markings he had long thought decorative – useless – and now blessed with deeper meaning.

"Indeed," Skyne tilted his head and gave Loki a thoughtful look. "Ulfrbarn – I cannot give you guidance – for I know you will find your own way... and such headstrong wilfulness has no time for an aged one's words. Yet, this foolish old Jotunn cannot help but say-" Skyne halted, frowned, collected his thoughts and then started afresh. "Go to Laufey-King... ask for what you seek, but do not linger. The Court is a den of desperate creatures these days. Remember... open hands hold hidden daggers." A hard look then. "Do you understand?"

"More than you know," Loki replied quietly, flexing his fingers, knowing how many hidden daggers laid ready for him. "This is not my home."

"It could never be your home-"

"Jotunheim can make no vaetki a place, I know-"

"Nay, it is not a matter of being vaetki," Skyne said sharply, shaking his head. "No – well, not in full. In part, yes, the last thing Jotunheim needs, some believe, is the curse of an Abomination. They will find ways to remove such a stain from its soil. For safety alone, it would not do well for you to linger. Yet, that is not my intent – it is not what I perceive – although the considerations of an old wit as myself is never really heeded... No... Ulfrbarn, I see in you such vitality – such Life – this graveyard of a Realm can no more hold you, feed you, than an ice field can yield a single tunglbloom blossom."

"Ah..." Loki hesitated and nodded.

Skyne's hand descended to grip the shorter, younger Jotunn's hard shoulder.

"I understand."

"I am sorry," Skyne said softly.

"I know," Loki replied in acceptance.

With that, the following week, after completing some useful workings to aid any desperate farmers who did not mind accepting the aid (and charmed field blessings) of a runt, Loki left for Laufey-King's current seat in Gastropnir hard by the Grarfjall Mountains. Deciding to take his time and take stock of Jotunheim's readily apparent devastated state, Loki travelled with the annual Caravan, so called Arlang'leith, which wound its way southward to Vatnboer and beyond to Thrymheim. Over the brutal, sharp ridges of the Kaldrfjall Mountains, they crawled and out the other side emerged, a little more frozen and battered than usual, and found well-earned rest in Griotunagardar.

Loki found Griotunagardar most interesting, for he had never visited the city which hugged the shores of Lake Gnottvatn. Despite its gay decorations in jarnvithr carvings and blue-white banners which flapped briskly in the wind, Gnoottvatn held an undercurrent of desperation. Walking down the streets on the outskirts of the large city, Loki noted the run-down quality of the peasantry's huts. He did not linger however, knowing that his size and alien nature would draw the more superstitious toward him, particularly those who, having little hope, would easily expend their frustrations on others around them. More than ever, as word spread about his arrival, Loki would have to be on his guard.

Already someone will have left to bear the news to Laufey-King, Loki mused. He refused to call, much less think, the word 'mother' or 'father'. The monarch of Jotunheim, Laufey-King would always be just that to Loki. An unknown quantity, an unfamiliar face. Helbindi however... At the thought of his stiff, formal older brother, Loki grinned sharply in anticipation. The image of Helbindi's face would not leave Loki's overactive imagination. What would he look like – what would Laufey-King look like upon realizing that the small piece of trash, of which they had been so
Loki bit his lip as a sharp chuckle rose. *They will not be able to fully disown me,* he snorted to himself then, fingers tracing again the lines on his inner left forearm. *I will be a thorn in their side, a pebble in their shoe... They will despise me – as they must – they will hate all I stand for. My abilities, my mischief – ah yes – there is that to show them as well.* Loki sighed. *If only Thor were here to see such tricks. He would laugh.*

So Loki laughed instead.

It sounded alien, coming from him there in that cold, hard land. Light, alien, threatening – maybe.

A dark promise of things to come.

Chapter End Notes

Well, what d'ya guys think? What's Loki going to do? Ba-dum, ba-dum. I've already written the next chapter and Chapter 51, which I'm working on, is a 10 page+ monstrosity...

Also, will write another side story for reviewers beyond Chapter 48 to celebrate the passing of 400 reviews~ You guys are awesome~ But I can't write it until I'm done my NaNoWriMo... It'll prolly be "A Day With Elska". So yep... Leave a review after Chap 48 and I'll take note. XD

Let me know what you think~
Leave a rant about Thor 2 (b/c I just saw it and I love fangirling about Loki~)... See ya round--KI

Alien Glossary:
'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
'r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
'n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:
bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fot'ro - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvila - high bed
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa’a’vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
raudhaust – high bed
Summary: The war between Jotunheim and Asgard draws to a close, but thanks to a horrible twist of Fate (or perhaps not), the nameless runt of Laufey-King is not discovered by Odin and so begins a remarkable journey of life that should not have been. Jotun!Loki AU. Set pre-/during-/after Thor/Avengers Assemble. MCU-verse only.

Warnings: ANGST! Loki-whump! Language, adult situations, violence, child abuse, dub-con, sexual assault (also of a minor), substance abuse, one abortion scene (sort of), slavery, sex trade (maybe), some mild original character/Loki M/M pairings.

Comments: This is not a slash fic. Sorry. It's Loki-centric, although I definitely show the rest of the Avengers and etc. Please review! Constructive criticism welcome.

Disclaimer: I do not own Avengers. Marvel owns it. I do not get paid for this piece of work. Sadly, but understandably. LOL.

A long chapter... with lots of important stuffs... I think. Watch out for the pronoun usage and the names. Things get political and complicated here~

Also be sure to check out my profile for 2 more pictures. ONE IS THIS SUPER AMAZING PIC OF THE ULFRBARN ON A WOLF! Done by our very own Double Gemini~ THANKS~! YOU'RE AWESOME~! In comparison, my own drawing of Jotunn!Loki kinda sucks - but hopefully it'll encourage better artists than I to try their hand at the grown up Jotunn!Loki. Or other parts of the story~

Thanks to all the amazing folks chatting and dropping a few lines! Thanks to: nevar_walc, Dragonanzar, Kai_Maciel, lemomina, rawr_balrog, iBlameGlobalWarming, Ninjathingstork, Uriko, Yuurei!

I have NOT REREAD THIS AS MUCH AS I USUALLY DO, so if there is any mistake, please let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 50
Open Hands Holding Secret Daggers

This is the heart of the matter, for the power of a Realm is its King, its Armies and the warriors therein, Vanir scholar Eytha of Korinath once wrote in his famous treatise 'On Realms and Their Lifetimes'. The endurance of the Realm is its Spirit, the unseen force which carries forth the will of its people and nurtures what magicks the Realm may offer. However, the Lifeblood of the Realm is its people, their daily lives, their hopes and dreams which guide the Realm's decisions both economical and political. What better way then to witness these, oh so important, interactions than
to stroll through the marketplace, explore the farm or journey with a caravan?

The wastelands of Jotunheim are not to be travelled lightly, yet the yearly Caravan Arleng'leith continued to wend its way from its originating city of Snjarhamr. Vatnboer - the town of fish, chilly Thrymheim - city of refuge, cheery Griotunagardar - the city of gaiety, Gastropnir - the King's seat and finally, Utgard - the lost citadel: these were the main stops in which the Caravan took rest, during its annual trek from one end of the Innaheim to the other, hard by the Eybjarg.

Many days of hard pounding across fields of blue-white-tinged ice and frozen black soil would pass before any sign of comfort was to be found. Feet ached, bones creaked, skin cracked and the eyes blurred – a slow torment on a long road. For Jotunheim has always been a vast land, even for Giants, and by the time the traders, guards, servants and the odd traveller who straggled behind stumbled into a city, be it dour Thrymheim or the pompous Gastropnir, they were all heartily sick of the monotonous hours of walking, running and pulling carts in the monochromatic vistas of black trees and lakes juxtaposed against grey rock and white snow and ice. They were more than tired of swift meals and uncomfortable rest with the varied guards who looked out into the dark night for any sign of vicious wolves or wild jarnkottr. The drivers' arms desired respite from controlling the ever feisty domesticated jarnkottrs which the traders employed, the servants merely wanted a proper hearth upon which to prepare the evening meals and the traders wished to hear the latest local gossip while sharing their own fresh news. So, as they neared the cities, expectation and excitement inevitably rose, clothing was straightened (cleaning was usually out of the question), the small stubby Jotunn horns of adulthood were polished and freed of ice, faces were scrubbed with clean snow and everything was cleared of ice and snow, the better to display the abundance and variety of their wares.

When Gastropnir hoved into view, the caravan halted for an hour in order to rearrange itself, for, as usual, Driver Olsi had gotten ahead of himself and four traders and their carts had lagged behind. Loki took this chance to double-check his visible (the pack he bore, the spear he carried and the grey-wolf cloak he had newly made) and invisible (his journal, his throwing knives, his potions and crystals and other treasures) belongings. Brushing his hair back quickly and easily, Loki applied a little of his favourite oils to ensure that his unruly locks remained in place, revealing his proud ancestral lines for all to see. Triple-checking his knives, Loki considered going ahead – but then Master Kiri was calling on him in invitation to ride with Driver Torsa at the front and Loki, out of politeness, found himself accepting the honour (and strategic position).

In such a way, Loki rode into Gastropnir, noting the somber, regal decorations, the usual sky-high black stone buildings with their glinting carvings twining about and upward. The residents of Gastropnir walked with pride, which Loki found amusing. Like the warriors of Asgard, he thought, they hold the honour of the nation close to their hearts... the question remaining is... how sensitive they are, how easily do they respond to provocation...

As the jarnkottr paced past, Loki noticed how the whispering increased, how looks were exchanged and stances shifted in tension at the sight of him sitting in front of Torsa. Yet none attacked. Or perhaps... they are waiting, Loki mused. Perhaps at the command of their King, I will know the full weight of Jotunheim's wrath...

When the caravan reached the wide area, which, judging by the stalls and merchants already there, was the city's central marketplace, Loki slid down and then paused at the sight of a guard leaving a small company of what he guessed was the King's Guard and approaching him. If I have judged the colours of the King's livery and heraldry correctly.
The tall, well-muscled Jotunn, wearing a kirtle of black and silver, looked imposing but Loki held his ground. For a moment, the two stared at each other intently, judging and searching for any sign of weakness on the other's part. Then, swiftly, yet gracefully, the guard knelt on one knee, shifted his spear to his left hand and, bowing his head, took Loki's hand and raised it to his brow in obeisance.

All movement in the marketplace ceased. Heads turned and voices lowered and then sank into silence at the odd sight. Unlike Snjarhamr, no one shouted out, no doubt understanding the importance of solidarity and fearing the firm hand of Laufey-King. Laufey knows best for Jotunheim... that is what they hope, Loki guessed. They believe in the justice of their King. How like Odin he is... rather, how strongly Laufey bears this mark of a King...

"Come," the guard said, rising amidst escalated whispers. "A litter awaits."

A litter? The question very nearly popped out of Loki's mouth, his red eyes widened, showing the extent of his surprise. A litter? Loki eyed the large square contraption now approaching between the guards. A carved open box of Vanir hardwood with pulled back silk curtains (no doubt also Vanir). Frowning, he allowed the guard to set a step stool block for Loki to better climb into the litter. A litter, Loki thought darkly, finding his seat and sprawling back in it, legs wide and hands gripping the over-sized armrests, the better to find purchase on the too-large rough seat. Between his feet, his pack had been slung, which he trapped easily between his ankles, while his spear he attempted to grip nonchalantly as the litter jerked and swayed on its way to the Royal Great Hall. A litter, Loki repeated to himself, for the elderly, the disabled... those wounded or incapable... so his opinion concerning his unwanted child remains the same – I will be to him, he says, a burden...

For a moment, Loki considered getting off – jumping off – the jostling, uncomfortable litter, but after an epic inward battle, Loki realized that there would be no real diplomatic way to extricate himself from the situation. Not without looking like a fool or a child. His inner ire struggled for dominance and the disguised Prince of Asgard found himself glaring at everything and everyone on the way up the hilly terrain of Gastropnir to the Great Hall. A litter, Loki thought as he came to a halt behind the broad backs of the guards who now stepped aside.

Face grim, Loki pattered after the increasing amount of guards who escorted him between grand columns to the Seat of the King. This was, he knew, a blatant show of power and all part of the game. The game. Here, he could not help but smirk at the thought, for he knew (as Thor did and most of Asgard – but not Jotunheim, they never knew and would never be allowed to guess) how dearly he loved to play games and tricks, to manipulate and invisibly pull the strings, to make his unwitting puppets dance. This will be a grand working, Loki thought as he came to a halt behind the broad backs of the guards who now stepped aside. The board is mine, the game is mine, this power play I know all too well – and I will never lose to them, he vowed. Never again.

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His eyes rose. Loki's gaze moved upward, slowly and calculatingly, showing casual insouciance and successfully hiding his reaction to the sheer size of what surrounded him, of who sat before him. The sheer size of the throne, the pillars, the tall, thin windows which opened in regular intervals on each side, the hulking muscular guards and the imposing figure of Laufey-King himself. Leaning back on his icy, dark throne, surrounded by fluted columns and surprisingly gracefully carved pillars, Laufey-King sat at ease, red eyes piercing the dim blue light which filled the throne room. Those hard red
eyes, like precious gems, glittered coldly and Loki forced himself to meet the King's gaze with equal
distance and serenity.

*As if nothing lies between us – as he had called himself my Sire, Loki thought distantly, as if he
had kept me for his own. As if he had calls me a Prince and, one day, hopes to see me on the throne
as King. As if between us there is, if not love, then at least respect.*

Once again, Loki found himself battling rising feelings of inadequacy. Just by looking at Laufey-
King's face, Loki knew that the old Jotunn was far from pleased to see him. About the hall, the
nobles who loitered along the edges of the room said nothing, leaving an awkward silence as the two
continued to stare at each other.

In that moment, insecurities warring for control, Loki contemplated fleeing the Hall and seeking his
answers elsewhere. *No longer is it a game*, he thought despairingly, heart aching. *Perhaps, it never
was...*

Fool, the darker half of him whispered. *You fell again into the witless world of those who hold hope
in the face of reality. Somehow – you thought what? That this being, this monstrous savage before
you – this thing who could ahve been your father would accept you with wide open arms? Fool.*

Straightening his shoulders, chin rising in renewed defiance, Loki faced Laufey-King and allowed
the corner of his lips to lift slightly, turn upward. In recognition, Laufey shifted forward in his seat,
moving his elbow from his throne's armrest, and lifting his chin off his giant fist. A rumbling
'Hmmm' broke the silence and Laufey leaned further yet as if Loki were some insect he could barely
see.

"So..." Laufey murmured quietly. "So this is the one of whom the superstitious lackwits of
Snjarhamr laud as hero. The Wolf's Child, the Ulfrbarn so named..." His following chuckle was dark
and grating as stones sound moving upon stone. "So aptly named for a scr awny savage such as
yourself... yet..." And here Laufey leaned back again. "You have proven the power of your blood
and, as with all those given the honour of my House's heritage, the endurance of my line runs strong
within you. Your obvious... deficiencies... aside, for a Runt, you, little Ulfrbarn, surpass all
expectation."

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His eyes fell. As the guards stepped aside, Laufey, sitting alone in his most grandiose hall, with only
the closest members of his Council present, was struck by the delicateness of the Runt which stood
before him. The old Jotunn King had never seen the babe he had aborted, nor had he ever asked after
it – even when Helblindi had brought the matter up for the first (and last) time. *I did not want to
know what abomination my body had spawned. This thing which should have been unmade –
should have returned to the Nothing it is... this Jotunn dvegr, this vaetki... now called Ulfrbarn... How
could it be so...*

Laufey felt something surge within, and looking at the child of his womb, he wondered. *Hate?
Fear? Disgust?* He could not name the emotion – did not wish to peer too deeply into his heart lest
he discover what he feared most. Thus, with stony face, Laufey catalogued the creature before him.

*A chiseled, well-formed face by mortal or Elvish standards, Laufey supposed. More like Farbauti, I
think, in face. Graceful carriage. The gentle blue of Farbauti and the graceful tell-tale lines of both
their clans on his brow and arms. Ulfrbarn, the Wolf's Child, was slender and lightly built, looking
like a child to Laufey's cool eye, with no sign of ageing or adulthood upon him even after the long
years which had passed. The King snorted softly to himself. Late bloomer indeed. He - It - will never
grow horns, Laufey sneered, forever a child with an aged mind trapped within.*
At that, the image of Helblindi rose before his mind's eye. Helblindi, tall, well-made, with the proud-formed blunt horns of adulthood now fully grown. Helblindi who so assiduously pursued his duties as Crown Prince. Helblindi, currently with Farbauti and Byleistr, who even now waited patiently in the antechamber for Laufey's call. For Laufey's decision.

"Give him a chance," Farbauti had said, squeezing Laufey's hand before stepping back. "I wish to meet Smár'brothir!" complained Byleistr who wished to see the creature about whom news had come, describing impossible tales of magic and derring-do. Byleistr had always wished to be an Elder Brother. "Helblindi got to meet him... I do not see why I should miss out on this chance..."

"And if he – it – attempts to stay?" Helblindi asked calmly. "The Court will not approve."

"Helblindi is right," Laufey had sighed with relief that at least his Eldest was showing some sense. "Its stay will be short, Byleistr, if it stays at all. Calm yourself. I will decide – you three will wait."

Thus they had parted and now Laufey found the words to speak as he peered closer at the Ulfrbarn that might have been his child.

"So... So this is the one of whom the superstitious lackwits of Snjarhamr laud as hero. The Wolf's Child, the Ulfrbarn so named... So aptly named," he chuckled, "...for a scrawny savage such as yourself... yet..." Here, Laufey paused, waiting for the creature to react, but there was no open response other than a returned serene gaze. He wondered if the Runt was in fact mentally cognizant. Tales spoke of Runts who, living longer than their time, succumbed to the witlessness of babes – or who were born thus, mentally incapable. Laufey shuddered. For those reasons and others, he thought, our people have had no choice but to end their misery swiftly and, over time, have created stricter rules that the more merciful path of early death may be granted. Yet this one... this one...

"You have proven the power of your blood and, as with all those given the honour of my House's heritage, the endurance of my line runs strong within you. Your obvious... deficiencies... aside, for a Runt, you, little Ulfrbarn, surpass all expectation."

A pause. The runt's thin lips quirked up then and with surprising grace, its heels snapped together as the Ulfrbarn gave a deep obeisance. Rising from a low bow swiftly, the Ulfrbarn smiled again, its hard red eyes glinting, leaving Laufey with an unpleasant impression – before saying slowly and with sardonic amusement:

"Expectations? I was not aware of any."

"As one of the Royal line, whatever you may be, expectation lies upon you – a natural thing as snow is to Jotunheim-"

"The Royal Line?" blinked the creature innocently.

"Do not play the fool, lagreinn," growled Laufey but then he paused as if a thought had struck him, "unless such understanding is beyond you." He turned to Councillor Ókilsa who hovered by the closer window. "We should call Head Mage K'valso to ascertain the creature's mental-"

"I understand just fine," snapped the Ulfrbarn, bristling, his grip tightening about the spear with which he had armed himself. "I am merely attempting to allow you the benefit of publicly disowning me if you so will."

"Hahaha," Laufey gave a hard laugh then. "Ahhh... to disown – such a thing is impossible for the Jotunn. Or very nearly impossible. Such a mortal, such an Asgardian concept, foolish creature – and it betrays your ignorance. For here, on Jotunheim, if a creature such as you lives, and bears the mark of its shamed Sire... there are... many options or means for disposal, but actual acts of disowning are forbidden. Such oaths being broken on the physical plane affect the realms which are not seen and to sever the link between one's own blood and the For-Eldra is a cruelty beyond imagining – even for us."

"No? Rather you aid them to meet the For-Eldra all the sooner-"
"The better to ease their suffering-"
"Your suffering-"
"SILENCE!" thundered Laufey.

The runt looked up at him brazenly – unfazed and Laufey found himself standing and looming over the insect-like dvegr, attempting to cow the creature into silence. Unsuccessfully.

"So you would rather-"
"Why have you returned, Unwanted One?" Laufey cut off the insolent wretch before it could complete its sentence.
"I came for answers to a question."
"Hm. And what may that question be?"

Calculating red eyes ran over the hall, sweeping over the huddled councillors and nobles before landing back on Laufey. Dark lips quirked upward then.

"I do not think you are ready for it yet," the Vaetki finally said.

Laufey gritted his teeth. The impudence. Does the little fool not realize where he stands – before whom he stands?

"Still..." Once again, the Ulfrbarn's eyes swept around the room swiftly as if measuring up and then barely attempting to hide his responding scornful smile. "I admit to curiosity, Laufey-King, for it appears as though your grand kingdom has acquired something of a... tarnish. Perhaps you would benefit from what knowledge I gained during my travels among the Nine Realms – and beyond."
"Your knowledge."
"Hm. This would supposedly place us in debt to you, then?"
"I would say so, yes. Yet, the bargain is not hard, I think – for payment would only be an answer – on the day I ask a question of you, you, Laufey-King, must answer in all honesty. A fair bargain, do you not think? For one such as I surely cannot be... choosy."

It is not fair, Laufey thought as a matching smile crossed his face, but then to countenance a bargain with one such as this creature... merely allowing it to live is a gift in and of itself.

Laufey nodded. Grimly.

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"Very well," he said, slowly easing back on his great black throne – and Loki's gut unknotted slowly as the realization that he had partially won the monarch over finally settled in.

This will work out after all, the short Jotunn thought dazedly. After a fashion... of course, he will plot against me from now on and thus we will hold our own secrets... My identity as Loki kept secret, his true plans for me similarly held... How desperate they must be – as their Realm falls further into decline...

...you could save them...

Loki shuddered as he thought of the Casket and its mournful voice.

...even now...
No, he thought, looking about the room again, noting the hunger hiding behind the facade of vast grandeur. *Even with the Casket... I would think it too late... this world, Loki told himself, is doomed.*

*[...having found one's place...]*

*[...turn one's back...]*

*[...put away the old, take on the new...]*

*[...let it perish...]*

*[...in silence...]*

Then, breaking the following awkward, burdened silence, shattering the quiet and disrupting their thoughts, a side door well-hidden in the far wall's shadow burst open before a young Jotunn, obviously just beginning his final steps to full Jotunn adulthood, judging by the newly scabbed, still rather stunted horns and flaky scalp which was most common during molting. The short kirtle, a dark leather with silver threaded down one side and a stout silver and metal belt securing it, immediately by its very high quality, proclaimed the wearer to be, if not Royal, than Noble at least. Yet as the two giants trailing behind arrived and clustered about to look down at him in curiosity, Loki could see the similarities in their features, the family resemblance. Tall lankiness combined with hard muscle and a wide forehead with deep set eyes – the heritage of Laufey. Shorter stockiness with sensitive facial features denoting a lively, emotive intelligence – the mark of Farbauti.

Shoving down newly realized rising emotions of inadequacy, Loki wondered if within his own stunted stature could be seen any resemblance to those before him, the family, the Royal Family, supposedly his family.

Another silence.

Then:

"He is so... small!" blurted out the younger Jotunn.
"Why else is he a dvegr, lag'rhyggr," the Prince's Helblindi elbowed his younger brother.
Loki smirked, "Astim observation."
"And it speaks!"
"Why would I not speak?" Loki asked caustically, his voice rising in warning.
"Well," the young Jotunn sat then, the better to face Loki eye to eye, "the Archivist, Mage Ishko told me that, when allowed to grow of an age, the Jotunn dvegr are witless and most cannot speak and die too quickly..."
"Well, they probably died for lack of care," Loki found it rather difficult to suppress the rage rising within him at the casual acceptance of folklore with no apparent, adequate research on the matter. *And they call the folks of Snjarhamr witless!* He seethed. *The lack of reason even here – such wilful ignorance... a crime against all thinking creatures. Thor may act the fool but at least he is willing to learn in his own fashion, albeit too slow for my liking...*

Above the young Jotunn Prince's head, looks between Farbauti and Laufey were exchanged. Farbauti sent his mate a definite meaningful "I told you so" look which Loki had seen before on his mother's face when Odin was once again found at fault for some household matter. Laufey frowned, coughed and said:

"It has been an era of desolation for the Realm... too long have we been forced to eke out a dire existence from nothing. Therefore, it is no surprise that the graces other Realms may engender may not flourish here. Independence is what all younglings must achieve – what we must all carry –
showing our worth to the community and carrying our own burdens. The dvegr of our Race have
ever been leeches, or so 'tis said, that it is better to end their lives before such a painful existence
begins – or continues."

"And yet, here I am," Loki replied blandly, "with aid. If you have need for it."

"We do not need your aid, Ulfrbarn," Helblindi bristled then. "We have no need to depend on-
"Ahhh! Ignore 'Blindi," said the younger Jotunn, rolling his eyes. "He is stuffy all the time, trust me.
I think it has to do with preparing for Kingship and the like."

"Last time we met you were but a Prince-"

"I am no King," Helblindi snapped, bridding. "Be quiet, Byla!"

"Byleistr," said "Byla". "I am your Elder, Ulfrbarn, so you must pay respect to me."

"I must, must I?"

"Of course! Yet, I am happy to meet you. I have long wished to meet you, smar'brothir."

"'Smar'brothir'?"

"Little brother'," Farbauti spoke up then, voice heavy with emotion. "'Smar'brothir' for the young
ones, 'Meir'brothir' for your elders... But of course... you would not know such familiarity..."

He paused, turned his head away for a moment, obviously distressed – and then began afresh. "I am
Farbauti, Consort and Fjor'fylgja of Laufey-King, and as such, some would call me Queen," here, he
bared his teeth in a general approximation of a feral smile, which Loki thought looked familiar, "or
wife, or even perhaps, Mother, but you may call me "Fylgja"."

"Fylgja'," echoed Loki in a deadpan voice, recalling the memories of the other younglings who had
run to their fathers, chanting 'Fyla! Fyla!' with arms outstretched.

"Or perhaps Farbauti will suffice," added the older Jotunn, kneeling on one knee and placing a
gentle hand on Loki's head. "The stars shine on our meeting, I think, Little One."


And you shall know no others, Loki vowed to himself, eyeing his so-called family. Not if I have any
say in it. This is not my place and any title of parentage you name yourself in relation to me has no
meaning.

Loki remembered Frigga then – sharply and vividly – her hands placing a cool cloth across his
aching brow, he light laughter, clear, blue eyes and the true concern she had always held for him.
There was also Thor, the annoying, foolish older brother who jested with him, fought with him,
fought alongside him... believed in him when no one else would. Even distant undecipherable Odin
had benefited me, helped me gain what I have today... gave me a place within his home – in Asgard.
And what has this so called 'Fylgja' done? As for Helblindi...

Loki smiled up coolly at his eldest sibling and watched with well-hidden glee as the Crown Prince
shifted uneasily beneath his younger brother's gaze.

Byleistr was speaking again, obviously excited an not very concerned about the politics of the
moment. But then, Loki thought philosophically, he is very young and no doubt well-sheltered by the
kirtle of Farbauti. He will age and will change... they all do, he thought darkly of the secret of his
Jotunn heritage which he had thus far concealed from Asgard thanks to his inherent abilities to
shape-shift and utilize all forms of magic. Long had Thor and his warriors, Odin and Frigga and the
other Mages noticed his now legendary abilities using Elvish artifacts, Dwarvish runes and the ice of
the 'Frost Giants' with ease – and, while looking at Loki with something bordering on worry, they, at
least in name, had accepted Loki's eccentricities. Yes. They accept me in words now – but should
they discover the truth of the matter, they would reject me easily enough. In the end, Asgard and
Jotunheim are no different creatures in their response to the unnatural, to the enemy...

"How long will you stay?" Farbauti was asking now.

"It - he - uh, it is staying?" Helblnidi's voice rose sharply.

"Of course," Farbauti rose then to eye his eldest child with concern. "Otherwise, your Fylgja would
"A short time only," Loki allowed distaste to flit over his face as he looked about the Court Hall. "Once I have attended to the matter for which I am here, I will leave you all in... peace..."
"The sooner the better," agreed Laufey.
"Then, let us get you settled in," Farbauti said briskly. "Come, let us find some quarters suitable for you. I think I know just the room!"

Thus, the Ulfrbarn returned to Jotunheim.

[...the Wind, finding its spirit again...]

[...howled tunelessly over the fields...]

[...hope had come at last...]

"Father," Helblindi's voice broke the silence of Laufey's private study as he slipped in the door and shut it behind him. "You called?"
"We need to talk."
"About the Ulfrbarn," Helblindi guessed.
"Yes. He poses a problem. Well," Laufey sighed, "that is nothing new. From the moment of his conception, that wild spirit brought me nothing but grief and even now grows complex issues with the speed of ice crystals sprouting on a still pond during a wild blizzard. Ahhh..." Laufey, pinching the bridge of his nose, shook his head. "Sit."

Helblindi obeyed quickly, knowing that his father's legendary short temper was no doubt rising to the fore as the question which the Ulfrbarn posed nagged the monarch. It bothered him as well.

"How did he..."
"I thought he died the day we forced him from my womb."
"He was..."
"Yes," Laufey shook his head. "We guessed his lack of growth was a bad sign – and so, made the decision to... remove the thing before it grew to any sort of awareness. That was our hope."
"And the – the Ulfrbarn was to have died upon removal."
"Yes."
"And he did not."
"Apparently not. Was it a soft-hearted Mage? Was it some mistake of a servant? Who can we blame? No one. No one. For many died that night within our lost citadel, Utgard, and the truth will be lost to us forever."
"Does the Ulfrbarn know?" asked Helblindi. "Does he - it - does the Ulfrbarn know what had happened?"
"No. I suppose not. Yet, according to the reports, the creature was found abandoned by a Caretaker who instead of releasing the creature, allowed it to live. Sentimentality which may slay us all. And yet... and yet..." Here, Laufey mused, hands folding before his chin in thought. "And yet, although the risks are many, there may be some use for it... to flush out discontent, to purge Jotunheim, to throw into relief all those who stand with us and against us... those you stand for you and against you, the future King of Jotunheim."
"And when you are finished," Helblindi said, mouth in a hard, flat line, "we – we just – just throw him away, Faetha? Throw him away like refuse?"
"He brings nothing but trouble and on the day you reach the Truth, you reach the Cave and hear the Truth of the matter, the Truth and the Warning which is bound to secrecy, then... then, you will understand, Helblindi. You will understand. It is for the good of Jotunheim. The good of our Realm."
"The good of Jotunheim," Helblindi echoed faintly. "For Jotunheim."
He opened his eyes, blearily meeting the sight of a distant black-stone ceiling, and paused for a moment, disoriented. Instead of being greeted with the familiar wooden and stone beams of his bedroom back home in Asgard, Loki could only see faint traceries in the stone above him – simple and elegant. No heavy warmth in the air, no sweet fragrance of flowers and herbs and newly cut grass, no faint salty tang from the ocean. In this darkening realm, there was a deep silence at the heart of all things – yet, even now, there was some sign of life. The fresh scent of snow, the desolate howl of the wind carrying with it distant jarnkottr battles and the call of the grey wolves who roamed the Grarfjall Mountains which partially surrounded Gastropnir in a cold, hard embrace. An annoying clang of a loose shutter also echoed around the vast open room which Loki had been given for his "short stay" in Jotunheim.

Short is what we all want, Loki groaned as he rolled onto his other side snuggling under the furs given to him by Farbauti and the ever-ready servants. Not that I need a blanket. Loki had first thought to refuse it, but then he had acquiesced knowing that Farbauti meant well. No doubt to ease his guilt, Loki snorted, and to make up for Laufey-King's ungracious attitude.

Loki had, thus far, taken quarters in the King's Hall for a total of two Asgardian weeks – spending his days as carefully as may be while attempting to find the answers he sought on his own. Everyday produced its own particular challenges, yet so far, Loki had risen to meet them all, finding in this once familiar, now foreign, land, a new kind of rhythm to life.

Mornings were filled with quick planning, mentally listing what he hoped to achieve for the day ahead. With care, Loki groomed himself each day, knowing that others watched him with a close eye. Combed his short, dark hair, tamed its unruly curls and pressed it back with oils and other potions which he had packed. Thor would have laughed – had laughed before – at how fastidious Loki was. How quickly he had learned to charm himself a mirror out of water, the better to transport himself, yes – and also in aid of the younger Prince's daily ablutions when on a quest. Jotunn, thanks to their diet, biology and lifestyle, did not depend upon the various cosmetic habits encouraged by other Realms – brushing one's teeth, applying creams to one's face and such-like.

That, however, doesn't necessarily apply to me – Loki sighed, making sure that his face was properly washed as well as his now usually bared torso. His kirtle (gifted to him by Farbauti) – a leather and silver affair similar to that of Byleistr's – needed to be spotless and his wolf cloak well-kept. Every night, with the aid of some light warming charms (to raise the temperature of the water from freezing to merely cool), Loki took a bath which most Jotunn only took once a week. If that.

The land of barbarians, Loki's lip curled derisively as he made his way down to the Feast Hall for the early breakfast which was served every morning. Here, things were similar and yet different to Asgard's daily feasting habits. It was an ear-deafening affair – bustling and a little disorganized and the worst way, Loki thought, to begin one's day, really. However, unlike Asgardian breakfast, Laufey's Court enjoyed, of course, cooler fare – uncooked or lightly cooked or smoked eel and fish with ice cordials, lukewarm sea-creature stews and other grain-based foods, such as the brown-grain bread and black-bread rolls.

Loki always left the breakfast table early, rushing off straightaway to the Royal Archives, where he researched steadily until lunch was served. Some days, he would not emerge for the mid-day meal, preferring to snack on any extras he packed away from the breakfast table. However, at some point in the early afternoon, or mid-way through it, Byleistr or Farbauti (or both) would inevitably come to drag him away that he might "take rest" among Laufey-King's court.
Rest, it was not. There, Loki stayed perforce – hunting, playing various games or taking part in activities, gossiping, ignoring the blatant whispers about his size, attire or manners which went on about him – in short, politicking. This was an arena in which Loki had become familiar with over time at the Mage’s Court and then in Odin All-Father’s Court.

Still, one might have an affinity, Loki sighed, looking about the large feasting hall one night, but sometimes, it can get just a little dull and a part of you just wants to let chaos loose and watch the world burn...

Yes, the darker side of him whispered, show them you really are...

...WHO YOU REALLY ARE...

...listen not, beloved, to the lies...

...listen not...

Ahhh... Loki mentally groaned to himself while forcing his smile to grow wider as Byleistr leaned forward. The possibilities are endless and thus it is difficult to decide...

This evening, like any other, there was the usual intermingling of nobles, officials and Royals. Some days, there were other meetings he was allowed to attend (as if they really respected his uncertain position within the Court) and other affairs which demanded a certain amount of finesse. Dinner was no different – an intricate dance of accepting back-handed compliments, dealing with hidden threats or insults and ensuring one’s safety. Usually, Loki would attempt to slip away yet again to continue his research or Meerauk and his name. Some nights, he was successful, after which he would then slip back to his room and collate his notes. Some nights Byleistr accompanied him to do his own research and they would end up with sharp debates on Jotunn philosophy, historical veracity of tales, the origins of magick and Inter-Realm politicks. Some nights, he was not able to escape, which resulted in long, mind-numbing evenings fending off insults and questions. Unlike his usual habits in Odin All-Father’s Hall, Loki would only perform a few workings and never did he show his abilities to tell a tale. Instead, he spent most of his time listening to what the others said of each other.

Always, he heard the whispers.

The whisperings...

"That he is allowed to stay-"
"The For-Eldra should have welcomed him long ago..."
"It is his workings, his abilities, that is what-"
"Ah. That is a fair point-"
"You saw what he did on one of the farms beyond the city-"
"That really happened?"
"Magick? Bah! Tomfoolery, mark my words-"
"A trick?"
"No doubt."
"It is wishful thinking-"
"I had thought Laufey to be ageing – but surely not to give into witlessness so easily-"
"Perhaps it is time-"
"Helblindi is, after all, quite capable."

Of these conversations, Loki said nothing, storing them away with other nuggets of information he had gleaned. How the people groaned under the burden of their Realm's slow death. How eking one’s existence was all but impossible. How Laufey's reign was undermined slowly by the lack of
confidence within the Jotunn as the Realm inevitably fell into ruin.

As if the loss of the Casket is one Giant's fault, Loki shook his head in disgust. But then, he mused, remembering Shax's, Farfin's and the Mages' punishments heaped upon his head, more often than not from frustration over Thor. People like a scapegoat...

How Helblindi was viewed as a break from tradition – not being a True Heir – and thus representing a new era of hope for the desperate Jotunn. Although he shows no sign of real affinity for magick, much less the Realm's Spirit or the flow of Life itself, Yggerdrasil.

How the small, but obstinate, branch of traditionalists had more than once offered compliments to the Ulfßrbarn, referring to his continued presence as a "gift of the For-Eldra". Loki had a difficult time trying to figure out if they wished him to supplant Laufey-King as the True Heir (something he was loath to do) – or wished him dead (since traditionally, he was a burden and a curse).

Not that they haven't tried, Loki grimaced as one of his fingers subtly twisted in an Elvish sigil. He murmured over his cup of ice cordial, looking for any trace of poison. One night, he had made the mistake of not being as careful and, as usual, one of the less important (therefore, favour-seeking) officials had tainted his drink. Upon realization, Loki had slipped away and purged himself – a tedious, painful and bitter affair. Spending one's entire evening, hanging over one's privy, hoping no one noticed what had happened, was not the best way one could spend one's time. From that time onward, Loki's paranoia mounted. However, it was only a matter of time, he knew, before one of the vainglorious fools of Laufey-King's Court would make the mistake of calling him out. Loki was ready for it. They will regret it, Loki vowed, setting his jaw as he glanced about the room warily. When it happens.

Three weeks after his arrival, Loki's premonition was realized one evening during the post-main course drinks and finger food, which consisted of more mead and cordials alongside imported fruit and soft, tasteless bread. Just as he was reaching for another apple to cut, a lightly inebriated Jotunn sauntered up to the table casually and waved a half-full stone-carved pint in his large fist.

"Long-live the Half-Wit!" He roared with a smile. "May the For-Eldra be spared his presence that much longer-"

The Hall, uncharacteristically, fell dead silent in a matter of seconds. Only the barest of a whisper echoed as everyone froze and turned in blatant curiosity to see what the Jotunn dwarf would say. Noticing the smirks of the Jotunn about him, Loki felt his spark of anger burst into wild flame. Loki, under normal circumstances, would have laughed it off, would have told a witty joke at the expense of the Jotunn before him –

Would have. Could have. Should have.

With lethal grace, Loki rose in his over-sized chair, standing on the wooden box offered him to bring him higher to the table's edge. Without a word, he whipped his left hand upward, flinging a large shard of ice which had easily formed to his hand against the right shoulder of the Jotunn – and glared. Cold and clear, Loki's voice filled the spaces of silence, bringing the room into a deeper hush as the other Jotunn just began to gain an inkling, slowly admit that this creature, whatever the Ulfßrbarn was, was above all Royalty.

"Tomorrow morn, let us meet then on the Ice Field of Korovasi. Be prepared to meet the For-Eldra yourself, lagr'hyggr."

With that, Loki lifted his chin in a contemptuous jerk, sat down and gave no sign of paying any further heed to the disrespectful Jotunn before him. The official looked blank – stunned – for all of
five seconds before giving a confident, booming laugh and turning away. Loki smirked to himself. *Confidently he goes to his death an-

Loki's darkly gleeful ruminations were cut short as his arm was jerked up painfully – Byleistr had grabbed hold of him roughly, ignoring the jabs of ice which instantly descended upon his less tough hide as he hauled off the now wildly, yet silently, struggling Ulfrbarn.

"Byleistr!" Farbauti was not following hard on his younger child's heels. "What in Helheim do you think you are doing?"
"Let me go!" Loki hissed viciously, dragging into the back of Byleistr's hand with one of his daggers.
"We need to talk-OW!" Byleistr dropped Loki unceremoniously on the ground having finally reached a quiet passageway.
"Talk about what?" snapped Loki, rising to his feet and dusting himself off.
"What you just did in there!"
"What I just did?"
"Stop being obstinate, lag'hyggr!" Byleistr growled now understanding Helblindi's feelings all those years. "Do you want to get yourself killed?"
"What? The duel? I-"
"It is *holmganga*, Ulfrbarn – and it is insanity for you to – to-"
"I can take care of myself-"
"You are tiny! Fragile! So easily trampled upon. You would not survive-"
"He is right," Farbauti sighed quietly. "I would not have wished this on you, Little One."
"Why he fell for that is beyond me."

That was Helblindi. Loki sighed. *This is just... great... just great. And look – Laufey is here as well to round out this, oh so friendly, session. Looking unhappy too. As usual. Unhappy and a little too hopeful for my liking...*

"Official Kortha is a power-hungry-"
"Peace, Farbauti," Laufey said calmly. "The Ulfrbarn brought it upon itself-"
"Ha!" Loki snored. "As if I could let that insult pass. Not just to me – but also the For-Eldra-"
"You don't care about the For-Eldra-"
"No, I do not, Helblindi," Loki agreed, "but he annoyed me. It is as good a reason as any other."
"The truth then-"
"Laufey, beloved, he cannot win-"
"Fylgia!" Byleistr pleaded. "You know what will hap-"
"It is out of my hands-"
"I can take care of mys-"
"Silence, lagreinn," Laufey growled.
"I will not be silent when-"
"Hush, Little One," Farbauti said quickly. "We will get you out of this-"
"We will do nothing of the sort," Laufey disagreed.
"Fylgia!" Byleistr rose even higher with shock, cracking a little from the stress.
"Fylgia is right," Helblindi shook his head. "You know it as well, Faetha!"

At this, Farbauti sighed, nodded, his figure obviously deflated as his shoulders slumped. Rubbing his hand over his face, the King's Consort sagged against the passageway's wall and sighed again. Laufey laid a hand on Farbauti's shoulder and squeezed it in silent comfort.

"The Ulfrbarn will fight," the King said with a certain amount of grimness.
"But he may not lose," Loki gritted out, finally able to get his words out.
"No – no-" Byleistr backed away, horrified before fleeing further down the passage and disappearing
Loki turned and raised an eyebrow in silent question about Byleistr's uncharacteristic outburst. Farbauti smiled sadly, recognizing that look from Laufey and just shook his head.

"He was bullied as a child," Helblindi finally replied, voice heavy and not a little sad. "His first holmganga – did not go... well... with him."
"And he fears for me," Loki murmured.
"Yes, he was always a little... strange..."
"He need not worry. I said it before and I will say it again-"
"Holmganga is-"
"The Úlfrbarn knows what it has invoked full well," Laufey interrupted Farbauti again with a hard glance. "You saw the ice dagger, you saw the ritual carefully followed. The creature understands – and no doubt, it will survive somehow, having that annoying staying power with which all leeches are gifted."
"He endured far worse in the Utanheim," Helblindi pointed out.
"Well that may be but-"
"No buts," Laufey repeated firmly. "I have a feeling..." Here Laufey gave Loki a hard look. "I have a feeling that, like the pernicious wolf and all wild things with whom it belongs, the Úlfrbarn will somehow maintain its miserable existence. Come, Helblindi."

With that, Laufey and Helblindi returned to the hall. Yet, Farbauti remained, saying nothing and making no movement.

"I declared it," Loki said finally, finding himself to be the unwilling comforter of the savages who had abandoned him as a child. "The rules of engagement are mine..."

The words are hollow. Unconvincing. Farbauti did not stir, so Loki went in search of Bylesitr. After checking Bylesitr's two favourite "thinking spots", Loki turned to the library – and sure enough, he found the young Jotunn in the Archive's open balcony which overlooked the city. There he brooded, sitting on the ground and looking out into the night. Lowering himself, Loki took a spot besides the quiet Jotunn and allowed his relatively short legs to dangle over the edge next to Byleistr's. Nothing was said for a long time – each buried in his own thoughts (Loki planning, Byleistr obviously worrying) and content to just be. The moon was high in the night sky before Byleistr gave a noisy exhale and said haltingly:

"What if you die?"
"I will not die," Loki battled down rising annoyance. Why do they not listen to me? Why does no one listen to me? Still... better not alienate my only supporter before an upcoming battle.
"But what if you do?"
"I will not."
"But what if – WHAT IF?!"

Loki sighed then, rubbing his face wearily before leaning against the nearest railing pole.

"I will not. And if I do... if I do... I will join the branches of Yggdrasil and-"
"You will go to the For-Eldr-
"Valhalla."
"Valhalla," Byleistr huffed derisively. "Valhalla indeed. What are you – Asgardian?"
"Either way," Loki smiled to himself, "I will die and become part of a larger Truth."
"You do not carry a death wish, do you, Smar'brothir?" Byleistr asked then, voice rough with concern.
"I – I-" Loki turned the question over and over in his mind. "I have always walked closely with
Death, I suppose... Always it has been at my side. You know how I was discovered as a babe?"

Byleistr mutely shook his head, red eyes wide.

"El – the one who took me in – Elska, the Caretaker of the Gothahus..." Loki let out a rattling breath as he shoved down the ache of loss which rose at the memory of the rough kindness that was Elska. "He – he once told me he found me in the embrace of Death – covered in swathes of blood and ice. A child of war. A child of losss... and since then, life has been... hard. Hard at times, yet still, somehow, like a leech," Loki thought bitterly of Laufey's words, of how he never quite fulfilled the hopes of his owners, Farfin's expectations, the Mage's standards or the Asgardian warrior's code, "I struggle on. An arrogant thing, perhaps."

"I am glad," Byleistr laid a hand on Loki's shoulder. "Ulfrbarn brought hope and my little brother brought knowledge and speaks of deep things with me. I am glad you could come... and I dread the day you leave, fear the day of Death's embrace... Do not be so hasty nor so flippant with what life has given you."

"I will not," Loki replied quietly. "I do not. Have faith in my abilities, Byla..." He hesitated, then grinned viciously up at Byleistr, "for they are many – and devastating – I promise."

"Hmmm..." Byleistr was not entirely convinced but he said no more – and so they parted, Loki returning to his rooms to prepare for the holmganga.

His first holmganga. Loki grinned. *They will not be expecting this... ah, Thor...* He sighed. *It is a pity you were not here to see this.*

Chapter End Notes

So... Loki's gotten into trouble. Again. LOL.

Tell me whatcha think~!

Couple of things...

1. Feel free to stop by my kakashidiot tumblr to read my thoughts on Thor: The Dark World and etc. Also on my profile are links to my original fics which you can read~
2. Update in a week or so.
3. Side Story has been updated to show the newest previewed side story on culture shock and Loki in Asgard...
4. A new reviewer-only side-story preview will be sent out in a week or two: "A Day With Elska".

See ya round~
-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fot'r'ro - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvila - high bed
Hitì-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegia – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hrignraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa'a'vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyyr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormeri – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
raudhaust – high bed
Thanks to pressure from friends, I watched Catching Fire... I hadn't seen the first one, or read the books (just read excerpts and the end)... and I must say that the whole thing is soooo depressing. The only really "good" person (Peeta) is weak - and I know he's gonna end up broken for the rest of his life. So sad. My favourite characters were the other crazy fighters and their mentor.

'THIS IS A TRAIN RIDE YOU'LL NEVER BE LEAVING!'" THE NEVER ENDING TRAIN RIDE!

Kyahaha. I laughed a lot. I think I needed to be able to see something dark and laugh at it since my mood lately has been dark. But the movie was well-done. Very artistic. Very lovely. Very thoughtful. Now to see Ender's Game... hmmm... (will have to download it or something)

After watching these films, I'll be set for writing a Loki AU Hunger Games/Ender's Game style. XDDD

Thanks so much to people following and faving and reading... and REVIEWING~! So encouraging since this week I felt a bit more tired than usual and depressed b/c I dunno if I'll finish Nanowrimo in time. Le sigh. Anyways... Thanks to everyone who's been so sweet to drop a line or two (or more~): Augustus Blade, Sheeshasan, The Psychotic Queen, Mishil, acidburned, Chiharu-angel, Roith and Lorette, cecld16, Winter Cicada, Double Gemini, ClaMiAl, Naerysya, DragonsFlame117, InfinitelyBoredForTheMoment, IvySnowe, The Soul Soldier and InsolentKatt~!

I'll be working on a side-story for those who have reviewed Chapter 48 and onward. xD "A Day With Elska" - tiny!Loki flangst.

Be sure to...

A) CHECK OUT FANART ON MY PROFILE PAGE. SCROLL DOWN TO THE BOTTOM! THERE BE THE PRETTIES! Comment on the pics too as well! A new pic by our Double Gemini/Tiamatsan - a coloured pic of the Ulfrbarn with Wolf~ Very cool.

B) Add the side-story story to your fav and follow list. Some of you who don't review, go there to read what you have missed for the side story stuff. (May I call it goodness?)

Well, we have a fight scene up ahead! VIOLENCE~!

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 51
The Ice Field of Korovasi was laid, tales tell, by the ancient Jotunn King of the same name, Laufey-King's own Great-Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandfather, a lover of sport and, above all, justice, had instituted with rigorous standards the ritual of Holmganga. Not invented it, no, but he refined the concept that it may better serve as a form of resolution between conflicting Jotunn. At that time, Gastropnir was only a small village and had no real significance within Jotunheim – until Korovasi arbitrarily chose the central city as the head of the Jotunn's judicial administration. Thus began Gastropnir's gloried past as a beauraucratic city – and now it was exalted even more as Laufey-King's favoured seat within the Realm.

The Ice Field, a wide stretch of property to the east of the Palace yet still within the city's walls, was flat, hard and, with its thick ice covering the black soil perpetually a dull grey-white. Round about it, various stumps of ice were scattered for Elders or important dignitaries while the rest of the audience were forced to stand or sit on the ground.

On this particular morning, the entire field was surrounded upon all sides by the King's Court as well as other important merchants and officials who had caught wind of the news in time. Servants and other staff leaned out of the nearby King's Tower, the battlements of the city's wall or other dwellings erected round about. Tall Jotunn, lean Jotunn, short Jotunn, stout Jotunn… each of them unique in colouring of style of carriage. Younglings, not yet molted or showing signs of horns, were cradled in the arms of a few – squealing in high-pitched voices as they flailed about in the usual rough tunics carefully sown for them. Loki, walking past the outer ring of spectators, kept his eyes steady and straight in a vain attempt not to notice the lucky youngsters.

...Elska with a needle, grumbling as he struggled to sew the torn edges of the rough sacking in a straight line...

...no no no....

-don't think on it-

Heavily scarred Jotunn Elders, remnants of the Lengi Ofrithr, sat while around them crowded other older Jotunn, wrinkled and roughened from signs of difficult life-long labour.

...Elska's still form did not respond when he had woken up the next morning...

...nonono...

What brings on such memories? Loki wondered viciously as he walked down the wide path which had been left empty by the Jotunn in preparation for his arrival, who quickly closed ranks behind him. More than ever, the young Jotunn was aware of all the eyes which glowered down upon his dark head. Animosity now safely revealed. Shades of Utgard, Loki thought grimly, damn them. Damn them all to Helheim.

Then Byleistr was at his elbow, tugging on his wolf cloak in a poor attempt to straighten it further. Loki sighed as the second Prince recounted all the possible rules of engagements: the Glima'ganga (can you wield a blade, Smar'brothir?), the Brandr'ganga (do not choose that one – you will not, right?), the Višt'ganga (this is the best, I think, for you), the Frothleikr'ganga (you could choose it, I suppose – but it would not be considered fair and you would lose honour…), the Almor'ganga (archery or throwing knives – can you do either well, Smar'brothir?) or the dread Dauthr'ganga (that means no holds barred – the most vicious form of holganga!). He knew them already and his mind was already decided, but Loki relaxed a little as Byleistr babbled on.
Elska, he mused, perhaps there are a few of you yet. Hluti... Elder Skoll... now, Byleistr.

"I know what I am doing," Loki smiled.
"Yet, Smar'brothir, you have never fought holmganga."
"True – but I have -" Loki paused as memory of the battle pits of Shax rose before his mind's eye. Toh. Xaxor. Shiva. All the dead who had bled before him on the sand. "I have fought before."
"So you keep saying..." Byleistr was still not convinced.

Loki sighed. He will know soon enough.

Stepping out on the field, leaving Byleistr to make his way to the side of his family who firmly occupied the north-west corner, Loki looked forward with stiff shoulders and lifted chin - and faced his opponent who emerged from a tight bunch of raucously shouting Jotunn. Their confident laughter rolled like heavy stones and deep thunder; their audible whisperings were filled with threats and dark promises. The short Jotunn paid them no heed. Such tactics, I have experienced before, Loki reminded himself, and you know the power of words, have used it yourself.

Taking his place on the south side of the field, Loki met the gaze of his opponent who stood at the far north side, waiting for the Rettr'orthir to step forward. The Rettr'orthir, the officiator of the most important holmganga, raised a fragile stand of ice and then, letting his hands fall back to his side, he proclaimed:

"The Rettr'orthir recognizes Kortha of Ulath and the Rettr'orthir recognizes the Ulfrbarn – who have both come to this place, this Ice Field of Korovasi. Let the heitamogr step forward and name his battle."

Loki stepped forward, allowing his wolf's cloak to fall back, raising his chin to better show off his ancestral lines and planting his gifted spear firmly on the ground.

"State the ganga," the Rettr'orthir intoned barely giving Loki a glance.
"I choose to meet Kortha of Ulath in Dauthr'ganga," Loki's calm voice broke the following silence – and immediately all of the onlookers raised their voices in horrified excitement.
"N-"

Helblindi's hand, hitting Byleistr hard in the chest cut off his younger brother before the young Jotunn could get out a syllable.

"Ulfrbarn," the Rettr'orthir frowned, turning to look down at the small Jotunn and paying Loki real attention for the first time in the proceedings. "Dauthr'ganga? Are you certain?"
"Is this questioning usually part of holmganga?" Loki growled, red eyes glittering. "That was not how it was done in Utgard-"
"Well... no..." The Rettr'orthir murmured, nonplussed.
"Then, let us start already!"
"Very well..."
"This Rettr'orthir recognizes the Dauthr'ganga of Kortha and of the Ulfrbarn."

With that, it started.

-0-0-0-

For many years after, Loki would remember his first holmganga as being incredibly quick. It was over before he knew it, he often admitted, and this was largely due to the fact that he had been (once again) grossly underestimated by his opponent. As usual, the audience was heavily weighted against him, which may have seemed daunting to most, yet Loki had learned to glory in the knowledge that...
When the Rettr'orthir swept his hand down, breaking the fragile stand before him, Kortha charged – and for a few breathless seconds, Loki envisioned a long, painful death, trampled below the stocky Frost Giant's feet. Then, several ice projectiles began to fly at him - the forewarning of impending doom – if he did not move. Without hesitation and with the skills born of experience, Loki ducked and raised a wall of ice, gathering his natural ice abilities and melding them with his other augmented powers.

Small shards of ice rose up cracking the sturdy wall, weakening it before Kortha came crashing through, left arm raised protectively across his face as his right reached out to grab hold of Loki by the shoulder. Jerking Loki off his feet and slamming him back down on the rough sheet of ice, Kortha brought his full strength to bear. Shouting and roars of encouragement gave way to cries of shock as Loki shattered into several large shards of ice. An illusion.

Laufey leaned forward, hand raised to his chin – clearly intrigued. Farbauti and Byleistr were looking rather relieved and Helblindi watched silently, face blank and eyes darting around the crowd.

Kortha whipped about just barely fending off a hail of ice daggers which flew at him in a sharp white cloud – he lunged for Loki again and missed. Slipping past the older Jotunn's arm, like water twisting about a rock in the riverbend, Loki eased past – a picture of flexible grace and swift economic movement – to slice the official deeply in the lower back with the bladed edge of his spear. As his short swing ended, his left hand dropped, summoning three of the black, Dwarven-made throwing knives which Thor had gifted him with. They buried themselves in the back of Kortha's knees as the Ulfrbarn managed to find the larger giant's blind spot.

Roaring in pain, Kortha twisted about with surprising agility, reached down and grabbed Loki, this time verifying his catch by squeezing the muscle and bone of Loki's leg. Loki barely had time to react to the pain, to the mild fractures now hidden by the heavy bruises no doubt forming. Suddenly, he was up in the air, facing a blue-grey sky – and then brought down heavily on the cutting edges of the icy field. Biting back the sharp cry of pain nearly wrenched from him, Loki called deeper on the magical well within his possession, teleporting himself out of the Jotunn's hand to relative safety across the field (which raised even more shouts of mixed approval and anger).

Amid a rising roar of encouragement (for Kortha, not him) Loki staggered to his feet, pressing a hand now flaring with magic to his ribs. He allowed the healing flow to run quickly through him – painfully burning in the rush. The bone knit back together – but Loki knew it was only a short-term solution. Another hit like that will put me out permanently, he coughed painfully, eyeing the laughing Jotunn.

"So, like the cowardly wolves, the Ulfrbarn runs from battle-"

That brought hard memories of the Asgardian soldiers and stable boys who had ridiculed him for relying on his magic. Reminded Loki of Thor's easy dismissive attitude toward his fast-growing abilities. The warrior-mage gritted his teeth, ignoring the insults hurled his way.

"Perhaps he should run back to his wolf-mother and suckle her teats for a few more years before he returns to finish this – like a grown Jotunn!"

He will die, Loki decided then, he will die slowly and painfully. Or quickly, the better to warn them – to warn them – this is one who will show no mercy.

Sending another flock of ice birds Kortha's way, Loki watched carefully as the official barricaded himself easily with a wide ice shield, before letting down his guard and running toward him. Once
again, the taller Jotunn bent, intending on scooping up Loki, but this time, the shorter Jotunn was ready. Darts between the official's legs (raising laughter from the audience as Kortha ended up grabbing at air and looking like a general fool), Loki began to focus on gathering up all he had.

"Run, run!" Kortha's taunts rang in his ears. "Or better yet, accept your inevitable loss – you will always lose."

Loki froze as he remembered another time, another memory when he lay before his Mother and spoke of one of his deepest fears.

"...Sometimes, I wish I could. Just to see... to see if this is my destiny."

"What is your destiny?"

What is my destiny?

"To lose. I sound so silly. What I mean is – must I always play the role of the wrong one... the misguided one... the defeated one? Why must... I always fail in what I set my hands to?"

Why must I be the one to fail?

"Oh... Kol'la... Kol'la... Of course not," Frigga had repeated over and over. "Of course not. The things I saw... they were great things... and maybe some of them may seem terrible – but I know that you will work through your path, however dark it may seem and find the place to which you truly belong."

"From the time you were born – no, even before, no doubt, you were fated to die, so accept it and take respons."

The cruel vitriol of Kortha's words inflamed the fire within Loki and the young Jotunn, quivering with barely contained rage, turned, red eyes like flames. Above, the grey-black clouds scudded, forming even more quickly than usual and snowflakes began to swirl down at an alarming speed. Looking upward nervously, the watching Jotunn murmured as the wind began to pick up, as the clouds lowered into a light fog.

With alarming speed, a gale whipped up and Loki spoke – strange, foreign words to the surrounding Jotunn. A spell they would have supposed if the obvious power behind it hadn't thrummed so strongly through the air. Such magic they had never seen before. An unnatural voice reverberating – rising and falling – matching with the elegant ferocity revealed in the red eyes now lit as twin flames. As the elements converged on the group, everyone huddled together under the unexpected blast.

Except for Laufey.

He sat still and watched closely as ice began to form in giant swathes and columns round about, building up, caging in, looming over the arena. Overhead, snow and ice were forming into a familiar, yet dangerous form. Something so ancient it felt foreign – something not seen in Jotunheim for a millennia – the mighty ice dragon Iormungand. Long and spiky, it's tail whipped about, lashing at Kortha and driving fear into the hearts of the onlookers. For so long, it had been the symbol of the frozen Realm – a thing of pride, now soaring and given life again as the Ulfrbarn's hand twisted and formed what Laufey recognized as Elvish sigils.

A kind of working, the like they had never seen before. It spoke of ancient of power and a realization of things they could just barely begin to dream of.

Then, the Ulfrbarn spoke again, his voice finding form in the ancient High Tongue: "Protecting the pride and glory of this nation – this was the gift and burden given to you... and yet you sit here,
craven, casting aspersion on the lowliest – no better than wild dogs turning on each other."

The cold words resounded with the force of a thousand waterfalls and none could meet the living flames of the Ulfrbarn's eyes.

Walls rose up higher and the last thing the Jotunn saw were hundreds of the Ulfrbarn's slight figure flickering into being, successfully providing an illusory cover while the wicked creature completed his deed, enacted his will.

*His will*, Laufey thought, forcing himself not to flinch as the others did when foreign lightning crackled down. *His will remains ever strong. He was always so tenacious – I knew it then... and so he will ever be.*

Thickening and hardening, the ice wall was now opaque and stood higher than the tallest Jotunn – but they could see how the storm had appeared to settle. Perhaps the Ulfrbarn had overextended himself – they could not tell. For a short moment, none could see any movement within. And then... and then... suddenly an orange glow began to expand along the walls of the giant barrier. Laufey stiffened at the sight.

*No*, he thought, *impossible...*

And yet, it obviously was possible, forming before his eyes – flames exploding outward, shattering the ice in every direction with a loud resonating BOOM. Shielding their eyes, the Jotunn cringed as light and fire and ice blinded their sight.

Then, the world fell into silence.

*...and the land of Jotunheim fell silent...]*

*...can you hear it?]*

*...it is even here... in the silence...]*

When the Jotunn finally raised their eyes, all that was left of the Official Kortha was a smoking black pool of sludge before the leather-booted feet of the Ulfrbarn. The Ulfrbarn who stood there without a word, face hard as stone, red eyes hard as crystals.

He looked out and then paused, gut clenching as he recognized the looks on their faces. The looks he had long since learned to decipher as hatred and fear. Fear most of all. Fear which fuelled the madness and cruelty of the superstitious residents of Utgard. Such dark looks held no respect – only repudiation.

*I should have expected it*, Loki thought, distantly, only barely aware of his quick steps across the ice to take his place before the Rettr'orthir who only nodded in return of his ceremonial bow. *Of course, of course... of course... this is – I am – I am. I. Am... something they cannot accept. Never could. Never would.*

Loki left the arena, forcing down the feeling of failure as he remembered Byleistr's worried gaze which had transformed to something like fear.

*Never forget, he told himself, foolish Loki – this is the home that never could be.*
"I suppose," Laufey's voice rumbled out of the shadows, breaking into Loki's musings as the young Jotunn looked out over the city from his high perch in the King's West Tower. "I suppose you think yourself clever."

"Should I not?"

"Hm. 'Cleverness is a two-bladed knife, cutting the wielder as well as the opponent.'"

"Mage Kaldro during the Lengi Ofrithr," Loki nodded. "I know. Perhaps I cut myself today. If I did, you will not – you cannot know."

"Byleistr understands a little now I think," Laufey smiled grimly. "That is enough. For that... I thank you."

Loki refused to reply to the unspoken warning and criticism.

"The two of you have been deep in the Archives researching a variety of things: magick, philosophy, history..."

"Yes," Loki glanced over at Laufey who was now bent over the railing, also gazing down at Gastropnir and watching the lights slowly wink out. "That must burn – to know that one of your house has had the temerity to live when it was offered honourable death – and the other one to cling to what Jotunheim supposedly needs least – children's tales and myths."

"Do you believe that you will survive those trials set before you made by those who look forward to your downfall? You think you will outlast our people's hate?"

"I know I will. I have much to do," Loki replied calmly. "Reading is only one of those things. You know," he added casually. "There have been some mysterious references to Iormungand – as if he had actually existed a long time ago – and other things. Names I have never heard of – ancient names, I think – Ingard... Meerauk..."

"Ingard is a mystery for certain," Laufey grunted, "and as you say, such inquiries are not what Jotunheim needs... fairy tales indeed... They have no need of your attention, for they are myths only – and Meerauk-" He paused and then frowned. "It is a matter for kings, Ulfrbarn, and is not a common thing to besmirch in talk with one such as you."

Loki glared down at Laufey from his high seat. After a few moments, Loki shifted in his seat, dropped down lightly to the ground and then disappeared without further word; yet, despite the fact Laufey had silenced the creature, something stirred uneasily within his gut.

---

The next two weeks followed in a quieter fashion – full of the regular duties and activities of the Jotunn King's Court as everyone gave the vicious Ulfrbarn a wide berth. Left to his own devices, Loki continued to research with renewed zeal – with a focus which increased Byleistr's consternation, although the young Prince had made a point of leaving Loki alone for a few days. Ever since the Dauthr'ganga, the so-called family time during the evenings was now full of awkward pauses – Farbauti attempting to make conversation, Laufey sitting in his usual disinterested silence, Helblindi darkly glowering and Byleistr, obviously discomfited, vascillating between uncertainty and overtures of friendship.

Of course, things did not improve when Helblindi lost to Loki in an informal duel of wits, which ended with Loki, as usual, soaring far above the rest of the Jotunn with his cutting flyting skills. The well-aimed barbs he sent Helblindi's way concerning Utgard's slowing progress were not appreciated – and in the end, even Byleistr's chuckles had faded away. From that night onward, the younger Jotunn nobles kept well away from the sharp-tongued Ulfrbarn, leaving Loki in peace to research.

Research was the main focus of Loki during those days, fueled as he was by Laufey's dismissive tone and cryptic words, more certain than ever that the answer to Meerauk lay within the realm of kingship. Byleistr, hovering at his elbow now and then, could not deter Loki from his self-imposed
quest even if the taller, older Jotunn offered much-needed knowledge on the politics of Laufey's Court or was the only one now willing to spar with the "wild creature".

One particular morning, during a fight with Byleistr which ended with Loki ramming his head into Byleistr's protective hand (which should have sprained the taller Jotunn's wrist in the very least!), Loki discovered that Byleistr had been reduced to laughter. Sending a blast of wind at Byleistr's feet, Loki brought the Jotunn Prince to the ground, but Byleistr's laughter did not abate. Loki sat on the young Giant's chest, folded his arms and glared.

"What is it now?" he huffed.
"No-nothing," chortled Byleistr, attempting to rise and failing, thanks to his quaking. "No-no-nothing."
"It must be something," Loki scowled. "Tell me! Tell me!"
"It is just that with your size – and – and all..." More laughter. "That move-"
"You blocked me so it was incomplete-"
"Y-y-yes, I know – but – but-"
"Tell me!" Loki bounced up and down impatiently on the laughing Jotunn's chest.
"Ai! Ai! Let me up, Smar'brothir, and I will!"

Byleistr then composed himself as promised and looked down at Loki as they angled themselves toward each other, sitting cross-legged together on the hard matting of the indoor sparring room.

"Haahhh..." Byleistr let out a gusty breath. "I meant no disrespect, Smar'brothir, but it was funny-"
"I fail to see the humour."
"Ai! Such a black look on your face will scare even a thurblakulfr away! The thing is-"
"Yes-"
"It is nothing really – only-"
"Yes?"
"When one is small – or young, I should say," Byleistr eyed his younger brother thoughtfully, "when the horns begin to bud, one tends to head-butt things a little more often."

Loki's hand rose automatically to his smooth forehead and self-consciously smoothed back his short black hair which needed a cut all too soon, he thought.

"Would it not pain the forehead bone more?" Loki asked nonchalantly as Byleistr's hand rose to press against Loki's smaller forehead.
"'A different pain is some relief', Sage Ola'o once said," Byleistr shook his head and smiled. "He was right. Some say that with battle, the horns become stronger."
"Hm. Well. I show no signs of growing horns – but to hit you with my head is pleasing."
"It is a mark of all Jotunn, big or small, I should guess. Mine grew out quite nicely," Byleistr proudly puffed out his chest. "Faetha says mine are especially fine."

Loki eyed the twisted horns, stifling the envy rising in his chest, thoughtfully. They were no longer than this forearm... My own horns, the second Prince of Asgard smiled at the thought of his favourite gold helmet now safely sitting at home, are much grander. A pity I couldn't bring them along... Ever since the day of his adoption, Loki had felt great pride in the grand horns gifted to him by Asgard. Greater than Grandfather Bors's helmet, Loki had privately thought – and definitely grander than Thor's! The conversation steered away from the uncomfortable topic, returning to the familiar ground they both enjoyed: research.

"How goes it?"
"Slowly," sighed Loki. "Too slowly. For a kingdom of nothing-"
"Hey now!" interjected Byleistr.
"Laufey-King's Archives are filled all too well."
"What do you seek?"
"A name. A name that will lead to a name," Loki responded cryptically and then added quickly.
"Meerauk is the name I seek. Laufey mentioned it related to the Kings and kingship..."
"Meerauk," Byleistr leaned back against a stone column and scratched his chin thoughtfully.
"Meerauk... Did you ask Fylgja?"
"I asked. It did not go well."
"Ha. I should not think it would – hm. I will ask Faetha."
"Farbauti would know?"
"As Consort, maybe," Byleistr shrugged.
"Well, it is worth a try," Loki sighed ungraciously. But he was smiling.

The next morning, raising his head stiffly from the book on top of which he had fallen asleep, Loki's blurry vision caught sight of a scrap bit of parchment by his hand, the lines of his brother's neat script written across it. 'Suggest you try out Talik's On Stars and the Kings; Mage Lu'iko's Vithrvatn: Lake of Legends and The Annals of the Kings and Rituals on the unbound shelf. Peace, Byla.' Then, further down, as if an afterthought: 'You should sleep in your own bed, Smar'brothir. In this place, exhaustion leads to death. Even with such shields as you erect.'

Thanks to Byleistr's suggestion, Loki's research continued apace – and yielded better results. Within the following week, Loki had all the information he needed. With renewed zeal, Loki took note of the information hidden within the obscure scrolls he had found. Finally, finally, he had found Meerauk.

[...the ancient forgotten city of the kings...]

[...it is calling...]

Loki packed swiftly and efficiently, memorizing the land features on the map he had also copied by hand from the ancient scroll he had found tucked away – almost hidden – beyond the stacks of unbound books in the far corner of the Great Archive. Into his pack, he placed all of his few possessions which had sat neatly in the corner of the large quarters which Farbauti had given him: his flint and tinderbox, healing kit, spare clothing, whetstone, fishing pole, hooks and bait and other dried food he had stored up. On his way out, Loki planned to nip into the pantry to grab a few spare fresh items he could use. Once out of the kitchens, Loki slipped out the back door to find a quiet, unnoticed spot where he could call upon his magick – but a quiet voice stopped him in his tracks.

"So, you are leaving."

Loki turned slowly, adjusted a strap, shifted his spear to the other hand, cocked his head a little to the side and eyed the gangly figure of young Byleistr, idealistic Byleistr who had even in the past month grown before his eyes. Byleistr, who now emerged from the gloom of the large side porch's overhang. Loki did not reply, merely raised an enquiring eyebrow.

"You put all your books back."
"Ah," Loki acknowledged Byleistr's explanation quietly.
"You found what you sought."
"A fairly good clue."
"You do not exactly know then?"
"Not exactly," Loki admitted, "yet, I am fairly certain-"
"Therefore you must go on foot?"
"Well, mainly... yes..."
"The season is not suitable for travel – much less to-
"Are you my mother now?" Loki asked curiously.
"I worry. What if you do not return?"
"Then... you can assume I went to a better place," Loki answered flippantly and shrugged easily.
"Wherever that may be."
"Can you so easily... leave?" Byleistr asked softly.

Loki looked up at Byleistr finally and, as their red eyes met – so similar in so many ways, he felt a pang of regret as he spoke his final words.

"What is this place to me? What is this place?" The short Jotunn paused, breathed in and then out. Closed his eyes for a moment before opening them and starting again. "Jotunheim is... is nothing to me – nothing. To you... to you, it is many things. For me, there is little here – I was never meant to stay."
"But-"
"No buts, Byla," Loki said softly. "Farewell... and... may the snows fall lightly before your feet."

Byleistr reached out and pushed down on Loki's head, grinding a rough palm against the dwarf Jotunn's smaller forehead.

"May the snows fall lightly before yours as well, Smar'brothir – and may your horns bring pride to our For-Eldra."

With a quick nod, Loki turned away and disappeared to the outer edge of the city in the blink of an eye. And Byleistr stood amidst the softly falling snowflakes. Silently.

[...it is a land of silence...]
[...it fell into darkness...]
[...still it falls...]
[...it is falling...]

Chapter End Notes

So we have a sort of Hulk!Smash! moment... and we have Loki being BAMF... and we have a kind of sadness here, I hope that you can see. And some foreshadowing. Ehhehehe.

Up ahead - MEERAUK! A NAME! AN EPIC! A LOST EPOCH! GET THOSE TIMELINE SHEETS OUT FOLKS! IT'S HISTORY TIME!
(with Loki)
Thanks so much!
Let me know what you guys think!
See ya round!
-KI

Alien Glossary:
'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-eff'er
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fot'ro - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvila - high bed
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Oinnim-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa'a'vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
raudhaust – high bed
Learning From The Past I

Chapter Notes

Well, this chapter and the following used to be all one piece but a few exposition parts got out of control. I apologize in advance! I AM SO SORRY! The next two chapters are just full of exposition and crap... But, we get a nice chunk this week, and I'll try to finish the second part in a week and post it in good time. (le sigh)

So... bring out the maps. Bring out the timelines! All are available on Tumblr (my tumblr name is kakashidiot also) and on photobucket. Enjoy.

It seems like more and more people are reading this fic. I'm like... WOW. Stunned! I'm so happy! Thank you so much guys. Particularly those who are reviewing or asking questions. Thanks to: history, Kai_Maciel, iBlameGlobalWarming, Yuurei, nevar_walc, lemomina.

Thanksgiving Week in America this week. I'm not American, but I wanna say that I'm thankful for all you guys who read and who fangirl with me. It's so great to hear from you~!

ALSO BE SURE TO CHECK OUT MY TUMBLR (kakashidiot)! THERE'S NEW FANART UP THERE. Got some fanart of Elska now~! By Raiden Akutabi~! Thanks so much~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 52
Listening To The Past I

It was too quiet. Too quiet, Helblindi thought as he wandered down one of the darkened back hallways after yet another conference with his Fylgja and the Court Advisory Council. The Ulfrbarn was not there poking his nose where he did not belong. Neither was Byleistr at his elbow nagging him for a change either... asking those useless questions of his. In fact, I have not seen either of them for the last few days. Helblindi sighed. Getting up to some kind of trouble no doubt... Pausing at the next window and peering out to eye the angry clouds overhead, the Crown Prince of Jotunheim frowned. Trapped in this place with two fools who play at politics for the theory of it... by Helheim, I hate the winter season...

As if summoned by the goddess Hel herself, Byleistr appeared at Helblindi's elbow.

"Ah. There you are," Helblindi eyed his younger brother sourly. "I was wondering when you would come around to inflict yourself upon me. You missed morning council – for the second day in a row. Are you and that creature up to something again?"
"Eh? Oh..." Byleistr glanced at his older brother in surprise. "No. No." Byla added nonchalantly – with a shrug – as the two turned away from the window and continued on their way. "He left the other day."
Helblindi paused mid-step and came to an unsteady halt.

"Gone? Gone where?"

"No need to be apprehensive," Byleistr moved onward – as if he were merely talking about the time of day and not about the fact that the abomination, who could bring about the ruination of Jotunheim if he so chose, had disappeared out from under the careful eye of the King. "He left. Was that not what you wished for?" Byleistr added snidely.

Helblindi paused a moment, considering Byleistr's dark mood, before replying carefully, "Now, that may be true – but it is wiser to escort him to the Doorway of the Paths and ensure his safety for leave-taking in the process."

"Safety for leave-taking?" Byleistr's fine eyebrows rose sardonically. "Safe leave taking? That is what we are calling it now?"

"Ai, Byla-"

"Don't 'ai' me," Byla growled and roughly banged their parents' shared parlour door open.

Striding in and ignoring the questioning looks of his parents, the younger Jotunn took Helblindi's usual spot before the fire pointedly, forcing Helblindi to subside with a hard glare to the smaller armchair.

"Byla is in a mood," Helblindi said by way of greeting at Farbauti's puzzled look. "Well," Farbauti said, amused. "No doubt you said something again, 'Blindi. You should not be so rough with his feelings – one does not poke a wild jarnkottr and expect to come away unscathed."

"Huh."

Ignoring his sulky brother, Helblindi glanced at his Fylgja. Does he know where the Ulfrbarn went off to? Does he even know the Ulfrbarn even left?

"It is hardly my fault if Byla is upset his new 'friend' has decided to leave," Helblindi settled for an air of injury and annoying elderly brother wisdom.

Laughter fell from Farbauti's expression immediately as the words sank in. Silence fell across the room as Laufey and Farbauti shared a glance before looking over at Byla who now brooded over the bright fire. The young Prince picked up the long fire-iron cast to the side of the heart and pensively poked at the blackened logs of silvrelm. The fire crackled and popped in an obscenely cheerful fashion amidst the heavy quiet.

But then, Helblindi thought, Byla is always too sensitive to things when he is in the mood.

"He left, Byleistr?" Laufey asked quietly. "When? Why did you say nothing of this?"

"The day before last," Byla replied grudgingly. "Early in the morning. I thought you knew and did not care."

Really... Helblindi thought disbelievingly. That is what you thought? Or just wanted to believe?

"Why did he not say farewell?" Farbauti's voice was a little higher than usual. Troubled. "He may come back."

"The Ulfrbarn did not leave Jotunheim?" Laufey's voice sharpened. "No. I do not believe so – but I am not certain if he will return here-" Byleistr stopped and frowned. "Do I look like I can know his mind?"

"A fair enough assumption," Helblindi pointed out sharply, "considering how close you two were."

"Byla! Why did you not tell us-"

"Farbauti. It is done-"

"Done? This is the winter season – he will not survive the-"
"It was never meant to survive," Laufey reminded his consort. "Besides," the King had to add thoughtfully, "it is not as ignorant as you suppose. It knew better – and its will to carve its own path is strong."

"How could it-"
"Faetha," Helblindi sighed. "I am sure the Ulfrbarn knew, considering where he grew up..."
"Where did he say he was going, exactly?" Laufey pinned Byleistr with a hard stare.
"Meerauk," was the grudging answer.

The room fell silent again as Byleistr's quiet word rang uncomfortably about the stone walls. Golden light flickered – throwing their faces into sharp relief which wavered with the slight draft. Laufey was the first to stir. Helblindi felt breathless as though he had been kicked in the gut and had forgotten how to breathe. He remembered his first trek to the outskirts of Meerauk in the ceremonial footsteps of his Fylgja. Fylgja told me the paths are hidden – known only to the King and his Heir... A path shown over time or to those gifted few, it is a road taken with the aid of magick – yet even then, Fylgja told me that the first trip must always be led by the King. Surely... Helblindi eyed his Fylgja worriedly. Surely he is not considering the Ulfrbarn in all seriousness? No. No. It cannot be... Fylgja would have shown the paths to him first before letting the Ulfrbarn go alone... Then, rising horror as another thought occurred to Helblindi. Fylgja did not send him out knowing the Ulfrbarn would succumb to the storms and die? Surely, surely not...

"Foolishness," Laufey's voice finally rumbled loud and rough. "It goes to its death."
"That is what I said," Byleistr jabbed at a log viciously and the rough brown-black wood fell into the ash with a shower of sparks. "He did not listen-
"He cannot – cannot survive in such weather-
"Farbauti, love-
"Can you sit idly by so easily, Laufey?" Farbauti's voice rose. "To let him die alone in the snow? Even as he is surely – surely-
"You cannot do anything," Laufey's voice was soft. "Even if you wished to... even if I wished to..." Laufey glanced down and then up again, meeting his consort's sorrowful red eyes. "The Ulfrbarn would not have listened to reason, that I know... it is like me in more ways than I want to admit." A pause and then, "Furthermore, its will is strong – there is a chance self-preservation will force the child to turn back before it is too late."
"But-
"If it dies, it will go with courage and with our blessing to those who have long awaited it."
"But why?" Helblindi asked, stunned, dismayed... puzzled. "To risk so much – and for what? Not for the throne – surely?"
"No," Byla shook his head. "Smar'brothir seeks for something I know not what, but the quest for knowledge drives him with great passion – and he believed his answer lay within the ruins. Somehow."
"It is Winter. The South Storms have come," Farbauti's voice was filled with dread. "No Jotunn, even the strongest and most hale, has ever dared to penetrate its heart during the harshest season."
"The Ulfrbarn is foolish, but brave – and impatient," Laufey sighed. "If it had sought our counsel, we would have told it to wait, and if it had waited but another two moon cycles... then..."
"Headstrong and courageous," Helblindi murmured.
"He would have made a great King-
"BYLA!"
"Byleistr!"

Farbauti's and Laufey's voices clashed in anger at the young Jotunn's words. Yes, Helblindi thought, remembering the tiny creature's magic, wit and sense of stratagem. He might have – but... the volatility of his emotion, the wildness of his will, the taboo nature of his presence... it would have torn Jotunheim apart – and it still may, if left to fester...
"Bite your tongue," Farbauti sighed, glancing at Helblindi, no doubt more concerned about Helblindi's reaction to Byleistr's treasonous statement than the actual words themselves. "I care not for the witless words of a gormless scholar," Helblindi replied stiffly. "Byla, after all, is not burdened with the fate of Jotunheim, and so can listen to his heart without thought to our collective future. In the spring season, a few years from now, I will tread the Path of the Kings... you cannot understand, Byla, but you should at least show me respect."

"I know," Byla grumbled, "and I do not say those words lightly nor in the presence of others... I know what you face – what Kingship entails. You will go to Meerauk by yourself, as Father taught you – but you will not find what you seek, I think... and what then?"

"Neither will the Ulfrbarn," Laufey said quietly. "It will only find death. To go alone to Meerauk and find the Path of the Kings is difficult at the best of times – and for the Lagreinn to go in the Winter Season..."

"He does not seek for the Path of the Kings," Byla said.

"Yet, he may find it," Farbauti mused. "With his magicks-"

"Do not raise witless hope, love," Laufey warned his mate.

A pause.

"The Ulfrbarn may not return from its quest this time, I fear."

"Smar'brothir-"

"It will not return, Byla. Do not wait for it. Forget it."

Farbauti leaned forward to clasp Byleistr's shoulder comfortingly but Byla only jerked away and, rising to his feet, swept out of the room without a further word.

He will not return, Heblindi told himself. He cannot return. By his own hand, in the end, Jotunheim will be cleansed.

-0-0-0-

I, Mage Forngeth, transcribed by Scribe Skriffa, in this the year sjau hundrath thousand a thrir thousand, ein hundradth a veir tiu niu [703,129] of the Aevi'meth Frjalsu, Ejtri'a'shlad [Fifth Age of the Cold Suns], and commit to the written word what my Faetha spoke to me and his Faetha before him and from generations past – for I fear that Time consumes our memory as the banked energies of our Magick and Heritage burn low. Let he who seeks knowledge take heed, therefore that he may parse the meanings, understand the Truth and then reveal it accordingly. [...] Yes, the signs of our descendants are filled with foreboding, but one may come who will see with clear eyes what must be done and right the wrongs of our past which continue to haunt us to this very Age.

[...]

The Path of the Kings, my Faetha's Faetha used to say, is a journey of the spirit given only to the True Heir and displays the natural inheritance of such youth. It is walked alone and those who take such a road heedlessly rarely return – for the end of the Road reveals the heart of Jotunheim, Faetha said, and the Truths of its Origins and the foundation of its Traditions. As such, it is guarded by the spirits of the For-El dra and the Heimsrsal itself, which together working, provide the signs to those who are gifted. Nature itself provides the barrier, the test and the protection; yet, such knowledge, I fear, has become hoarded by ones who stand above – by the King, his Court and the Mages – and, as such, the reasons for our Rites are slowly lost to the people. Let he who seeks knowledge, take heed, therefore, that he may not obscure the meanings of all things, hide or lock away the Truth and so keep it as useless treasure for the sacred few.

[...]
Thus, I write – for the Path of the Kings surely leads to the city of ancient legend, to Meerauk, which lies, they say on the plains of Holknovollr hard by the Holdra River, south of the Grarfjall Mountains which surrounds the hamlet, Gastropnir. The ancient highway has, for generations, been obscured by snows and the ways are no longer made plain. Yet, the Sages, those tied more deeply to this cold Realm’s roots, speak of a broad road which curves to the southern reaches and then disappears in giant ruins and great crevices. These, are, so they tell, are ancient Meerauk. I know the words of witless Giants are rarely heeded, but the Voice of Heimsrsal is sacred and those who hear Her Voice are the Chosen and are held close to her bosom with other secrets. Let he who seeks knowledge, take heed, therefore, that he may sharpen his inner ear to the songs of the Celestial Spheres, that he may sing with the Souls of the Realms and, in so doing, bear the burden of responsibility which all true Mages will bear to the end of Time itself.

[...]

Tales are many, yet truths are few – even fewer are those accurate tellings one can glean on Meerauk, the ancient city of Jotunheim. It had been a glorious place full of light and magick at a time when the worlds were young and life thrummed through the very particles of space, spawning What Is Seen from What Is Not – the very miracle of creation. Thus, the heart of Jotunheim was born, was carved within the ancient capital of gleaming black stone and ice and orbs of hanging light like Faerie globes and wide streets upon which paraded, upon which passed, Jotunn and many kinds of beasts of burden. The air, the Sages say, were filled with many winged creatures – dark-blue spirited ausa’songr fugl, darting flittermice and bumbling iss’hona’by. Above soared the rjothr’auga haukr and the broad-winged hjarr’veithr, which were fierce enough in their prime to blind a Jotunn – or so they say. Other beasts there were and upon their backs the Jotunn came to Meerauk – on the fabled snjarlang’hvartha and blar’iss hross, and there they lived on the Flat Plains with their glory and arrogance for all of Jotunheim to see. [...] Other cities there also were – Innagard and Utangard, the Twin Cities, so named for their mirrored qualities – if legend is to be believed – one born of day, one born of night. Today, however, there only lies Utgard, a pale reflection of its former state – the city of Power no more. Its brother city now perished thanks to the mysterious destruction which birthed the Eybjarg. Yet, in all their glory, Innagard, Tower of the Cold Sun and Utangard, Citadel of the Pale Moon, could not compare to the intricate, yet organic beauty of Meerauk, which had been raised out of the very aura of Magick itself, by the First Sages who walked when Time was not counted.

This I write so others may read, these tales I have told that the discerning ear may hear. Let he who seeks knowledge, take heed, therefore, that he may delve further into what even I, High Mage Forngeth of the King’s Court cannot penetrate. Furthermore, upon entering into accord with Heimsrsal, and upon keeping a firm grip upon his faculties while undertaking the burden of encompassing the Truth, let him who is gifted so return to our people and remind us once again of the Will of Jotunheim.

I, Mage Forngeth, transcribed by Scribe Skriffa, in this the year sjau hundrath thousand and a thrir thousand, ein hundradth a tveir niu [703,129] of the Aevi’meth Frjalsu, Eftri’a’shlad [Fifth Age of the Cold Suns], lay down my pen.

Thus it is written.

-0-0-0-

It had been too long since he had felt such cold. Too long, Loki winced to himself as he wove a small working – a warming charm – to bring some life to his limbs as he trudged through the knee deep snow. Too long a time has passed since I have had to endure such freezing temperatures... even Asgard's highest mountains could not achieve the chill of Jotunheim... Loki clenched his teeth,
pulled his warm wolf-skin closer about him and forged resolutely onward.

In front of him, behind, on either side of him there was nothing to see but white. White and grey and smudges of dark as the suns slowly set. A white wall which only intensified in thickness as the snowstorm increased in might. A blizzard, Loki huffed to himself. At times like these even the Great Black Wolf pack would hunker down to wait out the storm. Loki knew he would have to halt at some point, yet...

And yet... not yet... He told himself. Not quite yet.

As if moving on his own, his feet continued to rise and fall, pressing through the soft snow, walking easily on top of the harder crust below laid down earlier in the week. Drawn forward, Loki pressed onward, following the call, the whispers, the surging force of magick which he had first caught sight of just south of the Holdra River. Travelling southward, the little tendrils had thickened and widened until it roared past him as wildly as a strong river rushing down from the Storrfjall mountains of Asgard – and Loki, finding the life of Jotunheim which was so obviously missing from its nether reaches, revelled in the power as it surged about his feet.

Loki pressed on – until his toes went entirely numb and fatigue weighed like heavy stones upon his back. Drawing on the power about him and the power which he carried within and without, Loki easily raised the domed ice roof about his head and set to work on raising a small fire with the neat bundle of silvr elm branches which he had bound tightly and securely onto his pack. Once the fire was lit, Loki warmed the small rolls of bread and several skewers of eel which he had snuck out from the head cook's pantry. After his small meal, Loki curled up and fell asleep almost instantly.

Settled there alone in the wasteland, pressed down by the cold and the snow and the winds, surrounded by nothing but the voices of the wind, Loki's slumber brought memories to the fore.

He was riding upon Fenris, surrounded by the warm scent of wet fur and the call of the pack. Small fist clenched in black coarse fur, the Ulfrbarn raised his voice and warbled with the rest – as the tight-knit group thundered across Vithrvatn and headed toward the Offaerfjall Mountains in search of food. Always in search of food.

Overhead, clouds loomed, swirled about and a burst of golden light surged downward – a golden figure – a familiar form –

"Thor!" Loki called. "What in Helheim are you-

But his words were whipped away by the wind and when blue eyes turned his way, Loki wondered if Thor would guess – could ever guess – who that wild creature, the wild savage was – no, Thor, he thought, you must understand. You must see reason – you must –

A surge of light, more and more frequent destructive rays of light fell onto the cold hard ground as numerous other warriors descended. Large companies in the traditional battle formations, each with their own shields, swords and spears and other smaller units of cavalry and archers. Loki's eyes widened as each phalanx angled itself with the sureness of experience on the foreign roughened plain of snow and ice, the numerous Asgardian faces, set in stone, as they turned to face the western skies in unison. It was horrifying, frightful even, to see them here on the world he had called home, knowing as he did what destruction they could wreck upon broken Jotunheim.

"Thor!" Loki's now hoarse voice once again failed to reach the tall figure of his brother. "What are you doing?"

Thor turned – and Loki's call died in his throat as the blonde hair glimmered lighter brown in the
dying light, not golden and long and the blue eyes were unfamiliar. This was not the Thor he knew – not Thor – not Thor? - where was Thor where was he Thor Thor –

Loki jerked awake gasping, clawing his way to consciousness as the dream clung to him. No – no – nonono, he thought frantically. What – what – what was that? For a moment, he laid back, attempting to calm his harsh breath, yet the feeling of doom remained within his heart. He knew then that sleep would elude him for the rest of that night. Without further ado, Loki rose, tended the fire, fixed himself a small meal and then packed everything once again, dowsing the flames quickly with summoned ice before continuing on.

As his dome of ice melted behind him, Loki turned forward into the flow of magick and followed – his eyes no longer seeing the ongoing world of white about him. There was only a world of darkness before him now – the horizon blocked out by the eternal black towers rising upward proudly toward the cold suns and pale moons of Jotunheim. Utgard, he thought. Utgard perhaps. But... Utgard as it was?

Far beyond, far beyond, if he strained his eyes, he could see other towers across a mighty river which ran down the middle of a great, cavernous rift valley which separated the two cities. The city beyond rose pure and white and glimmered like a thousand shimmering gems, glorious and blinding. Something I have never seen before, Loki thought sadly, and will never see again... Jotunheim's past flows strongly here for those who would see. Loki remembered again the fragmented thoughts of the Mage who had written within the unbound journal of the King's Archives.

"Other cities there also were – Innagard and Utangard, the Twin Cities so named for their mirrored qualities – if legend is to be believed – one born of day, one born of night. Today, however, there only lies Utgard, a pale reflection of its former state – the city of Power no more. Its brother city now perished thanks to the mysterious destruction which birthed the Eybjarg. Yet, in all their glory, Innagard, Tower of the Cold Sun and Utangard, Citadel of the Pale Moon, could not compare to the intricate, yet organic beauty of Meerauk, which had been raised out of the very aura of Magick itself, by the First Sages who walked when Time was not counted."

Loki kept walking resolutely, following the stream of green and blue which now had widened and deepened. Around him, he knew instinctively that the storm, if possible, had worsened; yet, the slight Jotunn pressed onward, eyes fixed only on the trail which led into the nothingness of the white world.

A white city of gleaming towers. A dark citadel of glinting stone. A flat plain suddenly split in a blaze of magick and light and pouring out from its banks the waters of the Vollrvatn Lake surged forward from its shores to fill in the new chasm which had formed within the soil and rock. The birth of the Holdra River, Loki thought, catching a too short glimpse of two slight figures in the distance standing on either side of the newly formed river. So... it was true?

Past the river, a city rose and within its streets and deep within its labyrinthine foundations and underground passages, round globes of light hung, the leftover static and radiation of magick, Loki thought. Or something else entirely... He was standing on the large paving stones of the broadest street, watching one such globe hang in the air, offering a soft, pale blue sphere of light. His blue fingertips rose to touch it and –

There was the small altar to the For-Eldra standing before him. It was hard to forget - Loki remembered all too well his younger self dusting it and rubbing its dark stone so that the grey and white flecks within the black granite glimmered gracefully. He had polished it until it gleamed and his tiny fingers were rubbed raw and sore - but how the white flecks of hvitr'steinn had glimmered faintly, even in the dusk. Like stars, he thought, his palm ran along the upper surface. Our ancestors
"Do you not remember what I used to tell you every night? Who are the stars but those who love us? They shine down upon us," a familiar rough voice spoke, breaking into his thoughts, "because they are always looking down upon us, thinking upon us, grieving with us, laughing with us. They are the For-Eldra – and the stars remind us, in a way, that we are not alone."

"I feel lonely regardless," Loki said, stiffening and refusing to turn to meet those familiar dark red eyes. Elska’s eyes. Is he disappointed in whom I have become? In the choices I have made? Does it even matter if I did disappoint him? He is dead. Dead. "I travelled to those stars... and there is nothing. Nothing but... a Void... the Void..."

"Ahhh," Elska sighed then, deeply. "I feared that doom the day I took you in my hands and cradled you to my breast. Take a chance, that is what my heart told me, my lost Heart bade me take the risk... I had hoped... We had all hoped..."

"It is not your fault-"

"And neither is it entirely yours."

"Not entirely?" Loki smiled then and turned with a grim smile and, looking up, met Elska’s troubled eyes. "Such honesty from the Dead – if that is indeed what you are."

"You doubt me – or do you doubt yourself so much?" Elska drew closer and laid his hand upon Loki’s head, his strong palm cradling Loki and drawing the slighter Jotunn closer. Loki found himself unable to resist.

"I do not doubt you," here, his voice fell to a husky whisper as tears gathered, "perhaps – perhaps I doubt myself, but that is necessary, is it not? To question? To wonder..."

"If it leads you to a path of better understanding and greater maturity, then yes," Elska replied gravely, "but if it brings you only to destruction, then do not – do not walk that road. Remember, dear heart, that although one feels alone, although one feels pain and regret and sorrow and loneliness, we look down upon you with pride. You are young - you look at the worlds and see nothing - but even there - even there, dear one... We. Are."

"We?"

"Yes, all of us who stand in the great beyond and see the Truths of Time watch with pride and joy, for you are destined to great things, little one. Great things if you so choose."

"I thought – I do not know what I thought, but surely in Helheim...

"Helheim is only open to those who believe, to those who wish to sojourn there... and for those whose hearts are pure, there are other glorious Halls and golden Realms. Yet, we are neither bound to the halls of Helheim nor to the golden land of Valhalla... Come now, little one," Elska chided softly, "did I not say that the Jotunn of Jotunheim carve out their own destinies? Our lives are not constrained by death, nor by the errant thoughts of other Realms... Trust us, dear heart, and know we are here," and with that Elska drew Loki into a firm embrace before releasing him and disappearing into the white, "we are here, waiting. Always."

[...always...]

[...this lesson so hard to learn...]

[...so easy to forget...]

Once upon a time, when the Realms were young as a babe and Time had not yet been counted – before hardships inflicted the Cosmos That Was, Jotunheim was a paradise in which creatures, spawned out of the inner fiery depths and still running waters, lived in relative peace.

...relative peace...

...peace is so fragile...

...so fragile...
...no one knows the time or day, but what is certain – and, since the Mal'a'Hlad, forgotten – is that the Jotunn were a people as diverse as the beasts and the swimming creatures and the flying things already making their home in the Realm.

...out of the snows they came...
...thus they were born...
...to the snows they return...
...the snows of the For-Eldra...
...great and small...

Great and small. Yes, my child, Jotunn grew tall as the sky, and thus gained great might and hardiness. A darker, grimmer blue they wore on their skin and their frames were stout and muscled. Exceptional warriors and diligent in their labours of farming and building, these Jotunn continued to grow in great numbers and, in so doing, placed their mark on Jotunheim even to this day.

...yet...
...and yet...
...there were others...

Yet, there were others. Those whom we do not speak of. Those whose names were all but erased. Those whom even Time has seemed to have forgotten.

...but the Heimsrsal never forgets...
...not really...
...not as long as we live...
...and remember...
...always remember...

Chapter End Notes

HOW DID THAT LAST SCENE HAPPEN? GAH! Let me know if it was too much. I may remove it. BLAH. ELSKA FEELS! SUDDEN ELSKA FEELS~ So not for the win.

OK. So, NaNoWriMo ended... and I didn't get the writing challenge done. Only halfway... (so disappointed in myself)... but on the other hand, I got sleep and I got this chapter hammered out, such as it is. Hopefully you guys will like it and let me know so I feel even more pumped to shake the next part into better shape. It's a toughie, let me tell you.

Also, the special side story, I'll be writing sometime this week, I hope, and will PM/email/fanmail those who contact me by PM-ing, sending me their Tumblr address or their email. This is only for those who review chapter 48 onward. More Elska and Vaetki fluff. That's what I'm promising.

Thanks so much guys,
I appreciate you all!
-KI

Alien Glossary:
'aauzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'inka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'aauzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fot'ro - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvila - high bed
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ommi-nith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa'a'vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
raudhaust – high bed
FIRST OFF - I'M SOOOO SORRY! (prostrates self) I have had to break the chapter up yet again. This is bad because that means the truth will be fully out next time... and that means that my perfect number of 75 chapters has truly bitten the dust. (le sigh) It will be longer now... how long, we shall see. (tear) Talk about getting out of control! That being said, as an apology, I will post the third (and final) part sooner than later. Let's hope I find some time on Wednesday to post stuffs. I hope to finish writing the third part within a day or two. (crosses fingers)

It's LIFE, I tell you, that is getting in the way. I'm prepping for final exams which are going to be on Christmas week this year... and also prepping to go home and cleaning my house so that it's neat and less dirty when I go back home for the holidays. Lots of lesson and Christmas party planning ahead as well. . I love Christmas (as you can tell from my other Loki fic, Christmas Magic) - but when you're a teacher, there's this whole added dimension which drives me nuts.

SECONDLY - still have not yet gotten the special reviewer side story done. GOMEN NASAI! DUI BU QI! BU HAO YISI! T_T Epic fail on my part. I apologize all those who have reviewed faithfully. You are not forgotten. I will reply to your reviews with details as soon as I have something properly hammered out. Please hope that things get done this week in a timely manner so I can write.

This chapter has taken a toll on me to write. It was so tough. Literally this is the chapter that I thought wouldn't be so bad and now it's gotten split into three parts and it makes me wanna just... argh. And this isn't the most complicated chapter yet! (Chapter 55 is a doozy). Haaa... (deflates) Sometimes I wonder how I'm gonna hold it together as a writer. Eh. Meh.

THIRDLY - I haven't replied to reviews yet, for that I'm sorry. I will try to get around to it - AFTER I start on the review-reward story and finish up the next chappie. Sorry guys!

So... onto my favourite part (other than writing the chapter). Thanks to all those who reviewed~! To history, lemomina, Urkko, thestarsasdestiny, Kat, iBlameGlobalWarming, YellowWomanontheBrink, dawntithshines, Dragonanzar, Kai_Maciel, nevar_walc and Loktipus~! You are all awesome. This chapter was written because of you and your awesome comments and encouragements. I didn't think people would go for exposition, you guys let me know it was OK and I feel so encouraged and this chapter got finished because I didn't want to disappoint you all. So thanks!

Be sure to visit my profile for links to a side pic of Meerauk. Also, I'm re-starting up a writer's Wordpress, called refiningsilver, where I'll post writerly stuff for those interested.

This chapter was brought to you by the sounds of the Myst series soundtrack.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
"I do not doubt you," here, his voice fell to a husky whisper as tears gathered, "perhaps – perhaps I doubt myself, but that is necessary, is it not? To question? To wonder..."

"If it leads you to a path of better understanding and greater maturity, then yes," Elska replied gravely, "but if it brings you only to destruction, then do not – do not walk that road. Remember, dear heart, that although one feels alone, although one feels pain and regret and sorrow and loneliness, we look down upon you with pride. You are young - you look at the worlds and see nothing - but even there - even there, dear one... We. Are."

"We?"

"Yes, all of us who stand in the great beyond and see the Truths of Time watch with pride and joy, for you are destined to great things, little one. Great things if you so choose."

"I thought – I do not know what I thought, but surely in Helheim –"

"Helheim is only open to those who believe, to those who wish to sojourn there... and for those whose hearts are pure, there are other glorious Halls and golden Realms. Yet, we are neither bound to the halls of Helheim nor to the golden land of Valhalla... Come now, little one," Elska chided softly, "Did I not say that the Jotunn of Jotunheim carve out their own destinies? Our lives are not constrained by death, nor by the errant thoughts of other Realms... Trust us, dear heart, and know we are here," and with that Elska drew Loki into a firm embrace before releasing him and disappearing into the white, "we are here, waiting. Always."

Loki continued to walk – and the tears which ran down his cheeks froze in icy trails.

"Elska!" He cried, but his voice was whipped away in the wind as he called for the first being who had shown him kindness. The one he always thought of as his true father. "Elska – Els-Elska?"

But the voices which replied upon the wind were formless and unfamiliar.

They always leave, he thought bitterly. In the end, they always leave – and I am alone. Elska. Hluti. One day... Thor, Frigga... and Byla, one day, will as well.

With that dark thought, Loki moved onward. Meerauk was calling. It was waiting. The broad green river had further deepened into an ocean along the bottom of which Loki now walked, compressed and suffocated within its warm embrace.

Here, his eyes blazed like twin red flames of fire and his body was suffused with the magick of his people; the magick of Jotunheim, the magick of Life, poured forth from every pore of Loki's cells as he forged onward. Despite the press of power all about him, which threatened to drive the very air from him, Loki felt as though the voices were lulling him into a strangely calm state of serenity. Loki recognized it for what it was – he had felt it momentarily before when he had drunk from the well in Asgard. It was the entrance into the World That Is Not, That Which Is Not Seen.

This is the heart of Jotunheim, Loki thought, raising a hand to shield his face. Enduring in the face of extinction, an un-tameable wind – and it threatens to kill the very things it aims to protect.

When Loki next opened his eyes, the world had changed yet again about him and under his feet. The air, no longer white clashing with the vivid swirls of blue and green, was still burning with the heat of magick – yet the landscape of an ice jungle felt comforting somehow to Loki.
The voices whispered. Loki could hear them joining song with the cry of the Casket, resonating with What Was and What Is, past and present intermingling.

...the world that was...

...the world that could be...

...born from ice...

A thick jungle of jarnvithr and other strange trees, he could not name. Silver elms and great black oak sheltering tungblom, manisilfr, and the luthrblom. In the underbrush, he caught sight of small curious creatures – animals similar to mice and cats and hares. Long extinct, he supposed. Long gone... In the distance, in the gloom which hung between the trees and dense underbrush, a howl rose and suddenly the Earth shook with the thunder of a thousand creatures headed his way.

Horses? Jarnvithr? Bears? No... No... These sound like... wolves! Loki instinctively took to cover between two great jarnvithr trees and stared out, entranced, as the large forms of great wolves materialized out of the fog. With a long mournful wail, the leader of pack swept by and, with overwhelming noise and stunning speed, the entire cavalcade of black, silver, deep blue and brown fur passed, leaving in its wake the wreckage of bent and bruised grasses, flowers, broken brambles and trampled grass.

Overhead, it was silent. All was silent. Then, a bird chirped loudly in complaint and the now deserted area slowly came to life again. In awe, Loki watched as the small creatures crept back out from their hiding places, as flittermice chased after ice drones and the white and grey spotted butterflies (with each wing five times the sizes of the palm of his hand) fluttered about serenely from flower to flower.

This... he thought. Can this be Jotunheim?

...Time has passed...

...our home squandered...

...voices forgotten...

...there is only silence...

...only silence...

Mesmerized, he reached out to brush a fingertip against a delicate ice crystal-like flower, but just as Loki touched the petal, it began to wither, turn black, crumble-

"No-" he gasped. "What-"

In horror, he turned about – watching helplessly as the entire forest disintegrated into ash as the creatures burst into flame and disintegrated in the blink of an eye. It was originating from him? It was, wasn't it? He couldn't really tell – but the expanding waves of destruction continued to blossom upward and outward until the sky darkened as though burnt itself by the glorious flames of blue and green.

Magic resonated within the air – metallic iron on his tongue – blood – and the gut-wrenching smell of death hung in the air – Jotunheim at its end? Loki turned, panicked and far away a responding sonic BOOM resounded blowing towards him removing any remaining bracket clouds of ash and
smoke billowed – filling his lungs – he could not breathe – could not breathe – could not breathe – could not talk – and the earth below him – the ice and few pieces of remaining snow and black rock quivered as though hit with a mighty blow – cracks – CRAA-AACCKKK – the sound of rock tearing under the pressure – the sound of ripping shivered through his very bones – and the rock gave way – gave way – it gave way from beneath his feet and fell – he fell – they all fell into nothingness – he was looking up now – Jotunheim receding – no nononono – no! No! No! - help! No! - Jotunheim falling away and he was falling away with it – darkness clouding in – the grey-blackened skies of Jotunheim disappearing – the edges of the Eybjarg receding as he fell away – fell further into the Void – noooo! - it was waiting.

It had always been waiting-

...this is the end...

...as it was in the beginning...

...this is the threat we face, dear one...

...beloved...

...awake...

[...south of that great River...]

[...the ancient city of Meerauk rose...]

[...splendid and fair on the plains of the Holkn Vollr...]

[...the ages of old...]

[...desolate – yet sacred...]

[...the wellspring of the Jotunn...]

[...the origin of the Rites...]

[...an ancient land long forgotten by Time...]

[...never forget...]

Meerauk, once located on the Vollrvatn Plains, was a great city in its time. Nowadays, if any spoke of it (or remembered it at all), it was more often than not referred to as the ‘Sunken City’ for the cavernous city which had boasted labyrinthine mazes and great halls below the icy surface of Jotunheim which would have impressed even the Dark Dwarves in their size, scope and depth. Mining deep, the Jotunn of Ancient Times, had discovered hidden veins of silver, hvitr-aldrnari stones and other rare metals. Drawing closer to the hidden fires of Jotunheim, the ancient Jotunn found unending reserves of warmth, fuel – and, even more importantly, magick. Thus, Meerauk's foundations lay deep within the Earth – and the ancients boasted of its strength, believing Meerauk would last forever.

It was not to be.

Now, the flat plains give way to deep crevices and large round impressions almost crater-like. Pillars are knocked over, towers destroyed or caved in. Other buildings appear to have been blown away
entirely, leaving only bare remains of the lower walls closer to the ground – and piles of rock. Into
the crevices, bits of stone and columns and rubble have fallen – and if one were to peer over the
edges, one would be able to see the hitherto hidden chambers now gutted and revealed to the dark
sky. Within the rock, rooms lie empty now – empty, some crushed or filled with caved in ceilings or
other rubble. Beneath the ice and snow, one supposes, there must also be the ancient remains of the
city's inhabitants, yet Meerauk does not appear to be a full graveyard as one would have supposed.
Perhaps the Ancients had fled before the catastrophe had laid waste to the city.

And what devastation that must have been. What brought Meerauk, City of Lights, to its knees has
remained a mystery – yet Meerauk's corpse remains as a mute warning. A warning of what?
No one knows.

"NO! NO! N-No!"

Loki jerked awake, screaming, red eyes wide and wild, voice hoarse, chest heaving as he panted.
Light clouds of air puffed before him as he exhaled harshly, the cold air waking him up with sharp
clarity. With relief, eyes still half-blind, still unseeing as the memory faded, Loki groped and found
solid ground beneath him: the rough wool of his second cloak-blanket and, below, cold hard rock.
Beside him, his pack and grey wolf cloak were piled neatly.

After a moment, Loki realized that he was sitting and then, with rising puzzlement, Loki recognized
the rocks about him and the flattish, uneven hard ground.

I'm in a cave? He wondered.

For a moment, he sat there and just breathed. Listening for anything – but the silence seemed
absolute. As silent as the Void… Then, he could hear it – the sound of his own heartbeat, his own
harsh breaths… and far away, the sound of a distant creaking. A cracking sound which cut through
the void of sound like a knife. CRRAAAACKKK. Other nameless noises which Loki had learned to
recognize as ice falling, stone breaking and tumbling down the mountainside and the sound of a
waterfall rushing.

Plink. Plink. Plink…

Water dripping somewhere, he supposed. How could water run in such a freezing environment as
this?

Plink… plink… plink…

The pale white light of the storm still blasting past filtered down dimly through chinks in the dark
ceiling overhead and the large gaping entrance way. A dim world lying in menacing shadow.
Turning a little, Loki peered into the recesses of the cave-like tunnel in which he lay – but the
irregular rays of light gleamed too thinly to reveal much, other than the fact that the cave opened
deep into the heart of the mountain.

A mountain? Loki blinked, even more puzzled. A mountain in Meerauk? But I thought it was on the
plain of Vollrvatn. Or perhaps... this is yet another vision?

Loki shuddered as he realized that the world he was sitting in was probably a figment of his
imagination and the power of magick which swirled about. No doubt, he thought, I am still walking
through the storm... Hopefully I'm headed in the right direction…
Whatever the case, Loki knew that whatever had brought him to the cave and had wrapped him in the blanket, unseen world or no, was still out there. *I need to keep moving*, he shivered and cast aside the rough burlap that covered his legs. *Whoever brought me in here may be a friend, but keeping a show of strength at the very least is sensible.*

Attempting to get to his feet was easier said than done. Loki painfully rose – slowly and awkwardly – inexplicably tired and less graceful than usual. His movements were hampered by an overall achiness as joints and muscles flared suddenly in painful protest. Sluggishly, as though he were a fly snared in honey, Loki staggered to his feet, looking about, suddenly panicked, for his spear. It was leaning against the wall to the right only a few hand spans out of reach.

*It might as well be several thousand paces away,* Loki groaned softly.

The short Jotunn staggered forward a few steps and fell heavily against the wall, propping himself up on several rocky outcroppings before gathering the strength to reach for his spear. Once he had the spear in hand, using it as a staff, Loki managed to work his way to the mouth of cave.

Still, there was no sign of life about him. Only the distant rumblings of ice and rock heralded some kind of movement of land – and closer by, the rhythmic plink, plink, plink of dripping water. Only the howl of the wind outside and the whistle of what wind managed to work its way through chinks in the stone. Over everything, however, lay the thick, numbing silence of the ever falling snow. It drifted down through holes in the ceiling and fell thickly beyond the sheltered entrance of the cave.

Peering out, Loki's eyes could just barely make out a wall of rock rising before him, several paces away – unreachable thanks to the cliff which suddenly opened up before his feet and plunged downward into a seemingly bottomless white world.

*A massive chasm,* Loki realized and scrambled back suddenly, visions of the Void rising up before his mind's eye. In his haste, Loki nearly fell back – but he caught himself in time – and then froze as he realized, horrified, that the stone beneath his fingers, although rounded with wind and rain erosion and cracked wide with ice wedging, had obviously once upon a time been carved. Eyes wide, Loki's gaze drifted upward, following the curve of a crumbled arch and, turning, realized that the high ceiling of the cave was indeed too arched and ribbed to be entirely natural. The floor, covered as it was in rubble and cracked in many places, was hardly flat anymore but Loki could see how it had probably once been smooth and polished glimmering in the pale light of the suns which filtered through thin arched windows, now blocked by rock and other rubble.

He stood there, transfixed. The world about him still. Nothing but the steady faraway roar of falling water and the plink, plink, plink of water.

Plink…

Loki, following the destroyed wall which he supposed faced north, made his way to the back of the cave.

Plink…

There seemed to be no end to the cavern – it went on, getting steadily dimmer as Loki moved further away from the cave’s entrance. *Like entering a beast's belly,* Loki though uneasily as he forged onward in a determined shuffle. *Never to return…* He shivered minutely as he passed a row of columns, a few broken off halfway.

*…many fall…*
The rock underneath his hands was an obsidian black with glimmers of deep blue and white and silver specks. *Walls of black granite*, Loki supposed, *with embellishments of white quartz and silver or hvitr'steinn*. Around the tops and bottoms of the columns, the barest traces of blaufe'irsteinn glimmered in broken pieces, telling a tale of a glorious era from long ago.

*many fall...*

*but few return...*

Plink... plink... pliiink...

The dripping echoed louder now and the crunching of gravel and stones beneath his boots seemed deafening.

Plink... Plink... Breath coming in short and hard, Loki forced himself to keep moving, ignoring the muted whispers and swirls of phantom magick in green and blue.

*many fall...*

*but few return...*

When the ground appeared to open up without warning beneath his feet, Loki gasped and jerked back, the memory of his vision-dream still fresh in his mind. This time, he gripped a nearby column and held his ground, the better to peer down and then sighed with relief as he caught a glimpse of black stone. It was a stairway, he saw, leading downward at a gentle slope into the dark – a stairway that had been torn apart at the top step by the forces of the earth long ago, no doubt, judging by the disintegration.

He hesitated only a moment before stepping across gingerly and, still leaning on his staff heavily, made his way down the oddly carved stairs. They curved grandly – widely – and the steps themselves, even more strangely, were shallow long paving stones more comfortable for his pacing than for what he thought a Jotunn’s stride would be.

*This must have been a city in the mountains*, he thought, *but which city? There are no mountains mentioned on the plain of Vollrvatn...*

*many fall...*

*but few return...*

After a good ten minutes descending the stairs, Loki discovered another gigantic crack had lowered the stairs suddenly another few paces. Carefully, he turned, edged over feet first, hung for a moment from the edge by his fingertips and then let go, landing not so gracefully on his feet. When he had caught his breath, Loki continued downwards, following the stairs, trying to avoid the rubble as best as he could. Ancient jarnvithr ornaments, twisted foreign metal which might have been bars or weapons or furniture of some kind lay cast about as though they had been thrown down the stairs and had jumbled along it, finally settling under thick coats of dust and grime and ice and snow. Skirting the larger pieces of stone blocks and twisted metal, Loki cautiously descended, noting the continued high ceiling (which also showed signs of serious fracture) and carving. At one point, looking up, Loki noticed a large gaping hole in the ceiling revealing a spiralling towered room reaching upward into darkness.
A tower, he thought, a tower in a mountain? That does not make sense...

Eventually, the stairs came to an end – at another chasm. There was a small lip of what had most likely been a bridge – now gone – leaving enough space to look out further into the cavern. The sky had lightened and the storm had settled enough to allow Loki a clearer view. He was indeed looking into a chasm – but this one, he saw, had an end (although dangerously far). Further below, he could see the remains of a tower, now crushed a little under the weight of a grand pillar which had fallen. A pillar. A tower. A tower pillar? It was hard to tell at that angle, but Loki knew that if he had the strength for it, he could no doubt cross to the other side of the chasm along the great breadth of the pillar.

If I didn't slip off from the ice first, he reminded himself, leaning back again. This is indeed a city... but perhaps – perhaps...

And then – and then – an idea took seed in his mind and began to grow as he looked about and upward – to where he could see dangerously leaning towers and great halls and distant columns rising upward above him on the other side. Realization dawned and certainty took hold of him as he once again reached out a hand to trace a vivid blue finger along the intricate carvings of an entwined sun and moon.

This... he thought. This... this is... Meerauk?

Turning about, suddenly feeling tired with the weight of the implications of his discovery – his almost certainly correct guess – Loki began the long trek back to his pack and the cave he had woken up in. More than ever, he missed his wolf cloak, yet when he attempted to summon a little heat, Loki felt as though his entire muscles and body were inflamed. Groaning softly, he made his way back and up to the cave, more carefully looking at the rubble and stonework and sculpting as he passed by.

As he drew closer to the cave, red light flickering along the wall gave Loki pause. Quietly as he could, he approached the area in which he had woken – and paused at the sight of a small fire roaring before a tall, dark-blue skinned, ancient Jotunn who sat upon a rock and gazed into the flames thoughtfully.

For a moment, Loki's heart beat hard and fast – until he reminded himself that he had magick upon which he could draw, until he reminded himself that it was many years since he had last been overcome in combat without magick and weaponry at his disposal. Loki, allowing his boots to crunch loudly upon the stones, made his way carefully to the fire. Nearby, his pack and cloak and blanket had been piled neatly by the wall, far from the ravenous sparks of the fire. Loki, taking his cloak and wrapping it about him, added a few more pieces of silver elmwood to the fire before seating himself.

Old red eyes turned his way.

"So. He has awaken." A pause and then more meaningfully. "At last."

There was something about the odd air and the clear-eyed gaze, as though the hoary Jotunn were speaking to Heimsrsla herself which reminded Loki of Hluti the trader. The second one who had shown him much kindness and unexpected mercy. Hluti. Elska... Byla will become like them one day, Loki mused, perhaps. Wise, yet broken and so, misunderstood and then, finally, forgotten.

"Were you here earlier?" Loki asked. "Was it you who brought me in?"
"You have come far, traveller." The ancient Jotunn's eyes suddenly caught Loki's own with uncomfortable sharpness. "Take comfort by the fire and rest your weary soul. We shall have words
later."
"I have come to look for answers," Loki lifted his chin. "Those I would have – and I need nothing else."
"All in good time," was the quiet, soothing, yet enigmatic reply, "for all Time is good."
"Riddles," Loki growled irritably. "I have no time for those."

Getting up again, this time just as painfully as before, the young Jotunn dragged his pack closer and pulled out several well-wrapped leather packets of eel and fish, which he expertly skewered on the long thin metal pieces which were tied to the bottom of his pack out of the way. Laying the skewers on the wood which crackled and popped within the no doubt magickally induced flames of the fire, Loki leaned back against his pack and sighed, rubbing his face.

"I woke up here," Loki finally realized. "What happened?"
"What happens to anyone searching for the soul of Jotunheim?"
"What? Soul of Jotunheim? I was not searching for any soul-"
"Then, what do you seek?"

Loki considered how he should answer, but then he said slowly, "I seek Meerauk, the birthplace of the Kings."

"Meerauk is the birthplace of the Kings indeed," the stranger said equably, "yet it is also the soul of Jotunheim, for both are one and the same, as a coin holds two faces – though many do not know it and those who should have remembered have long since forgotten. This is the past which was forgotten."
"Yes, well, there was some mention of such things in the Laufey's Archives-"
"Hah! The Archives!" chuckled the old Jotunn. "The Archives which hold the combined foolishness of all of Jotunheim."
"That may be," Loki allowed with a sigh. "If so, then foolishness led me here-"
"Then, let Wisdom lead you safely out. Many fall into the shadowed land of the Sunken City but few return to the Realm of the Cold Suns."

At the unspoken warning, Loki nodded, leaned forward quickly (with a muted groan), turned the skewers and leaned back with a sigh, massaging his shoulders underneath his wolf’s cloak.

"Wisdom and good counsel, I need," Loki shut his eyes, wishing he could sleep but, not quite trusting the strange Jotunn, finding himself unable to relax. "From where do you hail? What is your clan?"

"I hail from a time forgotten," sighed the Jotunn, "and so have become forgotten like Time itself, but I can see from the lines upon your brow and the adornments on your wrists that you bear the lines of the King. A Sithr Efingi no less – and at such a time as this..."
"A True Heir..." Loki recognized the ancient words. "I read of that within the Archives as well within The Annals of the Kings and Rituals."
"Yes. The First Child of the King, gifted with the powers inherent to ruling a Realm... some, of course, more gifted than others."
"I am no Sithr Efingi, nor do I seek a throne," Loki said, forcing the bitterness and anger rising within him down.

Always others attain what they do not deserve, Loki could see Helblindi, talentless, magick-less Helblindi, and his feeble attempts to raise Utgard out the ashes of the Long War. He could easily recall – as if it were yesterday – Thor sitting on the hay bales in the stables, complaining about his court duties and outlining his plans to escape his morning sessions with the Royal Tutors and Mages. Taking for granted the gift they have been given... wasting the opportunity they have to prove themselves worthy... so certain are they, as if success were a thing of Fate or some inherent ability...
"I am no Sithr Efingi, no True Heir," Loki repeated with self-loathing, drawing his knees up and embracing them while drawing his wolf's cloak about him. "The seat of the King belongs to Helblindi. Laufey made the choice. Many would say it was the right one."

"Ah... but Jotunheim has not yet had its say," said the old one. "Long ago, Jotunheim fell silent, yet still its spirit lives, though stolen, and I would say -" Here, a hard look was cast Loki's way, "that it has returned."

A pause. Loki glared at the red fire until the red and orange and blue flames blurred into one patchy blob. After a moment, purposefully ignoring the giant beside him, Loki lifted the now rather well-done eel and fish skewers off the wood and began to eat the unflavoured meat.

"Can you hear it?" A whisper. A familiar voice echoed within the hoarse rumble of the strange Jotunn. "It is even here. In the silence."

Trust us, dear heart, and know we are here... we are here, waiting. Always.

"Who are you?" Loki's eyes hardened with suspicion, looking up from the last skewer he had in hand.

"I hail from a time forgotten, and so have become forgotten like Time itself, but when I ran in the glory of my youth over the white wastelands of Jotunheim, my mother called me by such a name – Miot'vithr – and one day, I left that name behind."

"Miot'vithr, you live within in Meerauk, then? Even here in such a desolate place?"

"Ahhh... Meerauk, a mysterious place and full of secrets," Miot'vithr rocked back and forth, looking upward as though talking to someone else in the room.

The whispers ran about now, echoing with voices from the past.

"It is my home, yes, and it always shall be. The place to which we all return – the soul of Jotunheim accepts all into her bosom. Until the end of days, when even Jotunheim shall find its end."

"Jotunheim has already found its end."

"That may be, that may be," agreed Miot'vithr equably, suddenly gazing at Loki with an unblinking stare. His red eyes seemed to glint in the flickering shadows cast by the fire. "Jotunheim may meet its end before now. The Long War brought darkness, brought silence – and the Slow Death has commenced."

A thoughtful silence followed. A silence of a sort. Now there was Miot'vithr and a fire and the howling and whistling wind and the dripping water and far-off waterfall.

"You came to seek for Meerauk, the Sunken City... and you have found it thus, brought on the tide of magick and ability, no matter what denials you may speak... Surviving such a winter season and such storms as these, that speaks in and of itself. And you are here, now," Miot'vithr continued in his hoarse rumbling tones. "Tread cautiously, little one, for Meerauk holds many secrets – some best left unrevealed and others deadly, yet life-giving at the same time. This is the land which sunk into darkness and draws in the unwary to their doom."

"I will remember that," Loki said wryly. "I don't intend to go scrambling about at any rate. For some reason, I felt as though I have just battled a thousand enemies... and so, I will take my time and look about cautiously enough."

"Ah, yes," the taller Giant nodded, "you strode within the stream of Heimsrsal herself and tread the ocean and swam its powerful rivers. Your muscles have been put to use to an extent you have not attempted in years, I warrant."

"Muscles?" Loki raised a hand to squeeze another tightening muscle in his neck.

"Ach... it is not the muscles of the body of which I speak but those of the mind and of the soul. Under such extreme pressure, even the physical is affected, but the physical cannot alleviate the
spiritual so easily – time and meditation and careful channelling of the magick within and without may ease the pain."

"Oh," Loki ducked his head, face turning red at the realization that he had missed the all too obvious state into which he had gotten himself. "Yes. I used to – when I was younger-" He shoved the memory of Elska viciously down where it belonged. "When I was younger and didn't know, I would wear myself out and – even my body ached..."

"Yes. What were you told?"

"To sleep."

"Then, sleep. I will watch over you."

"And who will watch you?" quipped Loki, voice muffled as he leaned his forehead against his forearms which were once again wrapped across the tops of his knees.

Laughter broke the silence sharply as Miot'vithr guffawed at Loki's sharp words.

"Ahh... he has some wit in him, he does," Miot'vithr mused. "I think I like him!" Stifling further laughter, Miot'vithr leaned back to give Loki another amused look. "Come now, little Jotun, what is it that you seek within Meerauk? Perhaps I may be able to help you after all."

Loki thought about it for a second before slowly answering, "I seek a name."

"A name?" mused Miot'vithr. "An odd thing to search for within such ruins as these."

"I seek the name of Loki."

"Loki," Miot'vithr paused, his face turned to look into the blaze thoughtfully – eyes distant as if seeing something before his eyes.

_A dream or a vision, perhaps_, Loki thought. _Living in such a place as this, it is no wonder that one's grip on reality might become a little..._

"Loki," repeated Miot'vithr. "Now that... that is a name I have not heard in a long, long, long, long, long, long time."

"But it existed? Here on Jotunheim?"

"Yes, it did," was the heavy reply.

Loki's stomach turned a little.

"Loki," Miot'vithr said softly. "If you seek Loki, you seek doom."

...this is the land which sunk into darkness...

...this is the past which was forgotten...

...this is the truth now well-hidden...

...this is the power which flows unrestrained...

...this is the hope which waits for the taking...

_It was they who raised the cities of Innagard, Tower of the Cold Sun, and Utangard, Citadel of the Pale Moon. It was they who birthed Meerauk out of the air. And it was they who first began to war._

...this is the cause...

...the burden of those gifted...
...to see the temptation of What Could Be...

...and not to grasp so hastily...

...and in the grasping...

...they lost it all...

Chapter End Notes

Well, there you go. You can go yell at me now and foam at the mouth and threaten me all sorts of violence. I'll try to update by Wednesday.

Until then,

SOOORRRRYYY!

(let me know what you thought)

-KI

Author's Notes in Reply to Some Thoughtful Questions

Q: Why do the Jotunn mistreat Loki so?

Well, it's tradition. Tradition states that runt Jotunn should be killed. Why should they be killed? Well, the Jotunn have a reason to fear runty Jotunn. If you reread the last part of the chapter 52 (and now this chapter) - the part that reads like a history book, there is a mention of something that will be explained in the next chapter. Let's just say that it relates to your name, 'history'. XDDD Of course, for other reasons altogether, they should fear Loki... but they fear him for the wrong reasons and mistreat him in their fear and so exacerbate their position later on. This is the awesome complexity of relationships which we can see even now on this planet. Sadly.

Q: Loved that last scene, tho I don't understand how it happened, was it because Loki was in magical place ? or was he hallucinating ?

Both. He was in a magical place and so he was hallucinating. More will be expanded on later, but in essence, as the heart of Jotunheim, Meerauk is a very magical place which allows for various realities to form in time an space. Loki happens to experience a bunch. Good times.

Q: On Byleistr, is he older than Loki? If so, he acts less mature, and I'm wondering if the way Jotuns normally mature is different from Asgard? or was it because Loki had to deal with so much that he matured quite early?

Byleistr is older than Loki. Relative to Earth years, Loki is 19 or so. Thor is 20/21 years or so. Byleistr is around 22 years or so. However, when it comes to maturity, age is something a bit more relative. I would argue that none of the above characters are MATURE. However, some have more experience than others. And some have a greater variety of experience than others. So, if we were to say Loki is experienced in hard facts of life, the dark side of life, in magick and in underhanded combat and stratagem, that would be accurate. Thor is also experienced – like Helblindi – within the constraints of his culture, but what he can do, he can do well. Byla, sadly, is at the bottom. I blame Farbauti – and the fact that Byla is blessed with a loving family who protect him and...
make sure he doesn't have to deal with those things.

So, compared to Jotunn levels of maturity, Byleistr is more or less on par (but with less respect in his culture 'cause he's a scholar and a bit naive), whereas Loki is horrifyingly mature for his age because of his experiences. Once again, I say use the word mature carefully. He's seen and done things few Jotunn would have done before they got to early young adulthood, but that doesn't make him "mature" mature. If you take my meaning.

I feel that the Thor and Loki within the Thor film are horribly immature. The actors and writers and Feige and Branagh all refer to the two charas as being very young, immature, brash and hot-headed. So, yes, immaturity all around.
Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 53
Listening To The Past III

 [...]this is the tale...

 [...]the forgotten ones now remembered...

Once upon a time, when the Realms were young as a babe and Time had not yet been counted – before hardships inflicted the Cosmos That Was, Jotunheim was a paradise in which creatures, spawned out of the inner fiery depths and still running waters, lived in relative peace.

...relative peace...

...peace is so fragile...

...so fragile...

...no one knows the time or day, but what is certain – and, since the Mal'a'Hlad, forgotten – is that the Jotunn were a people as diverse as the beasts and the swimming creatures and the flying things already making their home in the Realm.

...out of the snows they came...

...thus they were born...

...to the snows they return...

...the snows of the For-Eldra...

...great and small...

Great and small. Yes, my child, Jotunn grew tall as the sky, and thus gained great might and hardiness. A darker, grimmer blue they wore on their skin and their frames were stout and muscled. Exceptional warriors and diligent in their labours of farming and building, these Jotunn continued to grow in great numbers and, in so doing, placed their mark on Jotunheim even to this day.
Yet, there were others. Those whom we do not speak of. Those whose names were all but erased. Those whom even Time has seemed to have forgotten.

but It never forgets...

not really...

not as long as we live...

and remember...

always remember...

...were smaller Jotunn, known oft times as the Light Kindred thanks to the gentler blue of their skin., their smaller statures, and slighter frames. Despite their size however, these Frost Kin were not to be underestimated, bearing their arched horns, greater than any Frost Giant, proudly. For although many died young and most were considered to be physically weaker compared to their darker, giant cousins, the Light Kindred were gifted in other ways by Nature, being empowered with the might of Heimnrsal herself.

It was they who raised the cities of Innagard, Tower of the Cold Sun, and Utangard, Citadel of the Pale Moon. It was they who birthed Meerauk out of the air. And it was they who first began to war.

this is the cause...

the burden of those gifted...

to see the temptation of What Could Be...

and not to grasp so hastily...

and in the grasping...

they lost it all...

In the end, the Light Kindred became known as the Lesser Kin and then, the Cursed. For imbalance has been the chief enemy within of those given great power – and the call of the Unseen, of the Dark, has driven many to madness. Either they were reduced to witless, gibbering creatures, feral beyond reason, or they would fall asleep – eyes wide open and unseeing, never to rise again. Others, maintaining a semblance of reason, took upon themselves the strategic raising of defences against the threat of the vengeful Dark Elves and the imperialistic tendencies of the Asgardian race who multiplied greatly and, in droves, foraged abroad for much needed resources or defended other Realms in the name of peace.

Utangard rose as powerful citadel and within its heart was placed the Kero Fornvetr. Knowledge of the natural world was sought out by these, the Lesser Kin, and in trade, they dealt with other Realms, seeking out new technological processes and inventions.
...thus Jotunheim prospered...

...and for a time...

...there was peace...

Until two, born from the ancient snows, came to full power...

[...this is the truth...]

[...which is now forgotten...]

[...should never be...]

"Two."
"Yes," Miot'vithr paused in his narration to answer Loki's quiet echo. "Twins."
"I don't remember..." Loki frowned as he searched his memories for any mention of twins and found none. "I thought Jotunn couldn't have – didn't have-"
"Indeed..." Miot'vithr shifted. "Well, rather, say it is possible, yet not permitted."
"Not permitted," Loki whispered harshly, fingers clutching at his wolf's cloak.
"Yes. As you are also – you should not have existed and yet, here you are." Miot'vithr's gaze did not move from the flames. Within his eyes, Loki fancied he saw twin flames flickering, imbued, as was everything else, with the fire of magick. "Two great traditions in Jotunheim were born out of fear – born out of hate, my faetha's faetha told me." He paused and then added as if reciting a piece he had learned by rote at school. "That no creature may bear to term a Second, or having borne, may allow a Second, such an abomination, breathe beyond an hour's time. This is the warning. That no creature may bear to term a Lesser Kind, or having borne, allow such the Lesser Kind, such an abomination, breath beyond an hour's time. This is the warning."
"No twins. No runts." Loki summed it up in four bitterly spoken words.
"Yes. Long ago, as I said, the Jotunn lived peaceably enough together – great and small – and all those in between. Although like is usually attracted to like, blood was mixed between the Kindreds at some point in time and the lines of clans intermingled to create new stronger families. Out of one such mixed clan came a pair of twins, so named Loka and Loki."
"Loka and Loki."
"Yes. For honour of their clan, for the love of Jotunheim, they worked here within Meerauk, the city in which they had been born, and extended its boundaries, brought out its glow and lit Meerauk from within with the fires of its magick. Bound together as they were within the spirit of Heimsrsal herself, the two extended their abilities to bring glory to our dark realm. Travelling to unexplored wastelands, Loka and Loki raised the twin cities of Innagard and Utangard," Miot'vithr smiled as if seeing the memory. He chanted then: "Innagard, Towers of the Cold Sun, and Utangard, Citadel of the Pale Moon, reflections for all time of the limitless power and the terrible glory and the stark beauty of Jotunheim. Innagard, the child of Loka, and Utangard, the child of Loki – these rose up on either side of the great valley, the name of which is lost forever. It is said that within the valley a lake lay and a great river – but those no longer exist. There is only the Void now. There is only the Void. The Void and the Eybjarg."
"What happened?" Loki whispered huskily, voice heavy with dread. He had a feeling he knew what was coming.
"Loki and Loka were the only children of a powerful clan which was making itself felt within the fabric of Jotunn society. Their uncle, a powerful Jotun of the Dark Kindred variety, and his family had much ambition and drew in his younger siblings into a series of political maneuverings which led to the first ever serious conflict within Jotunheim. Or so they say. For the first time, the holmganga began and the Jotunn began to battle for leadership – even between clans."
"Holmganga began then? So long ago?"
"So long ago. Before the Purge," Miot'vithr nodded. "Before everything. You might say that it started everything, in a sense. Or perhaps it began even before then. Perhaps it began with the Darkness, perhaps it began with whatever evil lies within this universe – what whispers in the night and feeds fear and hate and greed and untamed ambition." Miot'vithr then gave Loki a look. "At any rate, as you may guess, any clan with Lesser Kindred were the hardest with which to contend, for the Lesser Kindred, despite their size, were able to wield magick in terrible, yet great ways. Creativity, innovation, study and observation made the most intelligent and hardy of the Lesser Kindred into fearsome warriors – weapons to be wielded by those who knew best how to strategize."
"So they were drawn into the conflict..."
"In a way. They were born for conflict – that is what the Jotunn now say – the Greater Kind, looking back, fear the madness which often inflicts itself upon those of great power. Ambition, greed and pride, these speak more strongly, tradition says, to those of the Lesser Kind."
"Hmph... and history is always written by the victors."
"That, young one, is all too true," mused Miot'vithr. "Nevertheless, gentle Loka and clever Loki found themselves offered the opportunity to gather Jotunheim together and lead it into an era of unity and peace. Their uncle promised them positions of power – the chance to rule the Twin Cities and prosper the land on their own terms – should they aid him in uniting the land under a single king."
"And they agreed?"
"Yes."
"And paid for it, too, I should imagine."
"Well now," Miot'vithr chuckled amused. "Perhaps it is hard to believe, but not everything is shrouded in darkness and gloom. Loka and Loki were favourites of the people. Of the Realm, my faetha's faetha would say. The Elves of Alfheim, the Dwarves of Niflheim and Svartalfheim and even Asgard paid respect to them and their abilities, for the twins were well-travelled and had often come to the aid of others in times of need. Since the beginning, the Dark Elves had plotted to reclaim what was theirs and no doubt scheme to this very day. Loki, I believe, was the one who met with the Mages of Asgard and the Seers of Alfheim and discovered a way to foil Mal'Kithor's plot."
"Malekith?"
"Ah... I know not Malekith, perhaps Dark Elf of whom you speak is Mal'Kithor's descendant – but, at any rate, the Dark Elves' plot to use the convergence in order to bring about the destruction of the universe was foiled and Asgard prevailed and Jotunheim, with their delegation, including Loki and Loka, proved themselves worthy scholars and allies during such dark times. Perhaps in Asgard and Alfheim you have heard those names before – or variations thereof – in memory of a more peaceful era between the Realms. Loki and Loka became names of power, genius and beauty. Thus they were known as the Twins of Jotunheim and gained a name for themselves, so when the time came for their Uncle, the first self-styled King of Jotunheim, Storrathr-King, to take the throne, Loki and Loka stood on either side of the throne and the people of Jotunheim felt at ease."
"Not for long," Loki muttered
"You are a dark one," Miot'vithr said amused. "Sadly, this time you are right. For a time, there was peace and prosperity. Of a sort. Many clans were unused to the new authoritative hand of the King and holmganga became a common enough occurrence between the Jotunn as they vied for positions within the new Court. Some even challenged the King. Many of the lesser clans and farmers and traders and craftsmen found it difficult to carry on in such a state of affairs, so when Storrathr-King fell in combat, his unnatural sleep worried the Court and threatened to bring increased strife. His two sons were too young to take the throne and, of course, the people turned to the Twins in hopes of bringing some kind of stability to the Realm."
"It didn't end well."
"No, I am afraid it did not."
"A throne, after all, traditionally only holds one," Loki said sharply, thinking of Thor and Helblindi and his own half-wished for dreams now long dead.
"Ah, well, that was only part of the problem," Miot'vithr shook his head. "It was clear from the beginning that Loki would take the throne officially. He was older, tougher and more able to deal
with the rigours of kingship."
"But...?"
"But Loka disliked how quickly Loki took charge. Perhaps it was the fact that the younger twin was at that time carrying child and one is always a little more sensitive during those seasons – or perhaps after a lifetime of standing in Loki's shadow, Loka wished to prove his worth – or perhaps it was the realization that the paradigm of monarchy would not fit Jotunheim in the long run – or perhaps the Void whispered new fears into Loka – or perhaps Loka foresaw some terrible doom... We will never know. Faetha's faetha told me that the truth behind the matter has been obscured for eternity. Only the For-Eldra know. And the Twins, of course," Miot'vithr added. "But they took their secrets with them to the grave."
"They fought."
"Yes. Dauthr'ganga it was called from that day forward. They fought."

A silence. A weighty silence.

"They fought to their deaths. To the death of Innagard first – and at the sight of his city and people swallowed by the abyss of forever, into the Void, Loka fell into madness. Perhaps they were always mad from the beginning – that is what the Great Kindred believe. They fought within Utangard – but Loki drew his crazed younger brother onward and away from his own beloved town – and, they say, he attempted to sue for peace on the plains of Vollrvatn. To no avail, for in his battle, Loka had also lost his child – and in the losing of his child and his city, he felt as though he had nothing left."
"There was only Loki left."
"Yes."
"And to wound the heart of a brother in such a way... is there any chance for reparation?" Loki snorted. "I would think not."
"There was none, apparently, between the two, to Loka at any rate," Miot'vithr sighed. "So when the two met on the plains of Vollrvatn, they battled – and under the force of their combined strengths, the Holdra River was carved and Meerauk's foundations were shaken... and so it sank... and so it fell. And so Jotunheim fell – and it has been falling ever since."
"I thought..." Loki frowned, remembering the stories he had heard as a young child at the Gothahus. 

_The Holdra River had been carved by two heroes, that was what the tales say_, he thought. Propping his chin up on his forearms, Loki considered the story Miot'vithr had told him. _Can it be true? That they were not heroes at all – but merely brothers fighting for power? That, in the end, it was in the frenzy of ambition that Jotunheim was altered beyond recognition... and so... and so..._

Loki's brow wrinkled as he considered the whole story, as the new information sunk in, as memories swarmed in, as the implications slowly began to unfurl. It all made sense now. It all made horrible sense.

Laufey's actions.

_He had done it, after all, for the good of Jotunheim just as he was taught, Loki realized. He only did what I would have done. Or would I have sought another way? Cruel necessity... and an unwillingness to consider alternatives... enslaved to traditions... What can I think? Can I forgive him so easily? I think not._

Farbauti's sorrow.

_How much Farbauti knows is suspect, but no doubt he only sees what might have been. Especially since I am Laufey's Hear and Laufey does not appear to be able to carry another. And why is that, I wonder?_

Elska's pity.
Elska knew. Surely... he knew... at least he must have guessed that I would bring Jotunheim nothing but disaster – why did he save me – why did he hope – what did he think would happen?

Odin and Frigga's pride.

Do they know... do they know? If they did, if they do, why did – why do they keep me? I am their worst enemy. At best a rival for the throne no matter how I may appear to aid and curb Thor... fool, arrogant Thor who knows nothing – or maybe they do not know of my cursed heritage and only thought to name me after a long-forgotten sorcerer in hopes that I would, in my maturity, bring benefits to Asgard as the ancient Loki did for Jotunheim. And what – they also wish for the doom I will no doubt bring as my namesake had done? They would risk all including the potential destruction of Asgard?

Anger, frustration, fear and sadness rose within Loki and the dancing flames before him blurred as tears fill his eyes. For a moment, it threatened to overwhelm him – all those memories -

Opna's whispers – you are nothing. The Void – YOU ARE MINE. The disdainful looks, the curses and the beatings. The distant black gates of Utgard. Utangard, Citadel of the Pale Moon, and Loki's city. Laufey's disdain and the Courts hatred. Thor laughing as he pinned Loki once again to the ground.

- YOU WILL ALWAYS KNOW DEFEAT -

Loki found that for a moment, he was speechless, was choking on air, choking on heady emotions as fear swelled his suspicions. His mouth hung a little ajar, unspoken words forming on his lips.

Of course, he thought. Of course, with a name like Loki, maybe Odin thought he saw some kind of tragic ambition within me. Maybe I showed a talent for destruction as well as my talent for managing Thor. Maybe – maybe –

Loki's red eyes flickered down and his gaze darted about as other memories of Odin's self-satisfied smile came to the fore. That smile which always quirked about the edges of the old King's lips whenever he watched Thor and Loki bicker.

Maybe – maybe I am the foil to Thor, the reason why he will fight and prove himself worthy for the throne. Perhaps Odin wishes for me to challenge Thor and then fail, showing Thor to be the better man-

- YOU WILL ALWAYS KNOW DEFEAT -

No. No. He told himself. Frigga would not – she would not be party to such a scheme. She would not -

And does she know the mind of the King? Truly? Of course she would know – she would she would she would - What did she hope for you then? Not the throne, surely.

Loki’s breath hitched – then began to increase, hard short gasps as he shook his head in disbelief at the traitorous thoughts which swarmed about in his mind.

She wants me to happy. To be at peace- With that name? Hardly likely.

"And so, young one-"

Elska's still body. Opna's heavy hand on his back. Thyrstr's fists. Stumbling toward Utgard, begging
for mercy and -

_He was strong. He would not cry. He would not cry. Crying helped nothing. Nonetheless, tears rolled down his cheeks silently and from split lips spilled heartfelt promises in his broken grasp of the Jotun tongue. Barely intelligible with a hoarse voice so long disused. So long unheard._

Lonely days on the ice fields of Utangard. The scorn of the miners. The suspicious glances of the Elders. _And that day I fought the slavers..._ he had always asked himself – _what did I hope for? Acceptance that would never come? In the end, what did they do but practically offer me up to the Slavers – abandoning me when I needed them most – because why would they risk their lives to save something that would destroy them-

"Young one-" The raised rumble of Miot'vithr's voice rose a little, breaking into Loki's chaotic thoughts.

Loki blinked, red eyes wide and unseeing as he came to himself. He glanced down at his hands which clenched on his forearms painfully, his black nails digging hard into his cursed lines bringing a dark purpling to the surface.

_Cursed blood_, he thought, disjointedly, tears pricking now hotly on the edges of his eyes.

"Young one," Miot'vithr then leaned forward. "Now that you know... your heritage, your abilities... the power which flows in your veins, knowing that you may unmake what was made and make what was unmade. Knowing the Casket of Winters calls to you, its Other-Soul... Knowing this, what lies in your heart for Jotunheim?"

"What – what – my – my heart?" Loki stuttered, disbelievingly, shock spreading over his face as he raised teary eyes to Miot'vithr's. For a moment, he could only shake his head – and then, finding his voice again, Loki managed to get out: "My... my HEART? Wha – have you – have you – are you – you – are you listening to yourself? I mean, really, really listening to yourself. I – I – what can I find in my heart? Why would I care about anyone on this miserable, Norn-forsaken Realm? What could I do for Jotunheim at any rate but bring death? I am Loki, the Doom of Jotunheim – remember?" Loki found himself on his feet, panting quickly and heavily.

Red, wild eyes met calmer, untroubled ones.

"After all they have done. After all they did – how they still treat me to this day... You know what they see when they look at me? Nothing." Loki paused and then yelled: "NOTHING! And how – how do you think 'nothing' can help Jotunheim. Jotunheim does not need my aid. It does not want my aid. Let it die as it should have long ago – as I should have long ago."

"Loki," Elska's soft voice broke into the smaller Jotun's rant. "Loki. No."

"And you – you – what were you thinking? You did not know? Or did you?" Loki's voice filled with venom as he whipped around to face the ghost of his past. Tears ran down his cheeks unheeded as fired question after question at the one being in the world who he had thought he could trust. "Did you? Is that what you thought when you saved me – you wished to wreck Jotunheim in vengeance-"

"No – Loki!" Elska stepped forward, extending a large, dark, roughened hand, but Loki bristled, flinched away, shoulders and chest heaving.

"Knowing my abilities? OR maybe – maybe – it was some sort of ignorant kindness to ease your own suffering without any thought about mine?"

"Loki – I did not."

"Did not know? Did not want to know? Did not think? Why didn't you tell me-"

"I did not know, Loki, the full weight of my decision – but I felt called to save you for when I held you, I believed, truly, that you were mine to cherish. You were the son I could not lose... I thought you could bring hope to Jotunheim. Our realm had need of you."
"So, you... what... saved me for Jotunheim's sake? Because I am some kind of... game piece for the Realm?"

"Loki! I never."

"And why didn't you tell me after – after when you knew. You have known for sometime now, have you not? Have you not? Why did you not tell me then?"

"The truth is a complicated thing, Loki, I did not wish you to misunderstand as you are now – to be burdened with the truth so early."

"What? That – that I am a monster that the Jotunn parents tell their children about at – at night?" Loki paused, his face crumpling as he battled back tears and anger. "You know they'd never let me near the throne of Jotunheim – you have to know that – had to know that, and yet you still saved me, thinking I would aid the very Realm which rejects me."

"Jotunheim does not reject you, beloved," Elska took a step forward, his sad ancient eyes pleading. "I am not your beloved!" Loki screamed, voice cracking, shoulders tense, fists clenched, tears now running down his cheeks. "And you – you are not – you are NOT Elska! I – I – I -"

Loki found himself for a few seconds at a loss for words. "I can do nothing for Jotunheim – there is nothing but – but – I cannot even speak of what is in my heart. The best this Realm can hope for is that I will forget it. Forget it. Leave it... and never return."

"Loki," Elska repeated softly, his face torn with aching sadness and grief. "I – I am... I cannot...") Loki turned away then, stumbling off to the mouth of the cavern. Away from the silent still figure of Miot'vithr and the unsettling memory of Elska.

Looking out, Loki noticed that the suns must have set and the storm had abated at some point in the conversation, for Meerauk was now shrouded in soft moonlight and the air was clear. Now it was easier to see the destruction which lay below his feet. The skeletons of rooms opened up like gaping, hungry mouths to the sky, the empty dark window like sightless eyes, the rubble, the deterioration like ugly pockmarks and scars – Meerauk, the Sunken City... the forgotten to blemish upon Jotunheim's white canvas of a wasteland, Loki thought. Innagard had it lucky. And one day, one day, Utgard will join the graveyard of cities about Jotunheim. As it should be... If I stayed, would destruction come that much sooner? Perhaps that would be a mercy...

He imagined himself leading Jotunheim into an era of peace and prosperity, imagined himself sitting on Laufey's throne giving orders to a race of people twice the height of himself, imagined reaping praise and gaining respect from his wise laws and careful rulings. Imagined the inevitable future, imagined the failure and the pain and the humiliation that would follow.

He could hear voices from another time, another place, speaking within his memory.

"No. No. But... sometimes I wish I could. Just to see... to see if this is my destiny."

"What is your destiny?"

"To lose. I sound so silly. What I mean is – must I always play the role of the wrong one... the misguided one... the defeated one?"

"Oh... Kol'la..."

"Why must... I always fail in what I set my hand to?"

"The things I saw... they were great things... and maybe some of them may see terrible –"

Some of them may seem terrible, Loki echoed Frigga's words with dread. No. Better let Jotunheim be, Loki thought, ignoring the whispers – the call of Jotunheim. Of Heimsrsal. Of the Casket.

...beloved...

...do not give up hope...
...there is hope...

...even here...

...on Jotunheim...

There is no hope to be had here, Loki said, shaking his head. Not within this Loki.

"Miot'vithr..." Loki said into the night. "You heard what Elska called me? This child of Laufey-King, this Runt, this Abomination that should never have been... bears that name. That cursed name along with such a heritage... so then, should I not bear that doom then – the doom of Loki? What say you to that? Can I be that saviour who would destroy what he worked so hard to salvage?"

Loki turned and any further words died on his lips, at the sight of the empty cave. Elsa and Miot'vithr and the fire were gone. The wind had died down and all that remained was the plink, plink, plink of dripping water, the crack of ice and the roar of the falls echoing eerily in the silence. No longer did whispers swirl about. He was truly alone.

[...Jotunheim fell...]

[...into silence...]

Closing his eyes and shoving down regret, Loki turned away, grimacing.

"Good riddance," he told himself firmly. "Good riddance," he repeated. "They may need you, but they do not want you. They never did. Never well. Helheim take them all."

With that, Loki grabbed his pack, his spear, pulled his wolf's cloak about himself more firmly, plunged into the stream of magick once again and, finding new wells of power within, he transported himself to the Offaerdale where he knew the safest paths lay to Asgard. Arriving painfully with a groan, Loki fell to his hands and knees in the snow behind some rocks, panting as the magick blazed along his raw nerves. For a moment, he waited to catch his breath, then, stowing away his cloak and transforming himself back into his hidden Asgardian garb and visage, Loki prepared breathlessly for the final, most dangerous leg of his journey. Half-panting, half-sobbing, Loki gathered himself – and without looking back, disappeared again and plunged onto the Dark Paths desperately.

Never, he hoped, will I have to return again. If I am so lucky.

You never are, another dark part of him pointed out. Thus, Loki departed from Jotunheim.

[...and it grieved...]

-0-0-0-

Loki arrived, as he expected, rather suddenly on the edge of a rocky slope which fell away a little steeply down into a thick forest. Usually, Loki managed to skid down it rather easily enough to arrive breathlessly but unharmed at the bottom. This time, however, with little control over his seizing muscles, the slender young man ended up tumbling down the stony incline rather painfully, to land awkwardly on the bottom, covered in bits of gravel, dust, weeds and grass stains.

For a moment, he just lay there enjoying the light breeze which blew across his face and finding himself thankful for the first time in his life for the warm sunlight which filtered through the green leaves which swayed gently above him. The forest was comforting, safe – familiar enough territory. Beyond it, he knew lay green hills, fertile valleys and small meadows of flowers, grass and the odd
It was to the south and east of the city, not far from the capital, a good day’s journey on horseback.

Once I catch my breath and relax a bit, I’ll have to transport myself closer, Loki sighed. Trying to get to the castle will be too taxing for me at this point...

So he lay there, enjoying the sunlight and the breeze and the dappled warmth and the cheerful songbirds and the smaller creatures (foxes, hares, squirrels and wild mice) which scurried along branches and every so often peered down at him, bright black eyes inquisitive. There were no wolves nearby, nor bilgesnipes, nor birds of prey, nor bandits or slavers or hostile Frost Giants -

Do not spare them a moment's thought, Loki, he told himself, decisively, testing his strength carefully as he heaved himself upright to lean against a tree. Only think of home.

After a moment, he got up and made his way slowly down the hill, deciding to enjoy the quiet of the forest for a moment or two before going straight to the city's outskirts. My muscles need resting, Loki groaned, stretching his arms and legs experimentally. Disappearing his pack into his magical storage space as well as his spear, the better to free himself up for a leisurely hike, Loki moved onward, following the small path which wound its way down a small hill. The trees leaned in and down, sheltering the underbrush and the earth beneath his feet ran in small grooves – rills which would fill with rain during the spring and early summertime.

Following them downward, Loki watched them grow and deepen, as he expected into small gullies and then collect with others fed by mountain springs into a larger stream. The stream, he knew, would join with other streams further down and make its way as a river down into the city, joining Asgarthaharr. It was soothing to listen to – the young babble of the leaping waters as they splashed merrily over grey glistening rocks and jutting stone. Running clear, the stream offered Loki fresh water from which to slake his thirst. Under the sunlight, it glistened like so many diamonds, indescribable and uncomparable - a feast for eyes which had so long dwelt in the smoky dimness of the grey, urban planets and the shadows of the monochromatic, severe landscape of Jotunheim. Loki enjoyed the short hike down the hill and allowed himself some more time to relax his nerves before transporting again closer to Asgard’s capital.

Drawing closer to the back gate of the outer court, Loki saw a familiar tall figure – golden hair, blue eyes, large muscles set off in well-wrought armour. Thor. As the Crown Prince turned about, Loki found himself unexpectedly cheering up at the sight of Thor although another part of him grimaced, knowing how he looked – dishevelled, grimy and a little stiff.

Not what a conquering Prince would look like, I should think...

"Loki? LOKI!"

Yes. Thor had caught sight of him. Blue eyes widened and then shone with relief and excitement at the sight of Loki making his way past several crowds of peasants, merchants and servants haggling over fresh fruit, vegetables and new cuts of meat which were always brought to the Court's servant's entrance. Slipping past a particularly vocal group of fishermen, Loki approached Thor warily – to no avail.

With another great cry which drew the attention of far too many people, Thor pushed his way over to Loki, pulled him into a tight embrace, held him back the better to clasp Loki by the shoulders warmly, looked him over, exclaimed again and tangling his large hands in Loki’s long dark locks which had grown longer around his neck.

"Loki! You got back! I was beginning to think I would have to put off my current plans to go out and hunt you down again! Mother said not to worry – which is odd coming from her – but I can tell
that she was getting rather nervous for true. Ah! But you will get quite a scolding – running off like that—"

"I told her I was going out, Thor," Loki frowned. "Are you sure you are not exaggerating again?"

"She knew – ah – well, I do not think she thought you would be gone so long. I certainly did not think you would bear to part yourself for such a period of time from your precious books and experiments... Father said you would be back in your own good time, but I am sure that – FANDRAL! Look who has finally returned!"

"Oho! Loki! I see you look..." A quick glance up and down Loki's dusty and torn attire, Fandral decided to settle for diplomatic, "...healthy... and rather... well, how can one say this... have you been in some war that we were not told about? It would not be like you to go off keeping some wonderful opportunity for combat all for yourself--"

"I assure you I was not seeking combat--"

"Ah! Sif!" Thor was really beside himself. "Look who just arrived! Loki! And he looks rather – well – Mother will have a fit."

"I hardly think--"

"You know how the Queen gets when one of her boys disappears," Sif shook her head humorously. "How many times has Thor's ears been blistered with her scolding?"

"And for good reason," Loki smirked, folding his arms and giving Thor a hard look. "The things you get up to, Thor, should have given us all grey hairs long ago."

"Not I," Sif sniffed, "I can keep up with Thor."

"That is the truth," Fandral snorted and then coughed sharply as Sif elbowed him with a death glare. "Ah, so, Loki, where were you at anyways? We were not looking for you, but we did not see you in Vanahem or Alfheim when we were there."

"Vanaheim and Alfheim?" Loki blinked. "What were you doing there?"

"Looking into something," Thor shrugged. "Nothing came of it, sadly. Still, some new thing has come up on--"

"No," Loki groaned. "Not again."

"Not again?" Thor repeated miffed. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind," mumbled Loki. "I just... I know where this is going."

"Well, I was going to ask you to join us, but if you are so busy," Thor said testily, "and wanting to get back to those boring--"

"They are not boring--"

"They are boring to me. And to Sif and Fandral and Volstagg and Hogun."

"Yes, and being boring to you lot, they must be boring to everyone," Loki said sarcastically, allowing Thor and the others to draw him further into the gate and closer to the palace. "Silly me to have forgotten that!"

"Well, you have been gone some time," Fandral slapped Loki on the back with a smile spreading across his face, flicking back his golden hair gracefully as he winked at a passing serving maid. "You may have forgotten that it is all about us."

"Ah, yes," Loki replied dryly. "I must have."

"Well, I think you should come," Thor said, a determined glint in his eye. "It is a shorter jaunt this time – and Father sanctioned it."

"Hm," Loki nodded noncommittally.

"To Garthrana, which is you know a state we offered protection to some time ago... bandits landed and have laid waste to good farmland and wreck havoc, stealing and looting and taking slaves and I think--"

"Fine, Thor," Loki waved a hand tiredly in Thor's direction as his older brother's words spewed out. "-that this is a good opportunity for Asgard to show its goodwill to it's neighbours, which is what you are always going on and on about whenever we talk diplomacy. Even Father and Mother think it is a good idea and are sending a company of soldiers with us – I think it might be Tyr even--"

"Thor. I will go--"

"I know that you are just coming in from your own quest or wherever you went off to hide, but this
will be nothing but a quick strike mission, easily enough handled -"
"THOR! I said I would go!" Loki hit his brother on the arm hard enough to catch Thor's attention.
"When do you ever listen -"
"You will come?"
"Yes. I have been saying that for the past minute or so, have I not?" Here, Loki turned to Sif and
Fandral for confirmation.
"He has been," Sif rolled her eyes. "You talk too softly, Loki."
"Just because he does not sound like a giant," Fandral snorted, "does not excuse our dear Prince's
exuberance. I am glad you are coming, Loki, at last we will have one person with sense on the
mission other than Hogun."
"I notice you do not count yourself in the number," Thor laughed easily, now that that his world was
set to right and he had gotten his way. "How modest."
"Fandral knows what I would say if he began to spout his usual delusions of grandeur," Sif laughed
then, "but I am glad that Loki is coming."
"If you will wait," Loki amended, giving Thor a look. "I must repack, bathe, eat and meet Mother...
and Father."
"Yes, yes," Thor agreed as the four stepped into the first back foyer of the palace. "Mother will no
doubt have a lot to say when she sees you."

-0-0-0-

The meeting with their mother and father was nothing what Thor had expected. Instead of being
summoned directly (for he knew that the news of Loki's return would have spread like wildfire
throughout the Court), Loki was able to eat and bathe before making his way to his Mother's rooms.
Impatiently, Thor followed Loki in, wanting to see what Frigga's first words would be.

_Shouting and scolding as she usually would? Or would she just give Loki the even more potent look
of disappointment?_

Instead, however, at the sight of Loki, Frigga rose swiftly and drew her younger son into a tight
embrace, drawing back, looking the dark-haired young man up and down before drawing him again
into another tight embrace while tutting about how much weight Loki had apparently lost. _Although
to my mind he looks as he does usually, Thor thought critically, too thin..._ Standing to the side, Thor
blinked, befuddled as Loki smiled tiredly in silent response.

"You will have to eat a good dinner tonight, young man," Frigga was saying as Odin came into the
room, joining Thor quietly. "No ifs, ands or buts. Vegetables, fruit – and I will have the cook bring
your favourite mint pudding in celebration. My goodness, your hair has gotten quite long – it has
been a while I suppose since you have seen a barber."
"I will get it looked after tomorrow," Loki promised, "and I will eat well tonight. I promise."
"And? How did it go?" Frigga asked.
"It went... well..." Loki glanced at Thor and Odin quickly before meeting Frigga's inquiring gaze. "It
went well all things considered. I am... tired."
"Were you hurt or wounded at all?"
"Not this time around," Loki smiled. "I just used a fair bit more magick than I am used to. It is
amazing how out of practice one can get -"
"Hm," Thor grunted, feeling a little perplexed and nonplussed – and annoyed.

_So, Loki is going to be hailed as some long-lost son – and not even get a scolding for running off
who knows where?_

"I would have thought that you spent enough time fiddling about with such trivialities like magick,"
Thor added. "What with all those hours you waste away in the library with your nose in a book like
some old man or woman."
"Now, Thor," Frigga said mildly, giving her older son a look.
"Well," Odin finally said, moving forward to clap his youngest son on the back and nodding in a
stately, serious manner. "He is a scholar, Thor, and scholars must read as a soldier must wield his
sword. Still..." Here, Odin gave Loki a small nod of recognition. "I am glad to see my second son
home safe."
"I am glad to be back," Loki found himself smiling back in response, his hand now firmly clasped by
Frigga's warm fingers. He squeezed her hand gently. "It is good to return home and see everyone
again... Quests are great adventures and we can... we can learn much from them," Loki continued
sobering a little, "but in the end, it is the return that matters."
"True," Odin nodded. "Even better to return successful."
"Was it successful? I know how it can be difficult for you to-" Thor fell silent at Frigga's silent 'look'.
Looking away, Thor frowned, wrestling with rising feelings of jealousy as Frigga made Loki sit
down on her closest couch and ordered tea and biscuits for them. Of course she will go easy on him,
considering how sensitive he is – and how rare it is for him to go out and show himself in some honourable combat. It should be encouraged more often, Thor decided. I just need to ensure that I can join him. I want to experience it with him, Thor realized
suddenly – and with relief – how important Loki had become to him over the years. He is my
brother. Of course I want him by my side. It is only right that we should support each other.
"It went just as I hoped, on one level," Loki was saying quietly to Frigga as she poured him a cup of
sweet dark tea and offered him a fluffy white biscuit. Odin was served next and Thor chafed silently
as he waited for his turn. "There were other... surprises... but it went well."
"Where did you go?" Thor asked again. "I know you can get to some places even I do not know of -
and Heimdall could not find you, for some reason-
"No matter," Odin said dismissively. "It was a matter for the King and since you are not King... yet...
it need not trouble you. Your mother and I are just glad to have both of our sons back safely. I hope
that Loki can stay a little closer to home in the near future – since we have much to discuss. Thor has
been preparing all of his life for this moment – and it would behoove us all to take our fair share in
supporting Thor in his new responsibilities when they are given to him."
"Thor is doing what?" asked Loki, curiously.
"He will be-"
"I will be preparing for kingship," Thor puffed out his chest proudly and caught his mother's proud
gaze with a big smile.
Loki, mid-sip of his tea, suddenly started to choke a little. Frigga patted him on the back gently,
or offering him a tissue, while Odin gave his younger son a sharp glance.
"Sorry," the younger man gasped. "When is this happening? Soon?"
"Not soon enough," sighed Thor, lounging back suddenly in his chair with a gusty sigh. "Father says
I must prepare with this and that, increased tutoring and I will have to spend more time at his side
during the Court and council sessions. Also, I have to go to some court functions and meet some
people and there is the whole matter of what I must wear and the day it must be on and how many
people will be allowed in, if any at all, and so on and so forth."
"All in good time dear," Frigga smiled at her eldest. "It will come sooner than you expect."
"My thoughts exactly," Loki mumbled, but he said nothing more on the matter, deciding to change
the topic. "I would like to stay but..." Here, he gave Thor a resigned look. Thor immediately sat up
and nodded proudly.
"Loki agreed to accompany us to Garthrana! How wonderful is that!" he enthused, leaning forward
to hit Loki on his leather-clad bicep.
"Oh, Thor!" Frigga protested. "He just got home! I will have hardly had time to say hello! And I
think Loki needs a rest – he looks like he needs a rest."
"Ha! You should have seen him when he first came in," laughed Thor easily. "Covered in bits and pieces of twigs and leaves and dust – as if he took a tumble down a hill or something... I never seen Loki so dishevelled since he worked in the stables!"

"Just because I like to be clean-"

"Well," sighed Odin, "at least Loki returned hale and whole. I know that your Mother was worried for your health, my son, as she is always for all of us."

"For all of you," Frigga's hand rose to give Loki another side-ways hug. "I definitely missed our breakfasts together."

"I did too, Mother," Loki found the word, which had been so difficult to say before, so easily passing his lips.

"Oh, Loki..." Frigga's eyes suddenly got rather wet and she busied herself with the pile of napkins by the kettle.

Thor sighed again, annoyed and embarrassed by his mother's open sentimentality, and kicked Loki in the ankle.

"We should go and get ready for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Loki asked. "So soon?"

"We have been preparing all week," Thor glared, "it is not my fault that you arrived at the eleventh hour!"

"It is not my fault! How was I supposed to know you what you were planning?"

"You should have been here at the beginning!" Thor retorted.

"Ah! So I am to be kept to the grounds of the palace merely to be at your beck and call for any of your usual brainless whimsies?"

"Brainless?"

"Whimsies," added Loki, with a wide grin. "Your brainless whimsies."

"Aiding folk to fight bandits is hardly a whimsy nor is it brainless-"

"Well, maybe not this time-"

"I should say not!"

"-but next time, you know what will happen..."

They left the presence of their parents, arguing volubly – but the both of them were smiling.

[...Asgard's brilliance never dims...]

[...Jotunheim falls into shadow...]

[...and Meerauk lies in silence...]

[...is waiting...]

[...waiting...]

_Laufey is right_, Farbauti thought sadly of the one lost yet again to their family, _he did not belong here... he will not return – and so we cannot wait... we must not wait. And yet..._ Here, the tall, elderly Jotunn peered down sadly to gaze across the way to the nearest city wall upon which, he knew, Byleistr paced daily, face into the suns' rising.

_Byleistr will wait. He will always be waiting._

Chapter End Notes
Wow. OK. Excuse me while I go die. I'll see when I get an update done. We'll see...

(whacked out)
I hope this whole thing lives up to the hype... vv
Let me know if it didn't... or if it did.
Thanks so much, you guys~
-KI

p.s. There may be a week or two wait before the next update. I'll try to get something out before Christmas, but we'll see...

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-eff'er
oto'oa - big sister
udji’oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fot'ro - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvila - high bed
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Oinni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa’a'vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
raudhaust – high bed
Wheels Turn I

Chapter Notes

Summary: The war between Jotunheim and Asgard draws to a close, but thanks to a horrible twist of Fate (or perhaps not), the nameless runt of Laufey-King is not discovered by Odin and so begins a remarkable journey of life that should not have been. Jotun!Loki AU. Set pre-/during-/after Thor/Avengers Assemble. MCU-verse only.

Warnings: ANGST! Loki-whump! Language, adult situations, violence, child abuse, dub-con, sexual assault (also of a minor), substance abuse, one abortion scene (sort of), slavery, sex trade (maybe), some mild original character/Loki M/M pairings.

Comments: This is not a slash fic. Sorry. It's Loki-centric, although I definitely show the rest of the Avengers and etc. Please review! Constructive criticism welcome.

Disclaimer: I do not own Avengers. Marvel owns it. I do not get paid for this piece of work. Sadly, but understandably. LOL.

So, first off, I just want to apologize to everyone. I'm so so so sorry for the wait. For the wait for everything. For Jan & Feb, I've returned home for a holiday to Canada... it's kinda... hard for me because it's the first time I've been back home in two years, so my family (who have missed me muchly) really wanna hang with me. As you know, this is a big deal because I have 9 younger siblings, 4-5 of which have significant others in one way or another, so this means a lot of socializing and I am really struggling with finding a routine. I'm so so so so out of it - and this chapter has been a real struggle...

Secondly, this chapter, I think, has been a real bother for me. It's been a long, long struggle for me to write this chapter - and I feel like crap about it as a result... I guess I feel like there's not a lot of bang for the bucks, not considering how much I wrestled with it... It's just really delicate, for me, because I felt like I needed to show how Loki gets to where he gets... so let me know if that's working for you guys... or not.

Thirdly, sorry again to all who reviewed. I've got the side story about halfway done. I'm trying to get that worked out as well. (sigh) I'm a bum.

Fourthly, thank you to everyone who have been SO SO SO supportive. Your reviews and favs and follows have encouraged me and guilt tripped me into pushing past this chapter (hopefully) and I hope to gain some momentum and get another chapter written out in a shorter amount of time than this one. (sigh) Here's to hoping.

Thanks to: Kai_Maciel, Ally, history, Sassiebone, Nevar_Walc, Kat, lemomina, iBlameGlobalWarming, Skywinder, Katie, cbc2v. Your support has been so amazing... I hope I can reply to your comments soon!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
...between the silences...
...can you hear it...
...the dark whispers emerge...
...cracks in time, in space...
...cracks in the mind...
...the cracks which grow into chasms between hearts...
...from these...
...it is calling...

It was raining when they returned to Asgard, sore and tired from the battle. Sore and tired and silent – for Loki and Thor were currently not speaking to each other. Looking a little more thunderous than usual, the blonde-haired Crown Prince mounted his waiting horse at the end of the Bifrost Bridge and he watched Loki closely as his younger, adopted brother also followed suit a little more stiffly.

It was raining in Asgard and the music of the heavy drops falling from the grey-black clouds, which lowered over the great city, drowned out all sound, overpowering the senses and bringing to the usually golden, bright city an aura of gray and blue. Water streamed off of roofs and gutters and small gullies and, in heavy currents down the sides of the main streets, then ran down and out to the waterfalls and the ocean. Window panes, closed tight against the storm, ran liquid, now opaque and barely showing the warm red of the fires within the city's homes. Here and there, the odd pedestrian scuttled from veranda to veranda, porch to porch, canopy to canopy, warding off the rain as best they could.

A gray day in Asgard.

It was raining.

-0-0-0-

At the fifth circle, Sif, Hogun, Fandral and Volstagg silently parted ways from the two quiet Princes, knowing that this, more than ever, was not the time to overstay their welcome. Watching the two brothers disappear into the gray, Sif, pulling her hood more firmly forward the better to shield her face from the rain, shook her head slowly and petted her fidgeting mount's mane absent-mindedly.

"Do you think they will be alright?" she asked, glancing at the others.

Fandral, warmly bundled in a royal blue cloak, shifted uneasily. Hogun, stolidly ignoring the rain as it soaked his bare head, rubbed the bridge of his nose wearily and replied after a moment:

"They always are."
"They always are," Volstagg repeated heartily, "aren't they?"

Nodding slowly, yet not entirely convinced, Sif clucked her tongue quietly, twitched the reins and turned her mount toward home – to her sisters and her parents who waited with anticipation for the new tale of adventure she would have to tell. A great tale of Thor's derring-do and Loki's schemes.
Sif sighed. And what a tale this one will make – two brothers fighting for justice and protection of the weak and, in the end, for each other no matter what differences they have. And yet... and yet...

And yet. There was that time, so long ago, there was only Thor and Loki had not been at his side and Thor could do as he pleased and perhaps, some days... some days, he remembers those times... or maybe not... maybe not.

Dark skies lowered over Asgard – but when Sif arrived, the door to her home was wide open, her mother on the veranda and her father waiting in the stables, and within, her family bustling about to prepare a warm dinner for the cold evening. Sif was home.

-0-0-0-

Loki dismounted even more slowly when the two young men arrived at the palace. Lingering for a few minutes, Thor stood there watching as Loki finally pushed himself away from the dark stallion's withers, obviously shaking from fatigue and, no doubt, pain, and then turned away to trudge out of the stables. Following hard on his younger brother's heels, Thor said nothing as they made their way through the hushed halls of the lower palace. After Loki's second left turn, Thor knew that the dark-haired prince was making his way to the Healing Halls and, for a moment, a frown creased Thor's previously blank face.

When Loki stumbled, Thor's hand automatically moved and before the older one knew it, he was supporting his younger brother, left arm around Loki's stiff back and his right hand clutching Loki's upper arm.

"Loki-
"I am fine, Thor," Loki bit out, trying to push Thor away – and failing. "I am fine."
"You do not look fine to me," Thor snapped back, helping Loki down the remaining two staircases before entering the Healing Halls. "You should have said something."
"I did, remember?"
"You did? Since when?"
"Since before!"
"When was that?"
"Never mind."
"See! You did not!"
"I did so. I just... I just... do not – do – do not want to talk about it," Loki ended with a breathless rush as he finally made his way to a bed and lay down upon it. Thor, attempting to help his younger brother, moved his left arm upward to grip Loki's left side. Loki recoiled, jerked away and let out a surprised gasp of pain. "Ah! Thor! You oaf! That – that was-"
"What?" Thor pulled back, noticing that Loki's face looked a little grayer than usual (never a good sign).
"I think – I think-

Three healers, emerging from the side store room, no doubt doing the daily inventory, and catching sight of the two, rushed over. Loki found himself propped up on pillows, Thor found himself forced to sit in a large armchair, while the physicians conferred. After a good while – during which Loki was told he had broken his arm and was given a variety of potions, while his upper garments were carefully removed – Frigga entered, looking worried.

"It is alright, mother," Thor rose clumsily, bandaging wildly hanging off his arms as he pushed past the two healers who had been attending to the few scrapes and cuts he had gathered in his usual way. "He said he was fine. They are setting the bone now – a broken arm and a few broken ribs... Well, that will keep him at home..."
"He did not heal himself?" Frigga asked concerned. "You know how our medicines never heal him as quickly as – well – you know what I mean..."

"I do not know..." Thor blinked, realizing he had never thought to ask Loki why the usually competent warrior-mage hadn't healed himself as usual. "He – he did not – he did not say..."

"Thor!" Frigga turned to glare up at her taller son. "What if his magickal reserves were low to begin with before he left Asgard?"

"Why would they be-"

"He had just arrived from his own quest when you rushed him off on another! I told you that he should stay and rest – but you no doubt pressured him-

"I did not – what? No! I did not-"

"Loki has ever found it difficult to say no to you – or your father. He is always too willing to please... and that is his undoing – and you must be more thoughtful of your younger brother-"

"But-" Now, Thor was scowling, annoyance already bubbling under the surface rising.

"You should go," Frigga sighed. "I will sit beside him and wait for him to wake up and give him a talking to as well. The both of you! You two remain, as always, like children – the death of me – that is what you two will be!"

Shaking her head, Frigga turned away to pull a seat closer to Loki's side as the healers finally drew away. Thor, feeling more useless and unwanted than ever, edged back, allowed the healers to finish bandaging his arms up, with their crushed powders and potions and pastes carefully applied, and then left the room without another word. Turning one last time at the great door, Thor looked back – his mother leaning forward to clasp Loki's hand as the dark-haired prince woke up slowly. She was leaning forward, talking softly, he knew, as was her wont when they came to consciousness after a bout of illness – and a slender hand rose to brush a dark strand of Loki's hair away.

Mother and Loki. Thor frowned and strode off. Yet, the picture remained within his memory, as though imprinted in stone. Mother and Loki. Those two, always together, always bearing each others' secrets, always talking and sharing some private joke – as if they shared something I do not...

Before he came, Thor turned over his early recollections of Frigga, before Loki came, I thought I was her world... and now... it is Loki. In some ways, he mused, he always was... perhaps... he always was...

With that uncomfortable thought, Thor returned to his quarters. In silence, but not silence – for there was the ever-rushing beat of rain and it reminded him of times before when he had been more certain of everything – his place, his future and his past. Comforting thoughts.

-0-0-0-

It was a gray day in Asgard when her two boys returned, but the Queen of Asgard paid no attention to it thanks to the many things on her mind. Frigga waited patiently for Loki to wake, fully aware of how Thor fretted somewhere behind her, but she knew her eldest well. Thor will understand, she thought, in time. Ever is his mind in the present, in the now and rarely does he consider what he has been and to where he is going. These words, these harsh words will, I hope, give him pause and help him to reconsider. He must reconsider. And Loki... Loki must learn as well – the pain of vulnerability is sometimes outweighed by the benefits of support. To be carried, one must admit to weakness first... My two boys, Frigga sighed and then smiled softly in pride. My two boys.

When Loki woke – quietly as was his wont – Frigga took his hand and squeezed it gently in comfort and encouragement, knowing how her youngest hated those few moments upon waking up after a healing session. For a moment, nothing was said as she watched Loki's still face, as he blinked, as he assimilated where he was. There was only the gentle hush of falling rain.

After a moment, Loki moved and Frigga forced him to lay back again with a quiet word - "Rest".
Gently brushing a lock of black hair away from Loki's pale brow, Frigga asked softly:

"How do you feel?"
"Fine," was his muted reply.
"Hmmm..." Frigga gave her younger son a look before drawing back. "I sense something else on your mind."
"Nothing new, really," Loki finally admitted. "It is as always – the usual worries... the usual realization that sometimes the things we hope would change never do... never change as quickly as we need."
"Is it Thor again?"
"Thor? Well... I..." Here, Loki's gaze fixated on the blanket which lay bunched up now between his fingers, now nervously picked up. He sighed and then added in a rush, "It was just as it always has been."
"It?"
"Our quest – Garthrana – we accomplished what we set out to do, but as always, I feel as though it could have been done... in a better way, an easier way – if – if he would only listen! If he would ONLY LISTEN!" Loki's voice rose dangerously, before he forced himself to lean back, press back against the white, starched pillows behind his dark head, eyes shut and jaw clenched, to compose himself. "He never listens – he never – he never sees reason; for that reason, I worry. I worry for us, for Asgard..."
"You always worry," Frigga pointed out, calmly, "yet it is not for nothing-"
"It is hard to see it like that," Loki admitted. "Why must it always be a battle?"
"Perhaps there are other things," Frigga suggested carefully, "which exacerbate the whole situation? Other things on your mind?"
"Other things?"
"Your recent quest – dealing with such matters as the Gems... Jotunheim..."
"Jotunheim..." Loki frowned. Then he shrugged, shoulders tightening, "I have no personal views about that place. It is like watching a dying beast... beautiful in a way... and terrible."
"Well, truth is found in the most darkest of places, in the most terrible times," Frigga squeezed Loki's hand again encouragingly, "when we are willing to accept it."

Loki's green eyes met Frigga's blue ones for a second, his thin lips form a straight, hard line. Then, he gaze shifted down and two the left. Frigga waited, knowing that within the usually private young man, a war was no doubt being waged. Yet, after a few long beats, no answer was forthcoming.

"Just think on it," she finally broke the silence with a quiet word.
"I will," he replied calmly enough, but his glance was evasive.

Frigga's heart ached. As always, he does not appear to trust me, trust us with his worries. Always I consider what it is that I have said to cause him to doubt... but perhaps, everything he has experienced has taught him the fallibility of those around him.

"Well, whatever you decide," Frigga added softly, keeping her voice low so that the Healers would not overhear such private matters. "I need you to know how proud I am of you. Of you and Thor. Both of you are wonderful sons as any mother could wish for... and I know that you, my son, have achieved much in these recent years."
"And yet..." sighed Loki, his gaze wandering around the spacious airy healing halls with their grand columns intertwined with delicate leaves and vines winding upward to arched, white and yellow and paisley ceilings glinting with golden marigolds and silver moon blossoms. "And yet, here I am. Again."
"Perhaps some time spent in training would help," suggested Frigga, easing back a bit. "I am certain Master Orfus would be more than willing to take you on."
"I already know-"
"Experience is not merely attained with head knowledge-
"But there is no way for me to battle as they do," argued Loki, glaring at his slender hands which he knew would never be as strong and brawny as Thor's.
"Hmmm... you may be right... in a way..." Frigga leaned back and considered her son for a moment before allowing her lips to quirk upward in a secretive smile. "Perhaps you merely need to study a different form of combat. Perhaps I should give you a few lessons myself."

Loki's eyes jerked upward and widened as he realized how serious Frigga actually was. For a moment, his mouth opened just a little in shock and then he frowned.

"But, Mother, I-
"But nothing," Frigga smirked a little at his surprise. Then, she let some disappointment show on her face and sighed. "Do I look so old and incapable to you?"
"No... no, no," Loki hastened to reassure her, "but, I mean, I gathered, I thought-" He trailed off with a slight stammer. Then he glanced down at his hands, once again nervously plucking at the blanket and forced them to still. "I would be honored... if you wished to spare the time..."
"Of course," Frigga laughed then. "I will be able to share my secrets with someone who would have use for them – for I trained with Master Hjorr of Vanaheim as well as Master Megil of Alfheim and I gave neither of them cause for complaint!"

Loki laughed then, relaxing as he recognized his mother's jest.

"Very well," he said ruefully, giving Frigga a wide smile of his own. "With a master such as yourself, I am certain I will become even more capable than before."
"Naturally, dear," Frigga sniffed. "I am your mother, after all."
"Yes," Loki replied thoughtfully. "Yes... there is that."

With that, the conversation turned to lighter things, to the Court and the latest fashion atrocities, to the snobby city councilors and the know-it-all, stuffy mages and their scandals, to the recent delegations from Vanaheim, to the news of a recent herb found upon a planet which had the ability to render one's skin purple and a variety of other topics which Frigga had obviously been eager to discuss with her son. Her garden passed into their discussion and out of it – as well as Thor and his latest paramour at the newest haunt for sailors, how the quality of food had lowered with the arrival of a new chef into the kitchens and other small matters.

-0-0-0-

There was no mention again of the Gems, of Loki's return to Jotunheim and what that might mean. There were questions, he knew, on Frigga's mind about Jotunheim, Loki's apparent lack of magick, what had actually happened on the quest on Garthrana or how he had come to be injured in the first place - yet none of them were vocalized. With heartfelt relief, Loki embraced Frigga's silence as a chance to consider it all at a later date, when he was alone and able to properly assimilate all that had happened since the day of his coming of age.

For the first time in a long time, Loki felt as though he could just be – without any consideration as to all of the mysteries and questions and doubts which plagued him. For the first time in a long time, he was where he actually wanted to be – at home in Asgard with the one he cherished above all else.

Loki was home.

[...voices drift away...]

[...together entwined...]
The following years were spent within Asgard and its environs with the occasional jaunt or quest to other Realms. Loki, staying closer to home, was able to study, under the watchful eye of his mother, the more fluid forms of combat which he discovered to be more natural and intuitive, combining easily with his natural physical grace and agility.

For several months straight, he worked hard under the tutelage of Master Hjorr's nephew – a good man who embraced other forms of combat despite his partial Asgardian heritage (on his mother's side). After every session, panting and sweating and feeling triumphant, Loki left to wash up – only to join his mother in several exercises in the late afternoons. With perseverance and patience, the young prince continued to practice, although Loki sometimes caught the whispers, the not so subtle grumblings concerning the fact that his fighting styles were gradually becoming less straightforward.

"Pandering to his cunning," they muttered.
"Better off just setting aside those tricks of his and relying on himself-"
"Always a queer one-"
"Why Prince Thor puts up with it-"
"I know that the Prince does not always understand either."
"Only the Norns know what they were thinking, to adopt him in the first place."
"Well, the Queen's heart is filled with-"
"They'll regret it soon enough, mark my words, when-"

Leaving the side practice hall, Loki passed by the open courtyard where the other soldiers were grouped in pairs or companies of four or eight, the better to practice their techniques with others. Sif, Thor, Volstagg and Fandral were standing with another group of four, cheering on Hogun and a younger lord who were battling each other with small shields and maces. Noticing that Hogun's technique looked a little less fluid than usual – no doubt due to the fact he had partially sprained his ankle the other day practicing horse-riding tricks – Loki paused a little, lingering on the edges to watch.

"Loki! There you are! Where were you?" Thor asked, catching sight of him and leaning back to clasp Loki as was his habit on his shoulder.
"Practicing as usual with Master Feytil," Loki replied.
"I really do not understand why you need to practice with the likes of him," sniffed Sif. "I myself find the techniques of Master Brimar to be much more useful, particularly his sword and shield combinations."
"Well, that may work for anyone who fancies themselves a brawny warrior," Loki replied easily, trying to hold onto his previous moments of satisfaction and finding it hard in the face of the other warriors' obvious, dismissive glances amongst each other. "I, on the other hand, can understand what I am best at – and will take any chance to enhance what talents I have."

Unlike others who live in denial of their abilities, was the unspoken snide addition, but Loki said nothing more and Sif had to content herself with an eye roll. Thor just shook his head and attempted to change the subject.

"Then, what are your plans for this afternoon?"
"I will be practicing some other techniques with Mother," Loki smiled a little smugly at his older brother. "You know how she is giving me some lessons on traditional Vanir combat styles."

"...drowned in the falling rain...
...the rains which come and go...
...with time..."
"Still?" Thor raised a blond eyebrow, now clearly annoyed. "I would have thought you would be behind such tactics... hiding behind your mother's skirts and all."

At those words, Loki's face, draining of colour except for two spots of red which blossomed on his cheekbones. Green eyes flashing, Loki drew himself up to his full height – just shy of Thor.

"Say that again," Loki hissed. Then, he paused, visibly bringing himself under more control before repeating again, this time slower and more measured. "Say it again."
"I have no time to play with you today, little brother," Thor laughed with the barest of emphasis on the word 'little' – and hint of unease showing. He waved a hand lazily, gesturing at the other warriors. "We have much to accomplish today, as you know... perhaps we will have some time tomorrow."

At those unfortunately chosen words, Fandral stepped back with a short curse, Hogun drew away from his opponent instantly and Volstagg heaved a gusty sigh and shoved the other warriors away, just in time to miss the effects of the sideways blast from Loki's magickally enhanced blow to Thor's chest. Sif's voice, calling out the two brother's names, went unheard as full chaos and war erupted between the two.

-0-0-0-

Standing back to watch the brother's battle yet again, Sif found herself wondering yet again, as she had since the very first day she had laid eyes on Loki, what exactly bound the two young men together.

Always they fight, always they find conflict with each other, and always they attest to some kind of bond, some kind of peace that I can rarely see. In Thor, I see confidence and capability and all that represents the good of Asgard... other things as well, but he will be the great king we all need... Yet, Loki... Loki has never belonged. Questioning, skeptical, innovative and ultimately... unable to find his place... always hungry, always searching... and perhaps, perhaps, he too looks upward and hopes to find his own place – and Thor represents to him, mayhap, everything that Loki would wish to hold. The throne... surely Loki would not even look that high... and yet, and yet, why not? Loki's gaze is far-reaching and sweeps wide and high. His ambitions have ever been limitless – and to one as Thor, who has always had what he needed, such hunger seems so alien...

Now, watching Thor and Loki going at it hammer and tongs – with magick and with might, with hammer and sword and shield and anything that came to their hands – Sif had a feeling that perhaps the conflicts that sparked more and more often between them in recent years had their root in something that she would never be able to guess at.

Coming in between them, will only result in ruin, she mused, and so they must come to grips with each other and make eventual peace... or tear apart Asgard and bring us all to ruin...

-0-0-0-

When the fight ended (and it had to end at some point), it ended as it often did – with Mjolnir upon Loki's chest and Thor standing over him, proudly, demanding Loki's surrender. What Loki thought of it, no one knew, but Thor extracted the words without a second's thought.

"Fine," snapped Loki, laying back, fidgeting, knowing that clawing at the magickal hammer would do nothing to change his position. "You win. Get it off me."
"As long as you do not attempt to start this quarrel all over again," Thor repeated for the third time, a broad grin on his face – but his blue eyes were hard. "I was not jesting earlier when I said I had no time. You know of what I speak, Loki – and with the coronation coming so soon, I must focus on
showing what her new king has to offer. Later, when all is said and done, we can return to our old habits and fight again."

"You are so certain of the future," Loki coughed a little as he sat up, dusted himself off theatrically and rose to his feet, a little slower than before.

"Why would I not be?" Thor blinked, puzzled. "Loki, why must you always speak in riddles so?"

"When I speak, why is it that you must be so determined to complicate what I have to say?" Loki returned. "Never mind. I am also busy. Even if I am only second son to the glorious All-Father and his splendid Queen, younger brother to the golden Thor... I, too, must prepare for what my position demands."

"And I am thankful for that," Thor admitted, allowing his hammer to drop to the ground and reaching forward to clasp Loki's shoulders, gripping the thin frame tightly. "To have your support in such a way, Loki, that means much to me – and does Mother and Father proud – and I look forward to our times in council together, as it always has been."

"Then why did you say what you said earlier?" Loki frowned.

"What?" Thor laughed then, nervously. "We were only jesting, Loki! No need to be so sensitive! By the Norns, it is like you wake up on the wrong side of your bed every day – the way you carry on."

"Well..." Loki hesitated. "It did not seem like a – well, never mind. I have to go."

Hitting Thor on the arm, companionably, Loki eased back and then walked away. The gathered warriors parted before Loki as he left the courtyard, quiet murmurs and whispers rising as he disappeared down the sheltered colonnade. Loki sighed. He knew what they would be speaking about for days to come. Sometimes, he thought, drawing his green, now dusty, cloak about him, this life can be difficult as well.

[...so seasons change...]

[...and with each new era, challenges arise...]

As the day of the coronation drew closer, Loki became more and more uneasy. As the courtiers and lords and ladies gossiped and talked during the dances and balls and tea parties and hunts and other numerous outdoor events which increased through the long, clement months of summer, the younger Prince began to feel the weight of what was approaching even more heavily than before. Thoughts, unformed and nebulous, chased each other around and around – and at night, his dreams, vague and shadowy, promised a dark doom.

Everyone about him, whether rich or poor, educated or unlettered, seemed so joyous and excited about the approaching day, praising the young Crown Prince to the heavens. Thor appeared to be above reproach, no matter what his deeds or words may be, leaving Loki more uncertain than ever.

Stalking down one of the side hallways, deep in thought as usual after a particularly difficult conference, in which he had ended up silenced by the rest – the better for Thor to spout his more imperialistic future strategies for dealing with impoverished planets, Loki considered the matter yet again.

What can I say? To whom can I bring my worries? Perhaps... perhaps...

Pausing in the long, grey corridor – newly washed and scrubbed by the zealous servants and hung with new banners and wall rugs, woven by various weavers from Alfheim, Vanaheim and Asgard – Loki contemplated his options.

"Loki."

Loki's gaze jerked upward at the sound of his name in those soft, yet firm tones. Odin All-Father. As though summoned by my darkest thoughts, Loki mused uneasily.
"Father," Loki finally said, straightening and allowing his shoulders to widen a little as he raised his chin and kept his gaze level under Odin's cool scrutiny. "I was just about to send for you," Odin stroked his white beard and allowed a small smile to briefly cross his face. "This is well-fated indeed."

"Is there some trouble?" asked Loki.

"Trouble? Hm, this is sad indeed if the first thing that comes to your mind is trouble – whenever I call for you. No, no trouble. I merely wished to hear your thoughts on the matter at council today."

"Regarding..." Loki tilted his head and raised an eyebrow.

"Regarding the potential strategies or policies we may wish to set in motion regarding impoverished Realms or planets which may approach us and seek our aid."

"I did not know – I thought that the council had agreed to support Thor and his decisions."

"Thor is not King," Odin replied coolly, "yet. I would hear of your ideas as well... perhaps you can write them up and submit them to me in an outline within three days?"

"Very well," Loki nodded, following Odin as the older man slowly strolled down the hallway and out the further door and into the west side of the square cloister around one of the inner palace gardens. "I will... I will send them to you within a day or two. In preparation for the meeting, I had already taken notes of possible plans, but in the end... well..."

"Thor has much to learn," Odin said, "and one of those things is the good sense to see good advice when it is offered to him, but I have belief in him – and his heart lies in the right place. With time, he will come to see the way of things as they are... and it is also up to you speak louder. That, or you can take him aside in private and speak to him then."

"Like Mother does with you?" asked Loki shrewdly.

Odin chuckled then, "Indeed."

A paused, then:

"Indeed... until the time that Thor gains a wife of good sense for himself, your position as adviser is most crucial – and even afterwards, I have great belief in your ability to foresee problems no other Asgardian might see. There is also your... how do they call it... your silvertongue to consider. Such an asset for diplomacy."

"Diplomacy with the other Realms and nations and planets?"

"Yes... as the universe grows, as planets are populated, as races stretch out their hands to conquer what they can for the resources upon which they rely, Asgard will have more and more need for men who can understand and discuss such matters with alien worlds and empires."

"We are at peace-"

"For now," Odin shook his head. "We do not seek war, that is true, but we must be ever prepared for it... there are those out there who do not wish us well. How long it was ago – and yet it seems like yesterday that you traveled to Jotunheim, for that... mission... you were set upon. What you saw there – the time you spent there – did you not learn much about that land?"

"Is that why you sent me there?" asked Loki curiously. "To visit that land, to dispose of the jewel, yes, and to take measure of our potential enemies?"

"In part, yes. Your Mother, of course, wished you to expand your knowledge by studying the magicks there, such as they are... for she believes your... shapeshifting abilities to be unique – uniquely able to expand with more study and increased contact with other races."

"Why would you wish for me to change my form to a Frost Giant?" blinked Loki. "Surely that would only horrify - Unless you wish to send a delegation?"

"Ah! Well, what your mother sees is even a mystery to me," Odin shook his head and then added with a chuckle, "best not to question it, I have discovered."

Loki nodded.

"Jotunheim is no danger, I think, to Asgard," he finally said. "At least, that is what I saw when I last
visited. A dying Realm – hardly able to attack our land in any great numbers. The few who may
travel abroad, thanks to Elves or Dwarves, would not be able to penetrate our defences in any great
way... perhaps a few exist who wish to lead the Realm to war and attempt to regain their greatness...
and yet..."

...they wish only for life...

...that which you can give...

...what lies within your grasp...

Ignoring the rising whispers, Loki forged onward, "Perhaps I can keep an eye on it as well."
"You mean, travel there and spy out the land?" Odin frowned, paused at an intricately carved
balustrade, formed from curving leaves and airy birds. His fingers drummed upon the granite stone.
"That could cause more trouble than it is worth..."

Loki leaned back against the column opposite his father and waited, arms folded while the older man
contemplated the situation. Watching the aged king under hooded eyes, Loki wondered yet again
whether Odin knew the truth of his heritage – if Odin and Frigga knew... if they know, why have they
not denounced me? If they do not, why did they name me so? If the All-Father knows, why is he
willing to trust my word and consider sending me back? If he does not know, why would he choose
me to return at all?

"I think," Odin's quiet voice broke the silence after a moment, his blue gaze distant and focused on
something beyond – to the garden which lay before them silent and gray under the cloudy sky. "I
think we shall let Jotunheim be at present... for, as you say, there is no power in that land and what
few may attempt to grasp at Asgard's glory would undoubtedly fail. No. It is better that you stay
close to Asgard and lend us support during the early days of Thor's reign. Let us look for peace and
not court the cost and waste of war needlessly."
"You think Thor will be so content to let supposed enemies thrive?" Loki snorted. "You heard him
today... I warrant that his first decision will be to attack Jotunheim or any who dare show any kind of
disrespect or defensiveness against Asgard."
"Such a low opinion to hold-"
"It is not opinion-"
"-against your brother. Always you seek-"
"-it is fact, Father, listen to me, Thor is-"
"-to find fault with Thor. Perhaps it is your ambition which speaks-"
"-Thor is – wha- what? No. No, I say these things only for fear of our precious peace – the peace
which you and Mother have always cherished for our people... I only fear that Thor may, out of a
misguided sense of justice, seek to bring about his idea of peace through war."
"Loki," Odin's hand swept down, cutting off his youngest son definitively. "Loki. You worry too
much, hold too little faith-"
"But."
"No, Loki, hold your tongue – and your peace. Your fears drive you, as always, to such extremes.
Thor will not be on his own, entirely. There is the Council, there is the Court, there is you. Besides,
your mother and I are not dead, nor will we be entirely absent." Odin paused and shook his head,
glancing upward at the grey skies apprehensively before turning away. "There is hope, Loki, and
never has it shone brighter for Asgard as now. A new era, just as it was foretold at Thor's birth. A
king like no other."
"I – but I – ah, never mind," mumbled Loki, avoiding Odin's sharp eye. He shrugged and eased
back. "I need to – I need to go and get those propositions written up."
"I will see you at dinner?" asked Odin.
"Yes," Loki shrugged, paused and then amended, "perhaps."
"Hm. Your mother would like to see you. Lately, she said, you appear to have disappeared entirely – and she misses your company."
"I will do my best," Loki replied stiffly, bowing formally before parting ways with his father.

Watching the white-haired monarch disappear into the shadows of the hall, Loki turned and continued down the cloister, even more deeper in turmoil than before. Careful to keep his face blank, he made his way eastward along the inner walkway, enjoying the silence of the garden. As Loki passed onward and outward along the north wall out the gate and into the south end of Frigga's garden and orchard, he contemplated what had passed between Odin and him.

Again we meet, again we fail to connect, the young prince sighed deeply as he made his way along Frigga's inset paving stones to a small stone gazebo. It was an out of the way nook and Loki's favourite spot for thinking when such times came upon him. A round patio made for small groups of people, it was a cozy, six-sided enclosure with two entrances on opposite sides. Seats ran along the waist-high balustrade, also decorated with sinuous stone leaves and rounded, full stone berries and flowers, blossoming upward and outward, twining together in grey and black ivy upward to sprout along the edges of the roof. The roof rose high and rounded, dome-like and graceful, with a small overshadowing edge and accompanying gutters for the days it would rain. Around the granite and marble pavilion, clustered various hedges and trees, providing cover and privacy for those who wished to spend their time in peace.

For those like Loki.

He sat there, for a while, mind chasing hither, thither and yon after straight thoughts and wild emotions. Rubbing the bridge of his nose tiredly, Loki considered his options.

Going to Odin was clearly a mistake. You thought it would not turn well – and lo and behold, it did not... Odin never listens. He never has. Not really. He only sees what he wishes to – and what he sees is the promised one, the so-called great king like no other who will lead Asgard into a time of unparalleled greatness. As if it is not great already!

And Mother... Mother – she has heard my worries and she knows my heart, and yet she cannot see beyond the hope of Thor either. She is so proud of him and although she knows that he is not perfect, Mother believes he will live up to his destiny. As usual, she is too kind. No. Mother can do nothing.

And Thor himself. He is on the throne already in his mind. The coronation will only bring to reality what should have always been in his mind... and from that day forward, Asgard will certainly move into a new era – but I am not entirely certain that it will mean peace for our people. Always Thor has lead with his heart and his opinions and not with any true understanding of how things actually are.

Loki sighed.

He will go to war. That I am certain of. With whom is still a mystery – but I could see him attacking the Kree or the Skrull because of their warring and imperialistic tendencies. Or others – like the Jotunn... And if I was to say it was a bad idea – my opinions would not be considered. So easily cast aside as they were today.

Always I will be known as the ambitious one, the cunning one, the deceitful one, the different one, and thus I will never gain the respect I need for the position which Odin has planned for me. Undercut by the ones who are meant to support me, I will never attain anything as it is now...

There is nothing I can do.
About him, the trees creaked and the branches shifted and shuddered under the indifferent gusts of wind which rose and fell sporadically. Chin propped on his clasped hands, now propped up on his knees, Loki contemplated the nearest tree – its dark brown bark, the strong limbs and the leaves now turning in a forewarning way to the sky, baring their lighter undersides.

It was going to rain.

After a half an hour, Loki's premonition proved correct as dark spots formed upon the leaves, the bark, the edges of the balustrade and the paving stones surrounding the small gazebo. Droplets fell with increasing frequency as far away thunder and lightning rumbled and flared. *Weather to match my mood*, Loki thought, leaning back and closing his eyes, enjoying the hush of the falling rain which drowned out any sound but that of water and nature. Drowning out all of his thoughts and sweeping away his burdens in a flood-like torrent.

Sitting there in the silence, Loki found himself slowly calming down, his thoughts finding order somehow as he began to seriously consider his options, tote up the chances of success and calculate the risks for each potential venture. Stratagems ran through his mind, some of them worth pursuing, others (impossible or dangerous) rejected immediately.

*Perhaps there is a way*, he thought. *Perhaps...*

Then a seedling of an idea blossomed in his mind and, unfurling slowly, took root. Musing over it, Loki sat, surrounded by wet greenery and grey-blue rain and heedless of the cold. Considering the idea, he looked at it from every side imaginable, went through the process step by step, thought as much as possible on what could go wrong... what contingencies he should have in place should some of his plan go awry... and how to deal with the aftermath.

*Odin will understand in the end*, Loki vowed to himself, a smile growing on his face. *He will have no choice but to see what I meant. Frigga will be proud of me – and Thor will learn his lesson... it will work out...*

[...between the silences...]

[...can you hear it...]

[...the dark whispers emerge...]

[...cracks in time, in space...]

[...cracks in the mind...]

[...the cracks which grow into chasms between hearts...]

[...from these...]

[...it is calling...]

Another grey day in Asgard.

It was raining – but Loki paid the weather no heed.

He knew just what to do.
This subdued chapter was brought to you by Tomas Dvorak and his subdued OST for "Machinarium" and James Newton Howard's amazing work for "The Village".

Upcoming: Loki's machinations and the proper beginning of Thor...

Let me know what you guys thought...
-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'sen'ke – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'inka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fot'r'o - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvila - high bed
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa'a'vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrri – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col’ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
raudhaust – high bed
So, first off, I just want to apologize to everyone. The waits for this fic have become super disgusting. I'm still at home in Canada, chilling with family - and that means that a lot is going about to distract me. It sucks! I'm sorry! GOMEN NASAI!

Plus, serious sadness has hit my family with the unfortunate miscarriage of my brother's and sister-in-law's 22-week-year-old baby. It was their first one - a girl... so this week, my parents are going up to be with them for the small funeral (only the parents are going) and I'll be babysitting my younger siblings (the ones still at home).

Secondly, some people reading this fic are wondering what Loki is going to be doing for this Thor section. I want to really impress on you that there is a sense of distortion in my work. That means the events in the Thor film aren't going to be exactly the same - but they aren't going to be super different either. It will turn out to be a believable mish-mash of what I've wrought and what is in the canon. Because there are moments in the canon that I LOVE. You will see them happen. So. I'm sorry. Yes. Jotunns are part of Loki's plan... but other things will be massively different and things won't turn out the same way - because others around Loki will also be a bit different. Hope this helps you guys! I'm sorry to disappoint in advance, but I really need to stick to my aesthetics and personal vision... which I hope some of you guys can come to understand over time.

On the other hand, I am tweaking a bit of my ideas to make everything seem a bit more do-able and less crazy. We'll see how it turns out.

Finally, a few of you have expressed mourning/grief over the loss of the original worlds and et cetera... and I hope that I can continue to still bring that descriptive styled stuff to these upcoming chapters as I embroider on what I've seen in the films... I really want it to be as if Marvel has commissioned me to write a partial-AU and I am adding all those itty-bitty cultural facts that give dimension to the story. Let's hope. XD

Thank you guys so much!

So... thank you to: iBlameGlobalWarming, lemomina, Kai_Maciel, Sassiebone, youcantstopthesignalmal, SingSongSilence, and Skywinder. Your support has been so amazing... I hope I can reply to your comments soon!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 56
Wheels Turn II

"Byla."
"Blindi?"
At the sound of his brother's voice, the younger Jotunn turned and stared into the gloom of late dusk which had fallen around Gastropnir. Helblindi, emerging from the shadowed stairway, frowned as Byleistr looked back out over the broad plains running away to the east. Far far away, they knew, lay the great Lake Gnottvatn, one of the largest lakes in Jotunheim, they said, vastly deep and teeming with life. On its banks grew the wealthy merchant town of Griotunagardar, which gained much bounty from not only the Lake, but also the caravans always passing through from the Kaldrfjall Mountains and beyond.

And beyond... Helblindi mused. Beyond this hills lie other towns and other plains and other lakes and other mountain ranges and vast wildernesses from which come all manner of things – visitors and merchants and Slavers and wolves... and all the troubles of Jotunheim... including Him...

"You still come up here still, I see."
"I cannot give up hope-"
"Hope?" Helblindi asked harshly, then he lowered his voice to a furious whisper as four guards sauntered past stolidly. "What kind of hope can you have – after such a length of time – for such a creature? He – it – will not return... and if it does... if it does..."
"It?" Byleistr drew back sharply, eyes hardening. "His name is Ulfrbarn-"
"-and if it does, it will bring nothing but ruin, smar'brothir-"
"-he will not!"
"End this delusion of yours, Byla, there is nothing in its dark heart but hatred for Jotunheim-"
"Not true!"
"Byla – Byla-" Helblindi turned around, braced himself against the wall and glared out into the gathering dark. "Trust me on this..."
"I trust my heart," Byla said stoutly. Softly, yet firmly. "As I always have."
"It will be the death of you," Helblindi sighed.
"Maybe... maybe... but... at least I have made my choice. I refuse to follow meaningless edicts or misinformed, stale tradition – I am doing what I know to be right."
"As always."
"As always," promised Byla.

Helblindi said nothing more, but he stayed with Byleistr until the last glimmer of cold blue rays from the suns faltered and disappeared as the Great Frozen Giants of Day fell below the forbidding horizon. He held his peace and turned the conversation to other topics – their recent hunt, the movements of the grarulfr, the upcoming annual trip of their Father, Laufey-King, to Utgard and Byleistr's newest studies in crystal mining methodologies.

There is nothing more I can say, Helblindi decided. Time will tell – and show me for the right.

[...time passes...]
[...those prepare who must...]
[...the great and the small...]
[...for the fulfilment of prophecy...]
[...and what must be...]
[...must come to pass...]

The air was flame and the bitter taste of ash and soot and burning flesh lingered upon his tongue as he turned about and about, green eyes wide, overlooking an expanse of devastation. Asgard's
indestructible shield had fallen – inexplicably – and the air buzzed with the fury of a thousand blasting ships – Asgardian battleships and alien space vessels, shooting at each other, wending their way across a blue sky. Several, now shot, in wild corkscrews fell into the city below.

Loki, from his position high up in a tower on the north side, looked down in horror as various columns and towers began to collapse downward under the force of falling ships and higher towers. He could see one ship already crashing into the main palace – shot straight like an arrow into the heart of the golden kingdom.

"No! Thor! Thor!" Hands shaking, he found his way down the tower's stairs, only to find that the bridge which should have connected his building to the next over had disappeared. Stranded, Loki had no option but to detour and take the longer way around, closer to the ground.

Harsh panting, Loki's breath hoarse and heavy filled his ear. Hearing nothing but his own heart beating and his own breath, the young Prince ran and he ran; yet he seemed to go nowhere. It was impossible. He wouldn't be able to get there in time. Who's fault was this? What had Thor brought on them? Where was Odin? Where was Frigga?

Loki did not know, but the feeling nagged persistently – the need to find Frigga. He needed to find her. He needed to find her.

Where are you? Mother!? Where are you?

His call was drowned out by a large explosion, there was light and fire and -

Loki woke, gasping and calling out Frigga's name. For a moment, he lay there, half propped up as he fought to regain his breath and his equilibrium. He could still feel the heat of the falling flaming bits of stone and canvas and metal. He could still taste the bitter air and hear the frantic cries of the scattering city folk and the loud explosions and repetitive fire of weapons. He could still feel the lingering sensation of grit beneath his feet as he ran along the walkways.

In. Out.

YOU ARE MINE...

No. No. No.

In. Out.

He took a deep breath and let it go, let all the memories go...

...AND I HAVE HEARD YOUR CALL IN THE DEEP...


In. Out.

Pushing the images of horror down, Loki laid back and evened out his breath slowly but surely.

In. Out.

Whatever that was... Loki closed his eyes and forced himself to turn his mind's eye away from the dream. It should never come to pass. It never will... if I have my way... if all my plans go as they should. Nevertheless, despite his best efforts to reassure himself, Loki found himself a little darker in mood that morning and, of course, at his usual breakfast with his mother, Frigga noticed right away.
"It is nothing," Loki was quick to reply when Frigga quietly asked him as to why he was so 'thoughtful' (as she diplomatically put it) that morning. "Just a – a dream."
"A dream?" Frigga leaned forward to pour her quieter-than-usual son a cup of tea.
"It was nothing."
"You have dreams quite often. Such is the way of many gifted with the sight or magicks in general. Being tied so closely to the stream of life itself, some nights the secrets of Yggdrasil and the Norns themselves spill over."
"Nothing so exciting," Loki lied, knowing that Frigga would have him bundled off to the Healing Halls in a trice if she felt that Loki's sleep was endangered. "Just a dream. As a-" A pause.
As a child, I often dreamed such things...
"As a mage, I have learned to tell the difference," he amended his words carefully. "Nothing to worry over, mother."
"Hm," Frigga gave her secretive son a look. "I hope so. Although," and here she smiled a little, "it does bode well."
"How so?"
"It means that your abilities have returned," Frigga pointed out. "Your magick was so low for such a long while... and now it is obviously returned. You pushed yourself too far with that one quest."
"That was a good year or two ago," grunted Loki. "My magick was normal within a few months."
"Really." Another look from Frigga.
"I just have not taken the time to go out and quest as usual what with all of the preparations for the, ah, you know, coronation..."
"Well," said Frigga. "As long as you don't push yourself too hard."
"I will not," Loki replied calmly. "That was a – a one time thing."
"Hm, yes, dear."
Frigga let Loki change the conversation, he was sure of it later, when their talk meandered to other topics. *I wonder*, he thought uneasily, *if she guesses. Mother is, after all, quite adept at her own magicks... and she was blessed with the gift of second sight... so Mother could have discovered what transpired on Jotunheim.*

Loki watched his mother carefully over the fruits and toast and teapot and other various delicious dishes which had been brought for their breakfast, but Frigga looked as she usually did every morning – as fair and bright and cheerful as ever. There was no tension within her, neither was there any watchfulness.

*She cannot know,* he told himself with relief. *She would never guess... and all will turn out as planned.*

All would turn out as planned.

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Only a few years had passed since his last fateful visit to Jotunheim, but already Loki could see the toll of time wrecking even more desolation upon the Realm. Looking about cautiously from a crumbling wall section overlooking Utgard's western side – down to the encroaching Eybjarg, the warrior mage couldn't help but notice how the city looked even more desolate and empty than usual. The south and western side had definitely been left to ravages of ice and wind and snow and time. Shifting shadows of the slighter, yet vicious granulfr wavered over the white as the slender hunters searched for any signs of life hiding within the ruins. In the dim light of the late afternoon, the world seemed to be dowsed in blues and greys. Close by, a bit of arch and column collapsed inward in a long rumble, falling to the hard white ground in a rain of rubble as the weakened foundations crumbled. Echoes returned eerily and the vibrations set off a responding tiny avalanche of snow off a tipsy tower which also slid down several inches – before tipping off the edge of the thick wall below
and then then smashing into large bits further down on the hard ground.

 Falling into ruin before our eyes. Falling to the Void, giving ground... everyday. Not that I care, Loki told himself quickly, yet it is alarming how essential the Spirit of a Realm is to its general well-being. Ah... yes – and it was Helblindi who had the great dream to raise Utgard from its ashes. Byleistr was not too hopeful – and I can see why...

Loki smirked to himself and disappeared in a flurry of green to arrive on the topmost tower of the Gothahus. Looking down and around at the heart of the city, which, judging by the muted bustle, was attempting to forge onward in the face of extinction, Loki searched for any sign of the usual retinue that followed a royalty about in Jotunheim - the scribe, the page boy, the courtiers, the guards and other sycophants.

A small train heading on the North Road to the North Gate, Loki presumed, looked promising. In a flash of green, the warrior-mage once again disappeared, this time to arrive on the tallest tower overlooking the gate. The black stone and jarnvithr tiles and carved stone was older now – crumbling at the edges, buried more thickly in the encroaching ice and looking at little less cared for. This was my favourite spot, Loki recalled, the place from which I watched the death of that... beast...

The memory of Opna turned his stomach and in an effort to forget, Loki shook his head and fixed his gaze downward. Just as he had hoped, Helblindi appeared to be arriving at the North Gate for some inspection of outgoing goods, no doubt bound for Dagaheim, judging by the accented dialects of the merchants and their rounded, steel caps famous in that northern city. As the Crown Prince of Jotunheim finished preparation, Loki double-checked his own disguise – his wolf's skin cloak, leather breeches, black boots, throwing knives and the security of his other hidden items. When Helblindi climbed up onto the outer wall to watch the caravan wend its slow way north, Loki knew it was time.

The stage was set.

The play had started.

The game had begun.

-0-0-0-

When the abomination appeared on the closest embrasure to Helblindi, the Crown Prince's flinch was quickly covered up by a scowl and a half-roar of displeasure.

"Ulfrbarn!"

At the Crown Prince's words, the rest of those gathered about began to raise a hue and cry amongst themselves, a thundering babble. In consternation, the guards and courtiers and merchants and citizens drew closer together, a tight knit group banding against the force of evil which they had feared all their long lives.

"The ulfrbarn?!"
"The ulfrbarn!"
"It is the vaetki!"
"You remember, Hafva? Well, you were young-"
"The abomination has returned to Utgard-"
"Surely the Prince will not-"
"You remember last time-"
"SILENCE!"
Helblindi's command silenced the gathering crowd of guards, courtiers, merchants and citizens.

"You will leave us," Helblindi said with finality. "We must talk."
"Should we summon Laufey-King-"
"Leave. Now."

The red-eyed glare of Helblindi was fierce indeed, so with great speed, the group scattered, leaving only a few guards to station themselves back at their spots on either end of that portion of the wall between the two towers. For a moment, there was silence as Helblindi scowled out over the white plains of snow at the dwindling speck of the long, black caterpillar that was the caravan.

"Opinionated bunch," the creature's voice finally broke the silence with a sniff and a raised eyebrow.

*Supercilious and condescending as always, Helblindi thought crossly. The worst kind. I do not see, for the life of me, what Byleistr finds within the creature...*

"They fear what they cannot understand – it is the law of those who sleep with desperation, those who lay their head on the brink of extinction-"
"-who eat the loaf of poverty and fruitless labour."
"You have read the Annals. Of course," sighed Helblindi, refusing to meet the creature's – his younger brother's – the creature's sharp gaze. "Of course you would have read them."

A pause.

"Why are you here?"
"No 'welcome brother'?” asked the light mocking voice, floating up at him in sarcastic enquiry. "No royal welcome? Hm. I suppose you thought me – you wished me – dead."
"That was our supposition when you did not return."
"Well,” the slender creature's voice seemed to fill with vindictive glee, "I am sorry for the disappointment. It would take more than a pesky snowstorm to get rid of me."
"Noted," Helblindi shrugged.
"Wolves did not work either."
"Hm, yes, I was remembering that,” Helblindi replied thoughtfully, remembering the small patch of purple-black blood on the snow and the flurry of howling wolves. "You bear the grace of Jotunheim. Our Realm holds you close to its bosom, Fylgja said..."
"You do not believe Faetha?"
"Luck, perhaps. Fate..." Helblindi sighed. "Fate is a cold thing."
"A machine," agreed the Ulfrbarn. "I have fought it for a long time."
"So why did you return then? Surely this land has no interest for you – neither love for you, nor love from you..."
"You are so certain that I do not care for Jotunheim..." The Ulfrbarn tipped its black head, ran long blue fingers through the dishevelled hair while frowning just a little. "Why?"
"I do not see love of Jotunheim within those blood-red eyes of yours, little one. I see only... A pause. "...a great, frightening blankness... and what is behind it... perhaps there is only rage and fear?"
"Rage... maybe," conceded the younger Jotunn. "Fear, perhaps... I fear being misunderstood, being rejected. Understandable, do you not think?"
"True."
"So what can I do for Prince Helblindi to prove my loyalty to his throne and kingship and to this country which so sorely needs my aid?"
"There is nothing you can do."
"Such a quick answer."
"A true one."
"Not well thought out."
"I am not arguing with you over this."
"But you are," was the smooth reply. "You must. Your heart will always question... will always... will always wonder... what if... what if I had asked, what if I could have chosen. Deep down, there is a dream within you that you would see fulfilled. What is it?"
"My dream," Helblindi stared down then at the red gaze which was trained on him.

*Those red eyes which look so certain, he thought, so strong and so severe and so hard and so mysterious. Like Father... a giant who keeps his counsel and plans a great future... two players on a giant game board, these two are. I cannot stand between them, played as a pawn... and what he offers me may in the end allow me to catapult myself into that higher playing field... or not. What he offers me may in the end only bring destruction...*

"My dream, lagreinn," Helblindi repeated absently, "is to see our country young again, growing again, alive... once again... and to see our family and people thriving. Yet, you cannot achieve this, smar’brothir. You cannot achieve this. Only the return of the Casket."

*...se m...*

*...th...oice...f...e...an...ar...g...ow...*

Helblindi stopped blinked and looked around before glancing down at the blank face before him.

"Did you hear that?"
"Hear what?"
"A whisper... a whisper of something... I could not understand... yet a whisper nonetheless..."
"The voice of the Heimsrsal," the Ulfrbarn shivered, it's dark head and fierce red eyes turning away to look over the harsh land, bleakly. "Can you hear it? It is dying. It is Death."
"No. No. I cannot hear it clearly... but it is true. We are all dying. We need the Casket," Helblindi's fist clenched and he hit the merlon on his left suddenly and viciously. "Yet those wretched, abominable, arrogant bastard race of Asgardians keep it away and watch us with glee as we fall to our Doom."

"The Casket," the Ulfrbarn. "The Kero Fornvetr, as the tales say... It is within the Vaults of Asgard's Palace, is it not? Surely you could go there yourself and retrieve it."
"And an eel may fly to the stars," snapped Helblindi.
"Well, with magick, it might, as its ancestor, the great Iormungand, did before it," was the calm, reflective reply. "With magick and cunning and a well-conceived plan, anything is possible."
"You would attempt such a thing? There is a creature in that Vault, like no Jotunn has ever seen nor any beast or man has known. They say those who entered there in secret and for their own dire plans never left... it is indestructible and lives immortal within the Vault neither needing sunlight nor moonlight nor food nor water. The Farbjothr."
"Hm. A lot of tales for something no one has survived... still, if I retrieved such a thing for you – would you then accept my goodwill? It will be a token of my good faith."
"You are mad."
"Possibly," shrugged the Ulfrbarn. "What have I to lose?"
"Well..." Helblindi frowned, his gaze sliding away from the arched black eyebrow, the knowing red eyes, the wolfish grin and the confident stance of the one creature he now knew to fear. "You have a point there," he admitted slowly. "Yet..."

Yet, why would he suggest such a thing? It is impossible? But is it impossible? After all, he survived so many things and the grace of Jotunheim goes with him. Perhaps the Casket would help him. Ah! And there is the catch. In having the Casket – would he so easily hand it over to me – and would I be able to use it at any rate? Or would he use it for me... perhaps we could share in this together. We
are brothers after all — and he appears to care for Byleistr to some degree... perhaps... perhaps...

The small creature waited patiently, sitting back in a slouched, lounging position, one leg hanging off the edge of the wall and swinging back and forth, while the Ulfrbarn picked at his black fingernails with a small throwing dagger. After a long while, Helblindi finally let forth a great sigh.

"Very well," he leaned forward to catch the narrow chin between two of his fingers. "I look forward to seeing what you can bring for Jotunheim's glory... and if you betray us..." Here, Helblindi's fingers tightened a little, bruising the paler blue skin. "If you betray us, you will find what the full force of my anger is. Do you understand?"

"Of course," the runt jerked back and glared up at its older sibling. "I understand. Very well. "Just so that we are clear," repeated Helblindi. "You will get us the Casket and in doing so, will gain my trust — the trust of the future King of Jotunheim. Do not fail us in this. Our land and our people depend on this."

"I know," the Ulfrbarn's face smoothed out blankly and his eyes, rising to meet Helblindi's, were knowing. "More than you can ever know... I know."

With that, in a flash of green smoke and silver and gold sparks, the Ulfrbarn was gone, leaving Helblindi alone with the incomprehensible wind which whispered in its unintelligible hush until it died down and fell silent.

[...silence fell...]

[...again...]

[...on Jotunheim...]

[...the words are heard but who can understand...]

...use me...

...the voices of the nothing are growing...

...the voices of the wind are dying...

...I am here...

...everywhere...

...use me...

[...the one who would hear...]

[...is gone...]

No sooner had the Ulfrbarn disappeared, Helblindi strode over to the stairs and stumbled down them, breathing hard as though he had just run a great race against the thurblakulfr. Sightlessly, he made his way down the North Road back to the main square and the Gothahus and the King's Hall further east. Helblindi found his father, Laufey-King, in the middle of some conference with two of the city council's members over a map of a silvrstone mine. Raising his head, Laufey caught the look on Helblindi's face and immediately straightened, gave the two council's a few more instructions and concluded the meeting with a few concise words. Turning to his son, Laufey took Helblindi by the elbow and led him down a side hall to his personal study, where the elder rooted for and found his private stash of Black Dwarf ale which he then served to Helblindi who accepted the mug blindly
and took a pull before coughing and sputtering as the fiery liquid ran down his throat.

"Talk," Laufey said simply. "He came – it came... he – it – it is alive... it survived."
"I heard."
"Yes. Of course," Helblindi said nodding while staring into his mug. "They would tell you right away. You did not come though."
"There is nothing I could say to it – nothing of consequence at any rate," Laufey shrugged. "What trouble does it have brewing now?"
"It came to ask after us, I suppose. I told him, I mean... whatever, I mean, I said it should not have come. It wasn't welcome... You know, he was injured or maybe not. Hard to say – but it asked what it could do to show its good faith..."
"Hm. Smart move..." Laufey leaned back and served himself a mug of the dark ale, taking a sip before continuing. "What did it offer?"
"To do anything – to attempt any task I would put before him. Madness. Utter lunacy," Helblindi shook his head. "What was I thinking? What was he thinking?"
"What did you say to it, Helblindi?" Laufey leaned forward, eyes suddenly serious and sharp. "I said – I said," Helblindi shook his head helplessly, eyes far away. "I said that we needed the Kero Fornvetr."

Kero Fornvetr. The two words sunk like stones into the quiet of the king's study like monstrous stones in a still pond. Kero Fornvetr. It was so small, held in his hands, Laufey remembered. So small and yet so powerful... a beautiful thing, a dangerous thing, a thing of magick. A think of life – and eath.

"We do need it," Helblindi went on. "He said – it said it would get it. Get the Casket. From Asgard. Madness! Impossible! And yet... and yet..."
"And yet..." echoed Laufey, old eyes focused on the weak flames which flickered within his study's fireplace. "If anyone could defy the impossible... it would be that one..."
"That was my thought... but... still..."
"Hm."
"It would solve all of our problems-"
"Yes."
"-or it would bring upon us our final destruction..."
"Indeed."
"And the Ulfrbarn may just be playing with us. On the other hand, if it was planned well – we would only sacrifice a few for a great cause."
"Hm."

A silence.

"You will not go of course," Laufey finally said. "Summon three of the Gnaefki-Seggr and we shall plan thus – three of ours and some of the Ulfrbarn's compatriots – if it has any – shall infiltrate Asgard and then the Vault. With knowledge of the Casket, how it appears and how to use it, they will be able to defend themselves once they get their hands upon the weapon."
"Yes," Helblindi nodded.
"We must also consider the role of the creature. How does it know of Asgard? How will it know the way to the Vault? What magickal aid will it offer us? Helblindi... have care when you deal with this creature," Laufey stared moodily into the fire – then shifted his gaze to pin his eldest son with a hard look. "It is as cunning as the snow-fox and as vicious as the wolf. It lies as naturally as the snow falls and works towards obfuscation, not revelation, of the truth, I think. It is hiding something, a plan, a second strategy. Yes, for it has ambition, however hidden or submerged, and you will be its target, Helblindi, if indeed its ambition stretches to Jotunheim."
"You think it wants Jotunheim? The throne?" Helblindi blinked, eyes wide.
"Well," Laufey amended, "maybe not. It is hard to say – and since its motivations are difficult to
ascertain, better to be twice as careful. Send others to retrieve the Casket. We shall see, how it shall
all fall out."
"Very well, Faetha."
"If we gain this great treasure," Laufey-King finished off his mug of ale and leaned back further with
a sigh. "Our land will be renewed, our pride will be regained and our lives will be revivified. A great
day, a glorious day, for Jotunheim."

Thus, under the watchful eye of Laufey-King, the plotting commenced between the Jotunn and
Ulfrbarn. It began with small things – with Helblindi’s choice for the three warriors who would go,
the introduction of the other specialists who would aid them in their travels (a hot-headed Skrull and
a monosyllabic Dark Elf), an underhanded investigation on the part of Laufey concerning his taboo
offspring, and several long-winded discussions with Mages on conflicting theories concerning the
Casket. There was also some conferencing with Laufey on the Casket’s properties which he knew of
from his experiences during the Lengi Ofrithr. All of these activities finally culminated with the
Ulfrbarn’s arrival, maps in hand, and a fairly straightforward plan as to how they would access the
Vault and the Casket within.

"The Prince of Asgard, Thor," the Ulfrbarn said as it laid out own map, setting small stones down on
the sides to keep the edges from uncurling. "He is taking upon the mantle of Kingship within a few
month’s time. A coronation the like of which we have never seen, if you believe the rumours of the
merchants at the docks. Hmmm," the runt shook its head. "We shall see."
"An arrogant display of wealth and power for an arrogant, powerful Prince soon to be King..."
Helblindi spat.
"Sounds like someone I know."
"Silence, brat," Laufey glared down at the small head which bobbed by his knee as the map was
flattened down. "Explain this."
"It is a map," was the careful reply, but there was an undercurrent of sarcasm there too. A pause as
Laufey just stared at the runt with expectation, knowing that silence was the best way to deflate the
rebellious one's attitude. "A map of the lower portion of the palace," was the finally gritted out
response to Laufey’s hard stare.
"How did you get this?" asked Laufey sharply.
"From the Archives within Asgard."
"How did you get into the Archives?"
"I was careful. I have my ways..." Here, the runt gave Laufey a hard look.
"Hmmm..." Laufey held his peace, yet once again he felt as though there was some gigantic, hidden
truth within the matter.

_Something we cannot comprehend, perhaps, he thought. Or something so simple or impossible, we
would never think of it..._

Quashing rising suspicions, Laufey continued on with the conference, as the group of them discussed
what paths they would take. As each eventuality was dealt with, as each obstacle was overcome,
Laufey could see that Helblindi was becoming more excited. _It is obvious that this was very much his
idea, Laufey mused, and so he wishes for it to succeed. And in succeeding, Helblindi's position will
be assured. A cunning plan... Yet, much could go wrong, particularly if the lagreinn has betrayed us._
_Well, Laufey smirked to himself, even if we do not get the Casket, at the very least, we will have
brought chaos to their splendid, self-congratulatory celebration. Odin will look a fool and all of the
Realms will laugh. That would be enough, perhaps._

And so Laufey planned, so Helblindi plotted, so the others prepared.
And the Ulfrbarn smiled, red eyes glittering.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there you have it. More Jotunheim. Jotunheim plays a larger role in this story. Hm. Yes. Surprisingly larger than I thought. But that's fine since it's a cool place.

If anyone wants to chat with me as to why I chose to have Loki go back to Jotunheim, be sure to PM me or you can find me on Tumblr under 'kakashidiot' or on my wordpress writing account. XD

This chapter was cut in half when I got to 15 pages with no end in sight when I looked at what I had planned to put in the chapter. Realizing that I would lose a lot of little details and it could fatigue readers, I cut the chapter in half. I'm sorry for that and hopefully I'll get all I need to get written within a week or so. Or not.

Thanks so much! Reviews are like gas in my engine, so it's great to hear from you~! See ya soon!
-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-efffer
oto’oa - big sister
udji’oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fotr'ro - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvila - high bed
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa'a'vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skryppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
raudhaust – high bed
Wheels Turn III

Chapter Notes

So, first off, apologies again - this time it's not my fault!!! (YAY!) I had written up a chapter and had it all ready to go but just as I was about to post, the internet blinked out and it's been blinked out for some time and will be out for the next few days. (I'M GOING TO DIE!!!)

This means... well... this means...

a) dunno when the next update is gonna be - maybe when I get back home to my apartment in la China.
b) I won't be able to reply to your comments... AGAIN!!! T_T SORRY! c) any new updates on fanart and stuff will have to go on hold until nets come back...

But here's a new chapter anyways - thanks to my awesome sister Joy and her unlimited data and her phone and her Wi-Fi hotspot~! The good news is that I've got the next chapter almost done~!!! So when I do get internet back or just as soon as I get home, I'll be able to update~!

Thank you guys so much!

So... thank you to: beanie, Uriko, Boudahmim, lemomina, Kai_Maciel, fra, iBlameGlobalWarming, YellowWomanonthetBrink, Crazy_Cat_Lady. Your support has been so amazing... I hope I can reply to your comments soon!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 57
Wheels Turn III

"...shall the King Who Was lead the One Who Will Be..." Odin's aged, gruff voice filtered out into the night from the high tower in which both he and his eldest stood.

Try as he might, Thor found himself once again bored by the rambling, meaningless words which poured out from his father's lips as the older man slowly moved through the words of blessing and ceremony. Beyond, through the the wide window facing the South and the cloud-topped Skythurs, Thor could see the sun slowly setting in the late afternoon. Soon there would be a quiet family dinner, followed by some last minute planning, followed by a night of meditation before the Haugbui Bustathr, the Shrine of the Kings, on his knees as his father had done before him and his grand-father and his great-grand-father and all those men who had taken the throne before him. Thor sighed, drumming his fingers restlessly on his knee as his father continued.

"...to the Well of Understanding, that the path of knowledge for those who wear the crown may begin with the blessings of the Realm's Spirits. Yea, for the Realm's Spirit's speaks wisely and with great knowledge..."
Loki would understand what this is all about, Thor thought, remembering the quiet trip he had made with Odin and the High-Mages – Mage Agaei, Mage Hrotha, Mage Flarathir – to a secluded garden, a quiet place and a hidden well. Sipping from the ladle in the manner of all the Asgardian kings before him, Thor had found himself feeling even stronger, more confident and more powerful than ever before. For a moment, he had been transported to worlds and planets. Places one day which will marvel at our glory, Thor mused. So many things to see...

There had been other things as well – the song of Asgard which seemed so familiar to him, the voices of the wind –

...welcome you, son of lightning...

...child of the storm...

...who brings the days of prophecy...

...the beginning and the end of all things...

Things he could hardly begin to understand. They said that I was not to say anything of what I saw... but perhaps I could tell Loki... But Loki would understand. He would know, because it is his area of expertise. The Realm of What Is Unseen, the world of Magick, the power of Yggdrasil is a wild force none can tame and few can ride those winds and live to tell the tale. Loki would have liked it there. Perhaps he has been there already...

"...being neither Here nor There, being Inside and Outside of Time's domain themselves, and being of the Living and of the Dead together. Thus, they speak and thus shall listen the One Who Will Be, that the Crown-Bearer may be one with the Strength of the Realm, Asgard's Spirit..."

Odin's voice rolled onward and upward, out with the wind, wavering up and down as the old King's finger trailed across the yellowed pages of the leather and wood bound vellum held in his left hand. Thor watched the sun set and dreamed of the throne which soon would be his.

[...the day approaching...]

[...a fateful day...]

[...like so many others...]

[...begins as others began before...]

The incredibly eventful Coronation Day for Thor began as many others had begun before – with a swift, orange and pink sunrise brightening into a brilliant, day with crisp winds, puffy clouds and robin's egg blue skies. All the colours of the city seemed more vivid to Loki's eye when he finally dragged himself off his bed and out to his balcony at the early hour of the fifth morning bell. It might have been the mild hangover he was experiencing from the feast held night before – in honour of the great and mighty and glorious and delusional Thor. Ahhh... but then, Loki thought with a sigh as he slumped against his balcony railing, it is always easy for Asgard to celebrate her finest and to bask in the sunlight of her pride, in the rays of her achievements... well, who would not?

Loki's eyes slowly wandered over the broad vista laid out before him, focusing on the waving green branches below, the white caps of the water as it rushed down from the mountain and over the large waterfall, the blue-green depths of the far ocean and the variegated colours of the banners and flags and pennants and streams which decorated the city. After a moment, at the sound of three servants bustling into his room – one bearing his favoured green cloak for special occasions, newly pressed,
the other bringing breakfast, while the third disappeared into the bathroom to start his bath. Nibbling at the grapes, apples, khalo and other more inviting fruits on the tray, Loki watched as the young page boy recently pressed into service was sent into a corner to re-polish his already blindingly shiny boots.

Two hours later, smelling less sweaty, feeling even less rested and already thoroughly disenchanted with the bustle and commotion emanating from the direction of Thor's bedroom, Loki wandered off, no longer the concern of the palace staff, much less noticed by Odin, which suited him fine. Finding a nook in the library, Loki summoned a copy of himself quietly and morphed it into a common looking tradesman from the South.

"Your name is Kauth," Loki said in a soft undertone to the blonde-haired, green-eyed short man. "Take this and deliver it to Illesa, the Dark Elf." Kauth accepted the letter silently and made his way out, ready to answer with the automated reply that he was running an errand for one of the courtiers regarding the coronation.

On such a day as this, Loki thought, it is the answer that will open the doors to every place, even the most remote. Doors, he thought, as he swept past the dark, black and brown lintel of the library. Doors that are open, doors that are locked, doors that are shut and must remain so... doors to our future...

"Loki? Oh! There you are! Such a commotion!"

It was Frigga, looking flushed and a little flustered. She had on a new gown as well – a pale, ethereal affair which seemed to make her glow with quiet beauty, rising up to gather in a diamond studded bodice and showing off all of her regal beauty. Although Loki gathered, from the bouncing white ties on her head, that her hair had not been finished quite yet.

"Mother-
"I was wondering if you were ready – but I see that you are, of course. Of course. Thor is being, well, you know... Thor... such a handful, that boy – as always. Just when you need everything to be just so – and it is his day, after all. But of course, that is just... men... I mean," Frigga paused as she realized who she was talking to, "well, I was not implying."

"It is fine, Mother," Loki smiled, taking the unspoken compliment for what it was. "Thor has no thought for others at the best of times. I have said it before... and I will say it again."

"Hm, well, I am sure it will all turn out," Frigga swept off, taking Loki along with her as she turned down several small corridors to end up her personal suite. "I just need to get my hair done and I will be ready – but there are so many other things I need to ensure are done. Perhaps you could be a dear and look over the list with Starfa and Eiga?"

"Well..." Loki quickly ran through his own schedule mentally, but already he knew that he would just have to improvise.

Leaving Mother to deal with Thor on her own is not an option, Loki decided. It will work out... As long as Sairina and Bofain have the pass's spell word, then all is well. After all, it is important that I am before Odin and the Court when the Jotunn come... and even if they are caught before reaching the Vault, that is enough...

Pushing his other plans away, Loki focused on the sheaf of parchment which Frigga handed over, while she sat at her favoured stool before her mirror, allowing the maidservants to gather about. Loki, with the chief housekeeper, Eiga, and Frigga's head maidservant, Starfa, on either side of him, scanned through the list. Seating arrangements (and rearrangements), last minute touches to decorations, updates on the progress of the kitchens, and other minutiae were quickly double-checked with occasional asides thrown in from Frigga sandwiched between the girls.
Eventually, Frigga's hair was done and Loki's checklist was triple-checked, allowing him to disappear to the relative safety of his rooms until the actual time of the ceremony. The relative silence there did not soothe Loki nor allay his misapprehensions. Pacing about in circles, he awaited the return of his clone – and as the time of its absence was prolonged, Loki wondered if something had perhaps gone wrong. *If the message had not been clear enough, if the Dark Elf and the Skrull decided to abandon the mission halfway through... if the guards were more cautious than usual, as is their wont during important ceremonies... or if the Jotunn could not arrive on time at the place as planned – or worse, if they decide not to come at all...* Loki sighed. *So much could go wrong with this... but the final product is worth the risk...*

When Kauth slipped into the room with a quick nod, Loki gave a short sigh of relief, listened to the short report and then sent Kauth back with the final spell, straightened his collar in the mirror and double-checked his hair before fetching his favoured gold-embossed horned helmet. *My proud horns,* he thought, looking over the polishing handiwork of his page boy. *A proud thing for a proud day.*

Fitting the helm on, Loki peered into the mirror, turning his head this way and that, smoothing out the barest of curls that showed at the edges toward the back of his neck. Smoothing out the wrinkles on his brow and wiping his face of any negative emotion. Placing on that canvas, on that facade, a look of solemnized gaiety. *This is Thor's moment,* he thought with a sly smirk, *this is his moment – but this will be my moment as well. Hm. Yes.*

*My moment.*

-0-0-0-

The coronation of Crown Prince Thor was a first for everyone involved – Odin had never given the throne and crown to any other, Asgard had never seen such a ceremony since that long ago time when Odin's father had passed onto Valhalla leaving his young son in charge. Yet, the Head-Masters of Ceremonies, the Mages of Rites and Rituals and Frigga had attempted to curtail Thor and make certain that the rambunctious prince would know the exact measure of his responsibilities and responses for the incredibly momentous ceremony. Thor, of course, as Loki knew, got into the spirit of the thing with each new recital and as each new day brought the promised coronation closer.

*Every moment guided,* Loki thought, *a glimpse into his future life – if he recognizes it. The ever present push and pull of kingship... and does Thor appear to understand?* Loki slipped down a dimly lit, golden and bronze side hall detouring from his initial goal – his place at Frigga's side on the right-hand side of Odin. A pale curtain-baner flared in Asgard's wind as it blew into the grand room just below the entrance foyer's steps. Loki paused there and listened.

...*this is the day...*

...*the day of promise...*

...*the day of Fate...*

...*and Asgard's Doom...*

*A victorious Asgard,* Loki grimaced, *rushing as it always does down the path of destruction without a thought as to what it means for the rest of us. Thor in essence... and he embodies it – and does he understand his inheritance? Of course not... this is merely the superstitious old wives' tales. 'Pay no heed to them', that is what he would say.*

...*what you plan...*
Beyond, Loki could hear the crash of a pewter mug tossed in the usual way with the corresponding flare of fire and Thor's victorious shout 'Another!'.

With a grin, Loki edged around banner, joining his brother to stand shoulder to shoulder and looking forward down the long stretch of hall down to the waiting fleygja-skip that the future king of Asgard would have to walk. Will have to walk alone, Loki thought, perhaps he will understand the importance of this during this time? What can I say to him? Could I tell him even now – Thor, if deep down you do not feel ready, than do not lie to yourself... I who tell tales and construct lies and weave webs of cunning know – I know – that in the end, you cannot lie to yourself. In the end... you must face the truth...

"Nervous, brother? I would not blame you if you were." Loki's quiet voice seemed more hushed to his ears than usual.

As if I am going to a funeral...

Thor's laughter jolted his younger brother – and Loki found himself grinning in response despite the words which followed.

"Have you ever known me to be nervous?"
"Uh, well, there was that time in Nornheim..."
"That was not nerves, brother, that was the rage of battle."
"Ah, I see. So your panicked yelling at Sif was just a trick of my imagination..."
"How else could I have fought my way through a hundred warriors and pulled us out alive?" Thor asked, blue eyes twinkling.
"Ah," Loki noted coolly, "as I recall, I was the one who veiled us in smoke to ease our escape, but of course you would be the first to forget such important details."
"Yes," Thor laughed then, teasingly, "some do battle, others just do tricks."

At the slight sound of an echo of laughter, Loki's green eyes shifted suddenly to the side, noticing the servant bringing Thor a final glass of mead. It was Nevirth, dressed in his best brown robes, cream tunic and leather boots, looking as insolent as always.

Perhaps, Loki thought, he has only been able to see the 'me' of before – the Kol'la, the stable boy and the mage's apprentice – and not who I am now. For a moment, Loki thought of the other throne he had seen in Jotunheim. Laufey-king's throne, which, he knew, could have one day been his. A great dark chair, weighty and aged as any Asgardian gilded hall – and no more his than Thor's future seat. Yet, even if I do not gain a throne, I have worth, I have abilities... and I am their equal... They never see it, do they, the long-forgotten darker side of Loki whispered again. They will never see it.

With a quick twist of his hand and a silent spell recalled, Loki sent his magick outward, felt it curl and twist and spill into the cups. A wonderful working, if rudimentary, yet it achieved the desired effect. As the snakes twisted out and around the tray, Nevirth gave a horrified gasp, dropped the tray and cups, jumping back in horror. Loki laughed and Thor gave an exasperated sigh.

"Loki!" He shook his head and let out a good-natured sigh. "That was just a waste of good wine."
"Oh, just a bit of fun. Right, my friend?" Loki said, shooting Nevirth a cutting look.
Nevirth scuttled off and at the sight of the ever obsequious servant hustling away at something as simple as such a working, the two young men laughed. Loki waved his hand, reverting the squirming snakes back to their original constituents. Thor laughed and hit Loki lightly on the arm before turning to accept his helmet which Frigga had told him to wear going down the carpet. Looking at the small metal thing, Loki chuckled again.

"Oooh, nice feathers."
"You do not really want to start this again, do you, cow?" Thor retorted good-naturedly as he always did. "The both of us know how this will end."

A tradition. A welcome one in the face of the momentous day, a day that would change everything.

"I was being sincere," Loki lightly protested.
"You are incapable of sincerity."
"Am I?"

A small pause and then Loki turned a little to face his older brother square on, looking up those few inches to meet Thor's eyes.

"I have looked forward to this day as long as you have, my brother," the younger brother also added, "and friend."

Another short silence as the two stood there, eyes suddenly fixed elsewhere, as they thought on the two words which lay between them: brother, friend. Finally, Thor stirred and laid a hand on Loki's shoulder comfortingly.

"My brother and friend. Yes. It seems like only yesterday that you and I met, only yesterday that you came to Asgard and made your home here at my side."
"Yes," Loki nodded. "We have known each other for a long time now – and this, this coronation will... will bring you, will bring me to a different place. Maybe I am... uneasy. Perhaps you are as well. Sometimes," Loki admitted, "I am a bit envious... but never doubt that I love you."
"Thank you," Thor said, clasping Loki firmly before drawing back. "I know."
"Now give us a kiss," Loki nudged his brother, attempting to lighten the suddenly heavy atmosphere. "Stop it."

Another pause as the two resumed their stances and looked onward contemplatively. Soon, so soon, Loki thought. It will all begin. Uncharacteristically quiet and uncertain, Thor's voice broke into Loki's moody thoughts.

"How do I look?"

_How do I look? How do you look, Thor?_ Loki glanced then sideways and upwards at his tall, golden-haired, blue-eyed, ever muscular, ever confident brother and saw that for the first time in his life perhaps, Thor was not entirely sure of himself. Do I say it now? _Is it not too late... but if he knows... if he is not sure, perhaps he will change... perhaps he will take advice. Perhaps he will be able to question himself._

"Like a king," Loki found himself saying.

_In the end, I wish his dreams would come true, Loki mused. I wish that he will succeed. How could I not? He is... He is... my brother._

A revelation. Shadows shifted, the banner fluttered softly, the guards shifted in the further edges of the large room, the fire crackled. Far away, the sounds of fanfare were beginning.
"It is time," Loki said softly.
"Go ahead."

Loki looked over at Thor uncertainly.

"Go on!" Thor urged. "I will be right behind."

Without another word, Loki left giving the Masters of Ceremony a short nod as he passed them and went onward and outward and then upward to his place by the Queen, his mother.

It had begun.

-0-0-0-

The palace of Asgard, the largest palace in the entire Nine Realms, was built during the golden years of that great Realm – during the reign of King Ai the Magnificent. The ancient sagas tell of the people who laid its foundations when Asgard was but a tiny Realm, born as the others with it from the very branches of Yggdrasil itself. These people, or so the tales say, were taller than most. Taller and greater and each of them born with mysterious powers. In the pride of their strength and the power of their wisdom, they built the Mikla-Konungsgarthr, the Great Hall of the Fathers, and over the years as king after king came to the throne of Asgard, new additions were built, resulting in a large complex fit for the most powerful Realm of Reality itself.

Standing tall and golden, curving upward with natural grace and strength, the main hall rose from the centre. Lower down, underneath the great gold citadel, sixteen massive pillars held up a lofty granite and marble ceiling, decorated with swirls and glints of gold and silver. This was the throne of the All-Father himself. A grand open area which was usually closed during most times of the year, but during this great ceremony, the inner massive walls had been rolled upward to allow for the crowds of courtiers, mages, merchants and people of Asgard to come and attend the coronation of their new, would-be King. Today the entire outer plaza and the upper and lower tiers of the inner Court were filled.

Everything was gleaming and glistening, the red banners newly spruced up and mended fluttered in the soft breeze and even the grey stone looked clean. As Thor arrived in a ceremonial fleygja-skip likewise decorated with banners and flags and piloted by the august Einherjar, the Crown Prince's heart swelled with pride at the sight of so many come to see the coronation. Beautiful maidens, coiffed matrons, tailored handsome lads and their fathers – all of them dressed in their finest silks, cottons and leathers. Leaving the barge, Thor walked down the long red carpet, descending the first set of stairs and entering the inner Court room.

On either side of the carpet another row of imperial guards, the Einherjar, stood at attention in gleaming armour and bearing the most ceremonial and powerful spears and weapons. Walking between the two lines, Thor strode, opening up his shoulders and allowing the cheering crowds to better appreciate his new armour, his newly woven red cloak and Mjolnir. Flipping his hammer upward, Thor gave a shout, drawing another pleased yell from the crowd. His eyes drifted upward – and suddenly, all he could see was the throne.

*My throne,* Thor found himself suddenly light-headed with glee and anticipation as the realization set in.

His father sat, waiting and holding Gugnir, and on either side of the king, standing poised and regal on the stairs were those whom Thor held dear to his heart – his Mother, Loki, and Sif to Odin's right and Fandral, Volstagg and Hogun on Odin's left. Frigga was suppressing a look of amused exasperation, Sif seemed to rolling her eyes and Loki's face looked as blank as he usually did during
incredibly formal ceremonies.

*He is probably sighing deep down... or smirking... or both...* Thor grinned at the thought as he continued down the red carpet, *at least the others are enjoying themselves. Fandral and Volstagg look cheery.*

Then, Thor found himself at the foot of the Dais, in front of the stairs which led up to the throne. Kneeling, the Prince took off his winged silver helmet and set it on the floor as Odin rose slowly to his feet, gripping Gugnir with a firm hand. With a deafening clang, the great staff rose and fell on the Dais, silencing the crowd.

In a slow voice, Odin spoke out, his voice ringing out over the masses before him and his blue eye fixed hard on the young man before him.

"Thor, Odin's Son, my heir, my firstborn," he paused then added, "so long entrusted with the mighty hammer Mjolnir, forged in the heart of a dying star. Its power has no equal. It is a weapon to destroy or as a tool to build. 'Tis a fit companion for a King." Odin nodded and continued, "I have defended Asgard and the innocent across the Nine Realms since the time of the Wars..."

-0-0-0-

Several levels below, the first, unattended gate was passed swiftly and silently by the three guides – the Dark Elf, the Skrull and the incognito Asgardian sent by the Prince – and four Jotunn. All of them, according to the short note, were concealed by a spell which would be activated by the Dark Elf upon reading, and that, as planned, the first gate would be unattended, leading to a secret passage and then a small downward spiralling stair to the vault. Arrival was easily achieved, the Jotunn knew, it would be the retreat which would be more difficult.

Thus, they moved swiftly, quietly and efficiently – striking hard and fast when need arose, avoiding any unnecessary contact. Upon reaching the final door to the stairs which cut downward sharply into the hidden deeps of the Asgardian palace, the Jotunn parted ways from their guides. The Dark Elf and tradesman, once it was clear all was well, rejoined the borrowed fleygja-skip which would take them to the mountains quickly and thence out of a secret path to Svartalfheim. Te'cha, he Skrull, shrinking to the shape of a young Asgardian boy, returned to the first gate to keep watch.

Disappearing into the shadowed stairwell, the Jotunn made their way down to their destination. Ahead of them lay the side-door into the Vault, a few guards and their prize. It was an easy matter to reach the quiet, dim place, the Hoarding-Hall of Odin, the secret treasure store of the most powerful weapons in the world. Ice crept along the walls, crackling – the guards halted, the Jotunn sprang upon them, killing the unfortunate, unwary Asgardians without a word and then, there was silence again.

It had begun.

The Casket whispered, its blue depths swirling.

-0-0-0-

"Do you swear to guard the Nine Realms?"

"I swear," Thor replied easily as he continued on through the final rites of passage, the final phrases which would lead to a crown, a seat of glory and what he had been born for all his life.

A pause, then Odin continued.

"And do you swear to preserve the peace?"
"I swear."
"Do you swear to cast aside all selfish ambition and to pledge yourself only to the good of the Realms?"
"I swear!" Thor repeated, this time with more emphasis as he raised Mjolnir above his head.
"Then," Odin slowly spoke, "on this day, I, Odin All-Father, proclaim you –"

Odin's words suddenly came to a halt and the ancient blue eye turned away, unfocussed, as though the elderly king saw something within his mind's eye.

...beware, great King...

...beware the dark fate future holds...

After looking about carefully for any sign of other Asgardians, the Jotunn took note of what lay inside, until their gaze rested upon the far end where pale light shone brightest before a great grille and before that, a small stone pedestal upon which sat the one thing which they sought above all else. Dismissing the youngest Jotunn to the far door, to stand guard, the other three Jotunn quickly made their way up the room.

...beware the rise of dark and ice and fire...

...and war...

A blue hand rested upon the iron and crystal case which held what was most precious to the Jotunn in all the Nine Realms: the Kero Fornvetr, the Casket of Ancient Winters, the relic of a glorious age, the hope of a brighter future.

...beware...

Lifting the Casket, the Captain of the Haugbui Bustathr, Isfal son of Martr, turned away and began to make his way with his companions to the door.

They never made it.

...beware the whispers...

...deceit beneath deceits...

...illusion beneath illusions...

The fourth Jotunn, a younger guard, peering around the edge of the door watched with horror as the Destroyer made short work of his superiors. Without a word, the young one fled, joining the Skrull, who, upon hearing the dark tidings, cursed and brought his remaining charge down the final hallway, out into the sun and then down another set of stairs to the waiting flying skiff. After hiding the Jotunn and the Dark Elf beneath a brown canvas tarpaulin, Kauth and Te'cha cruised slowly down through the lower levels of the city before meandering out beyond the southern bridge into the mountains, looking for all the world like a patrolling guard.

Thrusting down on the helm of the fleygja-skip, Kauth increased speed, forcing the nose of the ship higher until they were soaring through the clear air above the gently rippling waters of the Ninendífljót River delta and the small accompanying lake. Upward they soared, the Skrull swore gently as their helmsman showed no sign of slowing, forcing the small ship into a crevice that could barely allow its girth to pass – forward, onward into the rocky cave and then, in a flash of multitudinous colours, through the unseen paths into Svartalfheim. As the skiff slowed down,
bouncing across the gravel, Illesa peered back the canvas to look out cautiously at his homeworld.

They had arrived.

"What was that all about?" Te'cha snapped, his natural green scales shifting through his form as his shape shifted back to the usual humanoid shape of the lizard-like Skrull.
"It was the Farbjothr," breathed the young Jotunn. "The Destroyer."
"I heard of it," the Dark Elf said softly, then shuddered, "not a legend then."
"No," said the Jotunn, "not a legend." His gaze drifted to the Asgardian who stood silent at the helm, the boat now safely touching down. "Why did you not tell us more about it?"
"He could not have known."
"Nobody knows the details of such a thing," spat the Dark Elf, "None have survived to tell such a tale... An Abomination created by the Dark Dwarves long ago, if you believe the stories."
"Yet, he could have helped us!" huffed the Jotunn. "It is the fault of the Vaetki-" At this, the Frost Giant rose, fists clenched. "Speak – where is the runtling?"

No answer.

"Giant," Illesa shook his white-haired head. "Can you not see?"

The Jotunn lunged forward, but his fingers met air, passing through the brown tunic and the rough hands of the tradesman who faded in a mist of green.

"It was an illusion," Te'cha said simply, with a grin, flicking a knife open. "It always was."
"But then," the Dark Elf continued, charging his preferred laser gun, "you are young."

Chapter End Notes

Well, that was that! Yet another part of the super long chapter that never ends. (tears)
Next time we get... a lot of discussion and preparation. Very soon... JOTUNHEIM.

Of course.

I know some of you may feel... HMMMMM... this seems a lot like canon - but the differences which are showing up here and there are going to increase drastically by Chapter 59 or so. I hope this is encouraging... for any of those out there who are worried that this is just going to be a rehash of the movies.

--KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
Dou'ma – idiot
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace.
oma'auzha – mother-effner
oto'oa - big sister
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fot'r'o - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvila - high bed
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa’a’vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
raudhaust – high bed
Wheels Turn IV

Chapter Notes

I'm going back home to Asia (my 2nd home, that is) this Saturday. Yay! But it'll take a few days to settle in, so the next update may not be for a while. I'm sorry!

In other news, I'm watching Pushing Daisies and am loving it. Lee Pace is such a hottie and there's something about his Thranduil that is so awesome. I have no words. No real words anyways. XD

Well, this chapter and the next will be the last Thor-movie canon pieces in this story. Soon things will diverge. I hope that we can already see the seeds for that divergence... and let's see how natural this all feels. (eek)

Thank you to: Kai_Maciel and iBlameGlobalWarming. Not at all of comments this time around, but for those who gave a shout out, thanks so much!!! You guys are so encouraging to me and every comment counts and just helps me feel like I'm on the right track and this stuff is going OK.

Thank you to my little brother (aged 8), Martin, for helping me find a name for the King of the Dark Dwarves~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 58
Wheels Turn IV

Headed out toward the stars, it lies – a bridge which spans the places of What Is Seen through the spaces of What Is Not. A physical bridge and a metaphysical bridge all in one – the Bifrost. Long and thin it stretches from the heart of Asgard's great capital, beneath the palace, down the centre of the city and out to the far-reaching expanse of Asgarthaharr and beyond. Perched on the edge of the sea, the Bifrost ended with the gold and bronze dome of the Observatory.

The Bifrost was a thing of glory and a feat of technology and engineering besides. Multicoloured as though it were a rainbow, the Bifrost was capable of spanning dimensions – space and time – to reach any land it set its gaze upon. How a bridge could generate the ability and power to achieve such travel (and so quickly) was a matter for much speculation throughout the known universe. The secret, guarded carefully by the Council of Mages, was often speculated upon with many visiting scientists supposing it must be a combination of material – the Bridge's actual atomic structure – combined with Asgard's powerful magicks.

Another matter of speculation was when the Observatory had actually been built, for it had sat on the northernmost edge of Asgard since time immemorial and many wondered if it were to be destroyed, whether Asgard would have memory or records on how to build such a wonder. The interleaved sections of the dome, the worked runes, the precious metals, the alignments with the stars, the actual function of the central pedestal and the apparent use of a sword to unlock the mechanism had been
noted, but in reality, few knew how the mechanism actually worked. Who had built it, who had conceived of such a wonder – no one knew, yet it was apparent that few knew its mysterious workings and the infamous Gatekeepers were silent on the subject.

Heimdall rarely spoke. In silence, he stood guard at his post, day after day in the Observatory which had been likewise kept by his fore-fathers for millenia now long past. Standing before it, in the middle of it at the sword's stand or at the far end looking out to the endless vista of stars, Heimdall kept watch, his gold eyes seeing far and wide, seeing all. The eyes of Heimdall and his kin, it was said, could see the drop of water fall from a single blade of grass a thousand worlds away.

Few could escape the gaze of Heimdall, or so the stories went. Yet, as time passed, uneasiness crept in as Heimdall began to realize that the eyes of the Observatory could not see all. Nameless things and shapeless shadows shifted within the Void and whispers of foreign magick swirled through Asgard with no sign as to their beginning nor their end.

The Bifrost shimmered, the Observatory gazed out at the brilliant nebulae and drifting clouds of coloured gas and shining, exploding stars and roaring comets and whirring pulsars and silent black holes and all that lay in between.

Dark things stirred.

---

Svartalfheim in between the seasons of fall and winter is a dark world, a grey-brown world with heavy gloomy suns which hang low within murky skies. Whipped across the barren Realm, sand and dust and small gravel rises in large storms which whirl about in wide hurricane-like circles. From a distance, there is something majestic, something lazy looking about the wide, circular storms – but caught within it, breathing is impossible and the low visibility does not allow for easy escape. Unwary travellers, inexperienced visiting traders and unlucky locals rarely survive such storms unless sanctuary is quickly found.

During these inclement times, the Dwarves of Svartalfheim dig deep and do not rise from their homes and the Dark Elves retreat to their great ships or mountain dwellings. Illesa, newly returned from the mission allotted to him, took comfort in the great clansman Ecya, cousin to Lord Malekith and Malo. Over a goblet of hearty ale and a bowl of mountain deer stew, the experienced mercenary related the information he had managed to pull from the young Jotunn.

Just as Malekith had predicted, the Aether was not hidden within Asgard’s Vaults.

---

Tey'cha hated cold. Tey'cha hated atmosphere-less moons. Tey'cha hated the shadowy, hooded informer before whom she sat. The two of them had decided to meet in a iz'kyr farming community's canteen – a grubby, cramped, smoky place filled with strange smells and equally strange company.

"So it is not within Asgard's Vault? You are certain?" whispered the hooded creature, grey skin just barely seen within the dim lighting. 
"It is not there," Tey'cha repeated for the tenth time. "It must be elsewhere. Tell your master-"
"Was there any mention of where it might be?"
"No. No mention."
"And the Dark Elf. He did not know?"
"No. Illesa did not know... and I did not press him, for if the Dark Elves were to become aware someone was searching for such an object, even they would find themselves hard pressed not to warn Odin."
"Hm."

A pause. Someone turned on the local jive-box and an annoying, clashing tune spilled out filling up the edges of the room with extra, unneeded sounds. Tey'cha stirred, fingerling the edges of her hat lapels which now hung down over her more sensitive ears. She waited as calmly as she could until the hooded one nodded slowly and pushed over three small blocks of creds.

"My master thanks you. We shall look elsewhere then."
"If I hear anything, I will contact you-"
"Best not," the alien rose, teeth bared and gleaming faintly within the shadows of its hood. "A delicate matter such as this must be dealt with extreme caution."
"Very well."
"Breathe of this matter to no one," whispered the hooded alien before slipping away in a whisper of black.
"I will not," Tey'cha said stiffly.

Tey'cha disliked suspicious clients – particularly paranoiacs and crazies who actually thought that the universe was watching their every move – as though anyone cared about someone who was chasing after a legend, a myth.

Who believes in the Tesseract anymore? Tey'cha wondered, ambling off a few hours later. Fools...

[...and elsewhere...]
[...as it always has...]
[...Jotunheim...]

Laufey and Helblindi waited for the signal which had been arranged previously - the arrival of one of the Dark Elves to a predetermined spot. Dark Elves, gifted with the ability to walk the Dark Paths, had many ways to reach Jotunheim and, although the ancient dark paths to Utgard had long lain unopened, Laufey had prepared a small delegation to await for the expected Dark Elf and Jotunn on the north-east side of the city. Our plan was simple, Laufey thought, but entirely dependent on the capabilities of the Farbjothr. If it is as terrible as they say, our kin will die this very day and even gaining an escape, the others who joined with us in our plan may not be so dependable.

When the hour of expectation slowly passed by, as the stars wandered overhead and the candles wavered and sunk within their iron lamps, Laufey sat back and awaited the arrival of his stoic, hard-faced son. Helblindi came in time and, sitting before the fire in Laufey's quiet study, said nothing but took a draught of Laufey's good ale and glared at the red and green-blue flames. After a moment, the young Prince shook his head.

"They will not be returning to us."
"As I thought," Laufey nodded slowly. "The question is 'why'."
"Indeed."
"If it was due to the Ulfirbarn, to that abomination of mine," the aged King continued, his voice a deep, ominous rumble, "it would do well to never show its face here again."
"We will know in time," Helblindi said. "He - it will come."
"Not just him."
"Hm."
"Others will come, I should think..." Laufey eyed speculatively. "Asgard will come."
"Yes..." Helblindi glanced upward at his quiet parent, "but you knew that would happen already."
"Indeed. The question is... who will come..."

[...Jotunheim waited...]
Accompanied by a small company of guards, the Imperial Einherjar, the King and the two Princes made their way as fast as may be down to the secret Vault. It lay quiet, quiet and cold. As they made their way down the steps, Loki looked about for any sign of other intruders, his quick green eyes flashing in the dimness. There were none. Only ice and dim light and the half frozen dead bodies of the Jotunn and Asgardians who had fallen. A sobering sight.

Stooping slowly, feeling his age even more, Odin bent to pick up the Casket and then moving forward again, set the ancient relic back in its place on the pedestal. Behind him, he could hear his two sons coming to a halt on either side of him, a few paces back. Thor shifted uneasily on his feet. The Crown Prince was upset. To say the least, Odin sighed.

"The Jotunn must pay for what they have done," Thor finally burst out, unable to keep his peace any longer. "For what they have done is grievous-

"They have paid," Odin countered his son easily, "with their lives." A pause as Odin ran a hand carefully along the metal edge-work of the Casket. It was returned... "The Destroyer did its work. The Casket is safe and all is well." Odin's blue eye shifted to the side, as the elderly King fell deep into thought.

"All is well? All is well?!" Thor repeated angrily, waving his arms. "They broke into the weapons vault! If the Frost Giants had stolen even one of these relics-

"They did not," Odin cut off his son with annoyance.

"I am missing something, he thought. Surely... surely...

The Casket swirled. It whispered.

...woe to those who suppress the peace...

...woe to those who court death and oppression...

"Well, I want to know why!" Thor growled. "Why and how. How did they get into the Vault and why did they not succeed? Why did they try in the first place? They are planning some thing. I know it! Such a savage race as theirs would not attack us except if they wished to begin a war with us – targeting the Casket which is a weapon of great power."

Odin turned and eyed his two sons. Thor, tall and commanding, was shifting back and forth on his feet, obviously more than ready to take action. His blue eyes flashed with fury and his hands were clenched, ready to take up his hammer and sword. On the other hand, the younger Prince had the air of someone who was waiting. In response to Thor's questions, Loki's green eyes slid to the side and his dark eyebrow rose sardonically as the younger Prince smirked behind the King's back. An unimpressed look and beneath it, something else. Something else unreadable.

Odin sighed.

"I have a truce with Laufey-King of the Jotunn."

"He just broke your truce! They know you are vulnerable." Thor shook his head. "We know what they are like. Knowing such a fact – however, impossible it is – they will attempt again to find that weakness and exploit it."

"What action would you take?" Odin asked, stepping back and cocking his white beard upward in inquisition.

"I would march into their lands as you once did," Thor replied immediately, "teach them a lesson, break their spirits so they will never dare to try to cross our borders again."

Loki snorted quietly. Odin, ignoring his younger son – for now – focused on the older with a frown.
"You are thinking only as a warrior."
"This was an act of war!"
"It was the act of but a few, doomed to fail," Odin shook his head. "I have spoken with Alinor of the Dark Elves and with King Gornor of the Dark Dwarves of Niflheim... They spoke of Jotunheim, having some trade relationships with them, which we do not have. According to them, the Jotunn have all but lost hope in returning what was once theirs. Their imperial dreams have been crushed and their land has been brought low."
"Maybe," Thor scoffed, "but these are only rumours! From uncertain allies! Look how far they got! This is no mere coincidence-"
"We will find the breach in our defences and it will be sealed-"
"As King of Asgard--" argued Thor, mulishly.
"But," Odin responded forcefully, "you are not King!"

A pause.

"Not yet."

The Vault fell silent and Odin glanced from his first son – blue eyes dawning with realization that this day he would not get his way – and then at his second son – green eyes blank and guarded. With a sigh, Odin dismissed his two sons and went off to call the guards, telling his sons to meet him at the seventh hour of the evening to discuss the breach and the information the council would no doubt have accumulated by then. Grumbling, Thor left, followed quickly by Loki.

An unaccountably silent Loki.

Odin turned to look down at the Casket again.

...woe to the one who turns his back...

...to the one who runs...

It whispered dark things of promise, terrible and great. A chill ran down his spine as he contemplated the powerful artifact. He had brought it to Asgard, knowing what it was – the precious cornerstone piece of Jotunheim.

*Its soul,* he thought. *Yet, the kingdom did not disintegrate as I thought it would and the spirit of Jotunheim runs strong and deep even now. Somehow, its spirit was not destroyed entirely within that War and the Casket is seeking... it is seeking... something... someone...* 

Odin's mind wandered in the gathering dimness of the Vault.

...woe to the one who turns his back...

...to the one who runs...

...from destiny...

[...for destiny will come, they say, to those who least look for it...]

[...and the future of some...]

[...lies shadowed...]

The thoughts of the Crown Prince of Thor were increasingly dark as he contemplated the day and
the results of his discussion with his father in the Vault. Wandering the halls of the inner Palace, Thor ignored those scurrying past him as he forged onward, thoughts piling one on top of the other. When he ended up in the dining hall, seeing the large table for the feast which would have ended the day with him sitting at the head, crowned and feted.

There would have been songs and laughing maidens courtesy of Mother and Father would have hired the best entertainment Asgard could offer and Loki would have told a story... and Sif and the Warriors Three would have been there to share the glory... and we would have dined and feasted until the Sun came up the next morning... and I would be seen for what I am – for what Father said I would be for so long – I would be King. I would be the destined King of Asgard. I would rule wisely and protect Asgard against any harm. I would crush the Jotunn and save our people... and now... it has come to nothing... nothing... nothing nothing nothing... I can do nothing.

Pushing a couple servants aside and to the ground, Thor picked up the table and threw it, enjoying the clatter of the remaining fruits and candles and plates and cutlery and goblets which rolled and crashed and clanged and clattered onto the floor. At Thor's angry roar, the servants scuttled off, leaving the room half dismantled and blessedly empty and silent. There, on the edges of the stairs leading down to the large balcony, Thor sat and contemplated his now bleak future – helpless and unable to do anything.

After a few moments, something dark brushed up against his thigh and turning his head, Thor's downcast blue eyes caught sight of a familiar flash of silver and steel thigh guards, green and brown coat and pale white hands.

Loki.

"It is unwise to be in my company right now, young brother," Thor sighed.
"Who said I was wise?" Loki's quick, witty response brought a snort from the older Prince.
"This was to be my day of triumph," Thor finally said. "In the end, I feel as though I have regressed to that of a child. Unable to do anything to protect the people whom I swore to save earlier this day. This was to be the day I would stand tall for them, guard and shield them... save them..."
"It will come." Loki paused and then added just as quietly. "In time."

Just then, the Warriors Three and Sif entered, obviously looking for Thor and at the sight of the room, they paused uncertainly. Volstagg, lumbering forward, sorrowfully surveyed the wrecked platters of buns and fruits and creams which splattered across the floor.

"What is this? Thor? What did the food do now?" He shook his head in sadness. "What a waste..."

At the sight of the two brothers obviously in conference, the others hung back and waited. Thor said nothing, feeling more than ever that their pity was most unwanted. Loki leaned forward and murmured:

"If it is any consolation, I think you are right – about the Frost Giants, about Laufey, about everything. If they found a way to penetrate Asgard's defences once, who is to say they will not try again? Next time with an army."
"Exactly!" Thor felt even more upset at the thought than before.

Why does Father not see this? These beasts will stop at nothing – nothing –

"There is nothing you can do without defying Father."

Defying Father – well, Thor mused, that is the easy part. What I can do is more difficult. I cannot go down there and kill them all myself – unless it is true and their numbers have dwindled so far... but perhaps not. At the very least, we could go down and find out the truth of the matter for ourselves, find the reason for the attack and bring such information to the session later on tonight...
Thor sat up straighter, his mind racing as the puzzle pieces fit together. Loki, catching sight of his older brother's face, leaned back, a look of consternation crossing his face.

"No – no – nononono. No, I know that look!" Loki's green eyes widened. "You can not be seriously thinking that!"
"It is the only way to ensure the safety of our borders," Thor said, standing up and moving forward, leaving his younger brother sitting behind him, shoulders slumped.

Of course Loki disagrees... but that does not mean that my idea has no merit. This is as it always was between us.

"Thor. It is madness!"

Volstagg's red-brown head rose at the sound of Loki's risen interjection.

"Madness? What sort of madness?"
"Nothing," Loki said. "Thor was merely making a jest."
"The safety of our Realm is no jest. We are going to Jotunheim."

Loki was rubbing his eyes now, clearly worried. Hogun stiffened, Volstagg blinked, Sif sighed and Fandral took a step forward, shocked.

"Jotunheim?"
"Thor," Sif tried to keep her voice calm. "Of all the laws of Asgard, this is one you must not break! You cannot be thinking of this in all seriousness."
"Indeed!" Fandral agreed. "This is not like a journey to Earth or some backwater planet, where you summon a little lightning and thunder and the mortals worship you as a god. The Realm of savages who would tear you apart with their bare hands as soon as look at you. The Realm of ice and darkness which has swallowed the unwary without a single word. The Realm most hateful of Asgard and its kind. This is Jotunheim!"
"Yes," Volstagg added heartily, "if the Frost Giants do not kill you, your father will."
"My father fought his way into Jotunheim, defeated their armies and took their Casket," Thor continued undeterred. Behind him, Loki was putting his head in his hand, a sure sign of defeat. "We would just be looking for answers. Answers Asgard needs. I am not suggesting we enter Jotunheim for war. We would only ask a few questions."
"It is forbidden to enter Jotunheim," Sif pointed out again.

Thor was not to be moved. They must come with me, he vowed to himself. We are in this together. For Asgard.

"My friends, have you forgotten all of what we have done together," the Crown Prince moved toward his blonde-haired childhood friend. "Fandral! Who brought you into the sweet embrace of all the exotic maidens within Yggdrasil?"
"You helped..." Fandral laughed, "...a little."

Thor smiled and chuckled and moved onward to the taciturn soldier. Hogun, who I trust at my back during battle...

"And you Hogun! Who led you into the most glorious of battles?"
"You did." Hogun nodded slowly.
"And Volstagg, delicacies so succulent that you thought you had died and gone to Valhalla?"
Volstagg chuckled, "You did."
"Yes," Thor moved onward to Sif, still wearing her fiercest ceremonial battle armour. "And who proved wrong all who scoffed at the idea that a young maiden could be one of the fiercest warriors
this realm has ever known?"
"I did," Sif replied stoutly, but there was a twinkle in her eye.
"True – but I supported you, Sif." Thor paused, for a beat, allowing his words to sink in. "My friends, trust me. All of our lives, we have gone out to seek justice and glory. Well, both. In equal measures. Every time, no matter what we faced, we survived."
"Through sheer dumb lucky," Loki mumbled.
"-to tell the tale and glory in our strength. This is another matter entirely. This is not something we do as young people who wish to glory in their strength and youth. This is something we must achieve for Asgard. We must do this." Thor ascended the short stairs and turned to Loki and then back to his friends. "You are not going to let my brother and I gain all the glory, are you?"
"What?" Loki blurted out in shock.
"You are coming with me, are you not?"
Loki sighed and smiled tiredly. "Yes. Of course." With that, the slender warrior-mage stood proudly at Thor's side. "I will not let my brother march into Jotunheim alone."
"And I," Volstagg added quickly.
"And I," nodded Fandral with a sigh.
"And I," Hogun added, "the Warriors Three fight together."
"I fear we will live to regret this," Sif shook her head.
"If we are lucky," chuckled Volstagg.

Thor smiled, boldly. "Then it is settled. We are going to Jotunheim!"

Within three-quarters of an hour, thanks to their long practice slipping off on quests, the six gathered beyond the armoury and the first inner gate where their horses were lined up already waiting thanks to the ever grim Master Farfin who had received Thor's message earlier. Settling their favoured weapons more securely upon themselves, the warriors looked about uneasily, wondering if Odin would burst out the great doors of the Hall at any moment roaring Thor's name.

"I still think we should do it my way," Loki was still hissing at Thor and Sif. "The Paths would get us there with little to no interference."
"But it would take too much time," Thor replied firmly. "We will go to Heimdall. He is certain to let us pass."
"I hardly think he will," Sif shook her head, disbelievingly, hands on her hips. "Never in his right mind would he countenance breaking such an important Asgardian law."
"We will tell him Father sent us."
"And if he decides to ask Odin?" Loki tried again. "Our trip would be rather short."
"We will try my way first," Thor said, "then we will try yours."
"Very well," Loki shrugged and moved off, allowing Volstagg to draw closer to compare the virtues of maces versus truncheons.

During the general rush of mounting, Loki took a few short minutes to send a small message through one of the nearby guards to his father. Walking away and setting his foot in his mount's stirrup, Loki grimaced. By the time we get to Heimdall, Odin will have caught wind of what Thor has planned... and if not... I will just need to delay our departure... somehow... hmmm... something that does not raise Thor's suspicions, or, even worse, Sif's or Heimdall's suspicions. After all, my meddling in such a way would not be greeted with the casual acceptance that Thor so often receives for his 'exploits'. And if we were to end up in Jotunheim... then... then... Loki shivered. That would hold some serious ramifications indeed.

Thus, deep in thought, Loki followed behind as the group surged out and down the main causeway
which ran from the Palace down the middle of the city and out to the Observatory – the Bifrost itself. Thanks to some persuasive words on the part of Thor and Fandral and Loki, the final gate opened, allowing the group to continue unimpeded down the bridge, the hooves of their horses sounding strangely hollow on the rippling coloured bridge. Arriving at Heimdall's Observatory a few moments later, everyone dismounted and approached Heimdall who stood before his post, sword in hand, face stolid and uncommunicative.

As usual, he was dressed in his finest. His gold helmet, however, was gleaming just a little brighter, his armour newly polished, his boots' leathers freshly oiled and everything looking well groomed for the coronation. The coronation that never was, Loki smirked, lengthening his stride to bypass Thor.

"Leave this to me." Loki said.
"You are not dressed warmly enough," Heimdall's soft voice was unperturbed.
"I am sorry," Loki started. "But-"
"You think that you can deceive me."
"You must be mistaken-"
"Enough!" Thor's voice broke through the usual argumentative discussions Heimdall and Loki were apt to have (and enjoy). "Time is of essence... Heimdall, may we pass?"

With that firm tone, Thor stepped in front of Loki, meeting Heimdall's serene, clear-eyed gaze with his own. For a moment, Heimdall seemed to be seeing something far in the distance over their shoulders and Loki had to ignore the urge to look over his shoulder. Then, gold eyes sharpening, Heimdall broke the silence.

"Never has an enemy slipped my watch until this day." A pause. Then, the usually monosyllabic guardsman added: "I wish to know how that happened."
"I rather thought that the All-Father was looking into it," Loki had to point out slowly. "Surely, he can find the breach and the Mages-"
"Ah," Thor rolled his eyes, "as usual you are so quick to rely on old witless men and your tricks to find the answer-"
"The Mages are hardly witless-"
"But they are old."
"Age has nothing to do with-"
"Enough, Loki." Thor gave his brother a hard stare. "Come, Heimdall. You understand the gravity of our situation. This must be dealt with - and swiftly. Therefore, tell no one where we have gone until we have returned, understand?" Thor asked.

Heimdall nodded slowly.

"So you will go to Jotunheim and court whatever you may find there..." he said slowly, turning away and taking Thor with him inward, leaving behind Loki standing there still uncertainly as the horror of what was about to happen settled down upon the warrior-mage.

_Heimdall will let us pass_, Loki blinked. _He is breaking one of the first tenets of Asgardian law so easily? With the mere word of Thor that all will be well? Loki frowned crossly. Of course the law is bent for Thor. Thor's word is law... at this rate, if the guardsman does not send word to Odin sooner than later, we will really end up meeting Frost Giants – and what then... surely Thor will not... he would not..._

"What happened?" Volstagg was passing Loki by now. "Silver tongue turned to lead?" The rotund warrior chuckled and moved onward, laughing with Fandral as Loki slowly stirred and followed the group into the Observatory.

As everyone took their usual positions, Heimdall stood at the pedestal and inserted his sword, starting
"Be warned," Heimdall finally added. "I will honour my sworn oath to protect this Realm as its Gatekeeper. If your return threatens the safety of Asgard, the Bifrost will remain closed and you will be left to die in the cold wastes of Jotunheim."

Yes, Loki snorted. Well. Most of us would die thanks to foolhardiness. If we were truly stuck there... would Thor last the week? I think not.

"Could you not just leave the bridge open for us?" Volstagg asked curiously. "Leaving the bridge open would unleash the full power of the Bifrost and destroy Jotunheim with you upon it," Heimdall said, his voice not reflecting any annoyance at the fact that yet again the same old question was being asked. Again.

Loki, however, could not stifle a sigh. How can they not understand this? He rolled his eyes. Anyone who knows anything knows this...

"I have no plans to die today," Thor promised with a smile. "None do," returned Heimdall placidly and activated the final phase of the dome, allowing the warriors, one by one in quick succession to be pulled, tugged, thrown into the powerful path of the light stream – and outward to the stars.

[... here...]
[... silences hold fast...]
[... but not entirely so...]
[... the skies are empty...]
[... on Jotunheim...]

Thor arrived on Jotunheim.

[...a blossom of gold in a grey land...]
[...the spark of a fire in black wood...]
[...beginning of an...]
[...who can know...]
[...the Norns, the Fate, the Player...]
[...the one who lays plans...]
[...no one...]

Chapter End Notes

OK. Some interesting developments. Developments I hope that will tie into plot points later on this fic and also later on in the sequel. Should I ever be crazy enough to write a sequel.

I hope that you guys enjoyed this chapter and found some interesting world building stuff in it, despite the fact that it is largely action and plotting packed. There's going to be divergence in Chapter 60 or maybe even 59. We'll see what happens!

Let me know what you think! Encouragement is the gas in my engine. Although I'll always write, reviews or no, comments do help me know whether I'm clear with my
vision or not.

Thanks so much!

-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
kol-saya'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace
n'ch'inka – a kind of cow
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
udji’oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fot’ro - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvia - high bed
Haugbui Bustathr – the Shrine of the Kings
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykvaha-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevesi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa’a’vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col’ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
 gargani – snake
 fintalenir – trickster
 vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
 caitahto – liar
 curunar – fiery one
 Lachruth – Flame Fury
 Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
 Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
 Am'lcoce Norie – Dragon Race
 raudhaust – high bed
Well, I'm back in my 2nd home. Yay for that! It was an abominable time getting home. But I did. In a nutshell, my flight was overbooked so I was compensated handsomely and had the opportunity of going through Tokyo's Narita airport~ So fun to hear Japanese and see Japanese on their native soil. Ahhh...

Anyways, I just want to apologize AGAIN for the delay. I'm still settling in, lesson planning, getting over jetlag and dealing with other 'settling' in issues as well as struggling with things like Tumblr addiction, Pushing Daisies and Lee Pace and other insanities.

That being said... this chapter ended up being halved. Can you believe that? It was halved at 17 pages. (wide eyes) Yes. Because this chapter 'Consequences' is a little pivotal in sense, setting us up for a lot of angst and stuffs ahead. There isn't a lot of deviation in this chapter, for which I am sorry... but we'll be seeing how this different Loki deals with things and how he doesn't deal with things.

There were some questions over why I had Loki use Jotunn despite his background. You can visit my Tumblr (kakashidiot) and see my answer to that question on there. XD

At any rate, I hope you enjoy this newest installment! Let me know what you think~

Thank you to all those who are hanging in there despite the irregularity of the chapter updates and the fact that so far there has been minor deviation from the film. You guys make me write better, for reals! Thanks to: rawr_balrog, iBlameGlobalWarming, miravisu, lemomina, Kai_Maciel, nevar_walc, Anon.

I also wrote a side story. If you reviewed from Chapter 48-58 and did not get it - feel free to comment to find out how to get your hands on it. I will post up the side story at a later date for the rest of you guys who did not review/did not get it. Once again, if you do wanna get in on the side story happiness earlier, feel free to review when I make announcements about writing side stories. Haha. It happens every now and then. XD

THANKS EVERYONE!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 59
Consequences I

All my life, all my life, it has lurked, it has loomed in my memory – a shadow of a threat, a dark promise of things to come. It has been my constant companion, my past and my future. It lies there on the edges of my consciousness, whether I will or no. Never far no matter how far I may roam.
This is Jotunheim...

[The skies are empty on Jotunheim...]

[... so wrong...]

[... there is life even here...]

[... and beyond...]

[... it fell silent long ago...]

[... can you hear it?]

[... it is even here... in the silence...]

[... and the land descended into darkness...]

Throughout his life, from the time of his birth to his most recent visits, Loki had always seen Jotunheim through a specific set of eyes, a certain point of view. To him, Jotunheim had always seemed a dark and terrifying world, a dying Realm, a beautiful, spartan place, a hard, difficult land. Now, gazing out across the southern reaches of Utgard, back to the Eybjarg, Loki’s birthplace seemed more desolate, mysterious, archaic and wild than ever.

Surveying Utgard and its disintegrating environs, the steep cliffs falling away into the Void and the further reaches of the Utanheim across the Eybjarg, Loki saw the Realm with the eyes of Thor and the others. More than ever, the air of Jotunheim, with its rumbling, cracking ice and stones in the otherwise silent world, had a pervasive whiff of death. Yet, there were traces of greatness even then – the tall walls, towers and ancient monoliths looming out of the mists seemed to speak of an ancient civilization, a powerful race and endurance enhanced by the ever present threat of extinction.

Utgard, Citadel of the Pale Moon, was but a shadow of its formal glory.

*Or perhaps not,* Loki mused. *Perhaps they see only something that should have been destroyed long ago. And who is to say otherwise, realistically speaking.*

For a moment, there was silence as the group stood there, taking stock of what lay before them. Setting aside the dangers of falling snow and ice and rock, the ground itself seemed rather treacherous, riddled as it was with sharp upward-slanting wedges of ice no doubt hiding cracks, crevices and larger chasms. Whipping across the Eybjarg down from the Grarfjall mountains which loomed darkly far off on the horizon, the wind howled wordlessly.

...you return...

...so warned...

...not all who fall to the dark Realm rise to sunlit lands...

...not all who fall...

...return...

Glancing at his comrades, Loki was pleased to note the solemn look on their faces as they were faced with the realization of what life was actually like on the wasted Realm. *Of course, the weight of what*
they are actually bearing witness to has not fully sunk in... One day, Loki mused, one day Thor will be able to hear the Heimssral, the Voices of the Realms – and hearing thus, he will bear the burden of his Realm with a greater sense of duty... but not, I think, this day. Not this day.

"We should not be here," Hogun's quiet voice broke the uneasy silence with his usual warning. "No welcome mat, I see," Fandral tried to laugh, but his attempt at jocularity fell flat, further deflated by a snort from Loki.

"We should keep moving," Sif said, moving forward, ignoring the others. "I agree with Hogun," Loki had to add, stepping a little closer to Thor's right, breaking slightly out of their usual formation. "This is no place for us, Thor, and even if we were lucky enough to find some Frost Giants, there is no telling that they will be able to parley with us, much less have interest in sparing our lives. We should go back."

"Go back?" Thor raised an eyebrow at Loki's words. "We have only just arrived."

"Well, if you wish to continue this quest," Volstagg huffed, "there is no point in standing around about. We should stay on the move."

"Let us go," Thor nodded and started forward.

In silence, the group strode down the slight hill carefully, picking their way around gaping crevices, partially hidden chasms and sharp shards of ice and stone. Usually, there were some kind of jesting or singing which Fandral, Volstagg and Thor would start, raising the spirits and taking their minds off of what was before. However, the very air of Jotunheim seemed to swallow all sound hole as though it were the Void itself. There is no singing here, Loki mused, there is nothing but the dark. They can feel it pressing down... and there is no escape from it.

Far off, there was the usual rumble of crumbling buildings and cracking ice or snow, but other than that, there was nothing to be heard. Even their quiet footsteps in the soft snow seemed as loud as a giant's. Loki's visual sweep to his right caught Fandral pulling his grey fur cloak a bit closer around him. The warrior-mage smirked.

"Where are they..." Sif wondered quietly, her voice also uncharacteristically lower than usual.

"Hiding," Thor snorted, his voice echoing eerily off the black towers and crumbling walls. "As cowards always do."

Well, Loki thought, there goes our element of surprise. Although the Bifrost itself was a beacon for leagues. Already, they have drawn back the guards from the southern walls – such as they are – and all that remains is the southern tower... perhaps we shall find opposition there.

Sure enough, as the Asgardians approached the southern tower, standing tall and craggy, it sheer face imposing even in its diminished splendour, there was a flicker of magick. Jotunn magick. Loki slowed his step even further, green eyes darting about for any sign of those undoubtedly watching the interlopers.

Then, rough and rumbling like so many boulders crashing down the mountainsides, the voice of an ancient Jotunn, a powerful Jotunn. Laufey, Loki glanced at Thor. Of course, Thor does not know. Nor would he care... The group came to a halt in the small square in front of the tower and looked upward as the syllables rumbled onward in a familiar warning.

"You have come a long way to die, Asgardians."

"I am Thor, Odin's Son," Thor stepped forward, blue eyes glinting and hand gripping his hammer tightly. "I-

"We know who you are," was Laufey's curt response. "Why have you come, young Prince of Asgard?"

"I came to seek answers – answers to questions."
"And what may those be?"

Laufey's voice was a tad bit sarcastic. Loki winced.

"How did your people get into Asgard?"

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"How did your people get into Asgard?"

The question resounded about the square, ringing upwards into the furthermost regions of the crumbling tower. For a moment, it went unanswered as Laufey, peering out from the guard's station box of which he had taken command, considered the party of Asgardians before him. *Youths*, his dark lip curled. *Fools and arrogant idiots. But, not all of them ignorant*, the King reminded himself, remembering the words sent to him by the Dark Elf traders and the occasional Dwarves who dared to enter his capitals. *There is the Crown Prince and his usual sycophants... but there is also the second son. Newly adopted. An alien to Asgard in more than one way. The dark haired one, Laufey mused, his finger rising to run across his chin contemplatively. The quiet one. The one who seems to carry the cold of Jotunheim lightly...*

An idle thought. A seed gently laid to blossom and forgotten – now blooming. An insidious idea. A terrible intuition. The memory of confidence, the unexpected, in-depth knowledge, the expertise... *and the younger son, the adopted Prince, is an adept, a shape-shifter and gifted with great abilities in seithr.*

Impossible...

Laufey smiled, then, and with slow careful words, laid his trap, trusting his instincts and doing what he had always done best in the long ages past – bred distrust through devious words.

"The House of Odin is full of traitors."

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"Do not dishonour my father's name with your lies, Jotun!" Thor blustered. "My father, Odin All-Father, is-"

At Laufey's words, Loki's stomach turned over sharply, but, keeping his voice blank, he kept his gaze trained upward serenely. Of course, Thor must take offence to that... not knowing that Laufey is more than likely searching for information as well.

"Your father is a murderer and thief!" spat Laufey, leaning forward, voice getting heavier and sharper with anger. "He was the one who took our future – our Soul – our Casket!"

"That was only to save the rest of the Realms from your unthinking greed and savagery!" Thor retorted. "It was a good day when Asgard took your weapon from this land."

"Strong words for one who supposedly has come for questions." A telling pause. Then: "And why have you come here... really? Not for peace, that much is certain. I can tell it, I can smell it. I can see it, I have heard it in the tales which spread after your devastating wake like an ill-omened wave of snow. You long for battle; you crave it. You are nothing but a boy trying to prove himself a man."

"This boy has grown tired of your mockery," Thor growled, swinging his hand threateningly, at the sight of which the other Jotunn, who had silently stepped forward into position around various portions of the remaining wall and tower and called upon the magicks of their blood – ice daggers and swords.

The air crackled with energy and tension, accompanied by the soft sound of ice molding itself along
hands and arms. Loki stepped forward quickly, heart beating fast and hard. This has gone on far enough – too far – out of control.

"Thor!" Loki hissed sharply, catching his brother's eyes. "Stop - and think! Look around you. We are outnumbered! There is no way to win this – and there is only one thing that can result from this – a worse situation than we came for. Imagine trying to explain to the Court – and Father – tonight at the Council why we are at war with the Jotunn again!"

"Know your place, brother!" snapped Thor.

Loki eased back a bit, cheeks flushed a little at the harsh reminder of his untenable position, stuck as it was between the expectations of Odin and the reality of his situation. Glaring at Thor, Loki glanced back upward at the Jotunn King before him. Laufey-King's face gave nothing away, but perhaps there was a flicker of cruel amusement and interest at the sight of dissension within the ranks. Loki ground his teeth.

"You came here for a purpose – known and unknown," Laufey finally said, shaking his head. "In coming, you, Son of Odin, have begun a chain of events that I think you shall regret one day. One day."

"You-

"You know not what your actions will unleash," continued the Jotunn, unstoppable. "I do. Go now while I still allow it."

A guard shifted closer. Eyeing the rest of the Jotunn who stood poised for battle or retreat, Loki nodded and said quickly, "We will accept your most gracious offer."

In disbelief, Thor glanced over at his younger brother. Loki winced inwardly. He would hear it from Thor when they got back. *If we get back, Loki amended. We are far from out of the woods yet...*

With a shrug, Thor nodded casually as if it had been a decision up to him and not commonsense, turned and began to walk away. Loki was just exhaling an inward sigh of relief when the quiet rumble of one of the King’s guards caught his ear:

"Run back home, little prince, and find comfort with your women."

"Damn."

The space-faring pirate oath rose to Loki’s lips as Thor whipped about, flinging Mjolnir squarely into the chest of the guard, throwing it back several paces to crash into the iced-over, lower walls of the tower. As if someone had rung a starting bell, the entire area burst into frenetic, violent activity – and Loki, once again, found himself fighting for his life not unlike all those times spent in the ring at the Battlehouse or on Thor's previous escapades.

*Except, Loki thought grimly, this is different. This time, perhaps, more than any other, there are devastating consequences to our actions – the kind of consequences which have the potential of bringing many Realms and realities into the frightful arena of war. This is no small conquest of a planet, this is the beginning of something that no one will easily be able to end.*

Behind him, somewhere, Thor moved into battle easily, laughing and taunting his oncoming attackers with the usual glee and arrogance. Mjolnir sang as it flew through the icy air, hitting dozens of Jotunn in a single arc before returning to the Crown Prince. Slinging about his weapon with ease, Thor laughed, his voice simultaneously encouraging his shield mates and raising fury within the enemy.

Further to the side, Hogun fought silently and stoically, face grim and set as he faced each opponent. It was increasingly becoming difficult to face all of the oncoming opponents, but with his variety of
weaponry and long years of expertise, the older warrior was able to hold his ground. On more than one occasion, one of his throwing knives beat off a looming, un-looked for Jotunn about to prey on one of the other Asgardians.

Sif, shield and double-bladed spear in hand, fought viciously and carefully. Ducking, twisting, turning and using her opponents' weight against them, the dark-haired shield-maiden more than held her own. Always, her dark eyes strayed to Thor, keeping an eye on his more often than not exposed back. Unlike her more jocose friends, Sif seemed to realize where this was really headed – and as a result, there were no jokes coming from her.

On the other hand, Fandral, was more than ready to laugh, like Thor. Although, Loki thought with a sigh, out of all of us, he should have more care. The light-haired swordsman, slashed his way through several Jotunn, gaining more confidence and cheer than the situation truly allowed for. His steel blade flickered and danced artistically – as did his fur cape – and Loki, glancing quickly over, had to shakes his head at the insouciant grace with which Fandral embellished his combat. Really.

Volstagg, feisty and hardy as ever, was barrelling about, yelling heartily and crushing anyone who came within the vicinity of his axe, his long blade and his short sword. A Jotunn appeared from the left, Volstagg feinted to the side, allowing the giant to blunder past – and gave the Jotun guardsman several well-placed sword slashes to the back of the legs, which caused the giant to fall forward. Twisting about, the Jotun guardsman grabbed Volstagg's arm, encased as it was by a dwarven-carved bronze and gold bracer. Ice formed, cold concentrated through the palms, and within minutes the metal and leather had shattered.

Roaring with surprised pain, Volstagg automatically stabbed the Jotun through the chest with his free right hand and then raised his left arm to stare at the black burn which now spread over his forearm.

"Don't let them touch you!" he hollered. "Their magick allows them to burn through armour and down to the flesh!"

Of course! That was what Loki wanted to say, but the warrior-mage had other things on hand. Already he had lured several Jotunn over the chasms with phantasms – but his options were running short since his ice magicks would be identified by Laufey in no time. There were other elemental spells he could use, but the ground, he worried, is too unstable... it could potentially begin to crumble further...

As his mind raced through a variety of options, Loki threw several daggers at some newly incoming warriors who were headed for a seemingly unsuspecting Fandral. Hugon stabbed a Jotunn pressing Sif a little too closely for comfort. Tearing his eyes away, Loki managed just in time to block the sudden attack of another warrior. Before the warrior-mage could summon anything, the Jotun warrior had grabbed Loki's arm, burning through his favourite travelling coat, revealing pale skin. Pale skin, which, under the force of the cold and the Jotunn magick, turned a revealing blue.

The warrior twisted Loki's palm upward revealing the family lines – the markings of Laufey and Loki's royal heritage. With a short curse, Loki stabbed the guard and looked about as he clutched his other hand, willing the illusion of pale skin to return.

No one saw that, his eyes darted about, did they? It was hard to tell in the confusion and the dark.

Just then, a cry rose from the other side of the courtyard. Fandral! Loki whirled about, fighting past a couple Jotunn in time to see Volstagg and Hugon pull Fandral off a nasty set of ice spikes which had apparently shot up from the ground. Sif killed the Jotunn no doubt responsible and turned to glare at the other Jotunn.

It is not the Jotunn's fault, Loki thought darkly, gazing over at Thor who was still blithely egging the
other Jotunn on. This is all Thor. Typical. Typical Thor.

"THOR!" Sif shouted. "We must go!" Loki shouted in agreement, fighting the rising knot of fear and anger swelling in his belly. "Thor! We must get back now!"
"Then go!" Thor yelled back.

With that, Volstagg hefted Fandral up over his shoulder. Hogun and Sif followed, fighting off any Jotunn who dared follow them (a fair few) and, gazing at his older brother one last time, Loki followed slowly. Thor shows no sign of stopping. As usual.

From the direction of their left, the entire group, now in full out retreat, could hear an ominous cracking followed by a dull roar.

"The 'auzha!" gasped Loki. "What? What?" Fandral's eyes widened as he caught sight of a giant beast headed their way – its long, tri-spiked tail swinging, its giant maw opened in a raging roaring call revealing sharp teeth, its small black eyes set in a terrifying face straight out of the history books. "What is that?"
"By the Norns," Sif shook her head after risking a quick look back. "My day just got better!"
"Do not look back!" Fandral kept yelling, now hitting Volstagg in his extreme anxiety. "I am not!" Volstagg huffed. "Stop hitting me! Do I look like a mule to you?"
"What is that thing?" Hogun glanced over at Loki. "Do you know?"
"It is a – a – a black ice cat!" Loki managed to gasp out as the group just barely missed being sudden death by falling pillar.
"A cat?" yelled Fandral. "What do they call a dog then?"

There was no immediate answer as the group increased their speed. Little hope, Loki thought morosely, since it will catch up to us in no time. Thor will pay for this – I swear.

From far behind, there was the familiar crackle of lightning and then a resounding BOOM as Mjolnir hit the icy ground. He did not – he did not just do what I think he just did, Loki shot a wide-eyed glance at Hogun who also nodded gravely. As close as we are to the Eybjarg, this is suicide. But of course, Thor does not know important things like that. No, of course not. He does as he pleases.

The usual resulting wave of ice and snow must have been magnificently devastating, for previously hidden crevices and chasms opened up – one of them happily below the jarnkottr who disappeared. Let us hope it fell to the Void, Loki thought. Although, that is a terrifying fate for any creature. Even a jarnkottr.

Then, there it was – the markings of Bifrost before them. Volstagg and Hogun began to holler for Heimdall. Turning about, Sif and Loki found themselves face to face with an increasing mass of unhappy Jotunn. Before either of them could say a word, before Sif could raise her weapon or Loki could spell some fire, Thor flew down to stand at their side, Mjolnir in hand.

"Did you see that?" he gasped. "Now this is what I call a fight!"
"You said that before," Sif said with a glare.
"This is no fight," Loki snapped. "This is senseless violence. It will get us all killed and then-"

FWOOSH! Suddenly the sky ripped open with light and magic and the roar and the crack of the Bifrost. A welcome sound to the group, until they caught sight of a familiar silhouette – a cloaked rider on an eight-legged horse holding one of Asgard’s most powerful weapons. Odin on Sleipnir, bearing Gugnir, had arrived in Jotunheim for the first time in millenia.

At the sight of his father, Thor's face lit up.
"Father!" Thor raised Mjolnir with a little shake. "You came as well! Come! We can finish them together!"
"Silence!" hissed Odin, keeping his stern eye on the gathered small regiment of Jotunn before them, now headed by Laufey-King himself.

Further back, Loki could see Helblindi standing anonymously with the rest, no doubt told to keep far from Thor and his reckless hammer. Thor never understands the importance of treaties and agreements and hostages, Loki thought sourly. Odin will of course attempt a parley of sorts... Thor will not understand, of course.

Laufey, raising himself up on a summoned hill of ice and snow, leaned forward to peruse the familiar, now much more aged face of his ancient adversary. His thin dark lips curved upward cruelly.

"All-Father," he rumbled. "The toll of time, the weight of years lie heavily on you. Perhaps the Odin-Sleep is upon you... for you look... weary."
"Laufey," Odin said steadily, ignoring the Jotun King's snide remarks. "End this now."
"Your boy sought this out."
"You are right," Odin admitted quietly. His blue eye flickered over Thor's blonde head and the others. "These are the actions of a boy. Treat them as such. You and I can end this here and now before there is further bloodshed."
"We are beyond diplomacy now, All-Father," Laufey shook his head. "Your boy got what he came for - war and death, for Jotunn blood was spilt this night, for which Asgard must pay in full return."

Odin sighed and then nodded slowly and grimly.

"So be it." Odin gave Laufey a look. "This was not something I wished for – not something I wished for either of our Realms."
"And yet here we are... again. It is as it must always be," Laufey smiled coldly, his gaze also resting for a moment on the young Asgardians before him.

Loki kept his posture easy, his return look bored and disinterested – until the golden stream of the Bifrost cut down as an impenetrable curtain between them and the oncoming wave of Jotunn, headed by Laufey. With a crack and resounding boom, the Jotunn were tossed back as Laufey's ice magicks ricocheted off the endless arc of light which rose upward in the air, carrying away the Asgardians.

Loki did not look back.

[..in the silence..]

[..and the land descended into darkness..]

When they arrived at the Observatory, several guards rushed forward as Odin dismounted. Already the old king's voice was raised in strident tones as he turned on the Crown Prince to give him the usual scolding. Except, this time, there was some quality to his voice, an increased sense of anger and disappointment. For the first time, Loki had a feeling that he should not step forward as was his wont and protest on the behalf of Thor. None of the others – the Warriors or Sif – spoke anything either as Thor and Odin's voices clashed and rang and echoed about the domed room as though in a battle of their own.

"-beyond me!" Odin was saying.
"Why did you bring us back?" Thor was still protesting, ignoring his father's initial reproof. "We were going to win!"
"Do you realize what you have done? What you have started?" Odin's voice rose higher and louder
as Thor glared back at him. "Did you even know before whom you stood?"
"I do not care if I stood before Laufey or any other person," Thor frowned. "I was attempting to find
the truth! I was trying to aid our cause! Protecting my home!"
"You cannot even protect your friends - how can you hope to protect your home?" Odin whipped
about to glare at the rest of the group. Hogun and Volstagg were now securely holding a rather faint-
looking Fandral, helping the swordsman to remain on his feet. "Get him to the healing halls! NOW!"
"There won't be a kingdom to protect if you are afraid to act!" Thor blustered on in protest. "I know
these beasts only understand one thing – fear! For all those long years, you waged war and taught
them the meaning of Asgardian power! The Jotunn must learn to fear me just as they once feared
you!"
"That is pride and vanity talking not leadership! Have you forgotten everything I taught you - about a
warrior's patience, a warrior's ability to strategize and plan?"
"Plan? Patience?" Thor waved a hand dismissively as he snorted. "While you wait and be patient,
the Nine realms laugh at us. Look, Father, the old ways are... done... We cannot hold onto those old
ideals. Would you stand by, giving speeches, while Asgard falls?"

Odin turned then on his heels, as Heimdall made his quiet way out of the Observatory, sword in
hand, following the rest of the guards and horses out to the Bifrost, leaving the King and his sons to
discuss what had happened alone. Watching the others leave, Loki wondered if the King's Court and
Mage's Court would be weaving their own tales of what had happened before the night fell.
_Probably_. He sighed. _But the truth is too terrible to consider. We are at war... I am in a country at
war. It seems so... strange. Somehow, we all continue living, although in the end, many will not...

Odin and Thor continued arguing and Loki, standing a little to one side, green eyes darting from one
to the other could not help but notice how similar the two men actually were. Both powerful, strong
and opinionated. _Yet, only one holds everything that allows him to exercise such power... but Thor
means well_, Loki sighed, _even if he does not go about it the right way, his heart is ever for the good
of Asgard. Surely the All-Father will see that._

"Yes," Odin was saying, "I was a fool. I was a fool to think you were ready for the throne of
Asgard. That you were worthy of that title. For many years, we prepared you. For this day, we all
worked – in vain, I see now. In vain."
"Father." Loki stepped
"SILENCE!" Odin whipped around to glare at Loki.

A pause. A silence. A short one, but to Loki it seemed to last forever. His mouth, he knew, hung
open a little in shock as he took in the scene. The glow of gold and bronze on Thor's face – Thor's face which now begun to take on a shade of fear. Thor was never frightened. Thor was never worried. Thor never really felt regret or repentance. *Yet, perhaps*, Loki thought, noticing the tears standing out in Thor's eyes, *perhaps he is beginning to understand. For the first time.*

Loki moved forward and then stopped as Odin clanged Gungnir's end on the stone and metal floor, rocking the entire Observatory with powers and magicks the like of which Loki had never before seen emanating from the All-Father. The Bifrost, under such a blast of magick, began to revolve, to spin. Odin seemed to pay no heed to that, focusing instead on the silent Thor before him.

A quiet Thor. A shocked Thor. A Thor who opened his mouth in protest too late. Too late, for Odin's spell (and Loki knew it to be as such thanks to the increased swirl of red and gold and orange magicks spiralling about) had already begun to take effect as the All-Father continued his working.

"I now take from you your power - in the name of my father and his father before-"

With each word falling from Odin's lips, Thor's armour fell away, leaving him standing in his regular, relaxed clothing most often worn under his armour. A grey, padded tunic, rough leather breaches and boots.

"-and I, as the All-Father, cast you out!"

With those last words, the magick swirling about, coalesced and burst forward, throwing Thor backward without warning into the path of the Bifrost now shooting out and sending the Crown Prince to – where? Loki blinked as his brother disappeared in the haze of white light and power and magick. For a long moment, the warrior mage stood there, dazed, unbelieving.

*It did not happen*, he thought disjointedly. *This did not happen. Surely not.*

When he turned to his father, Loki noticed that Odin had picked up Mjolnir which must have been yanked from Thor's grasp when the Prince had been thrown back. *Mjolnir is – what –* Loki watched as Odin cast another working over the hammer and also threw it after Thor, to wherever Thor had gone. Watching the hammer disappear as well, watching the white light of the Bifrost slowly fade and fall silent, Loki wondered what was happening, what would happen next.

He felt, for a moment, Odin's heavy gaze on the back of his neck, but Loki's father said nothing and Loki found himself unable to say anything in return. The young prince knew that Odin would no doubt seek him out later that evening. It was not something Loki looked forward to – already the anticipation of what his punishment would be sat heavily on his stomach like a heavy stone.

*And if Father were to find out that it was my prank that sent Thor to Jotunheim...* Loki felt a little nauseous as he contemplated a rather stark future. *Will I be banished as well? Disowned? Can one unadopt a son? Will I be tossed out of the city?* It reminded Loki of another dark day when he had been found wanting and, being unwanted, had been cast out. *Well, he thought bleakly, at least I have a good relationship with the wolves here as well.*

For the first time in a long time, Loki was not entirely certain as to what to do.

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Later that evening, after a long drawn-out Council session, in which the Warriors Three, Sif and Loki were forced to sit in silence to the side as the entire group of generals, court officials, ministers and mages bemoaned youth and the loss of Thor and the savagery of the Jotunn, the now rather chastened group of young Asgardians found their way to a quiet corner of the palace where on a
regular night they would usually drink and eat and cozen the palace staff into entertainment and other revelries. More often then not, the group would end up leaving the palace to find a late night tavern or (if Sif remained at her home) brothel. This evening, however, was a quiet one. Fandral prodded listlessly at his now healing shoulder wound, Volstagg helped himself to extra fortified servings of fowl, Hogun sharpened his daggers and Sif paced. Loki, returning from his usual spot by the balcony, was a little more preoccupied than usual as he considered the entire situation.

Thor is gone. Gone. Gone where... Father intimated Midgard. Thor, I recall, went there a few times... a long time ago before I arrived. Hm... According to him, the beings there were rather uncivilized. Will Thor survive? Probably. Loki scowled. With his luck, upon his arrival, he will be worshipped as some mythic hero. And of course, as usual, his friends find life intolerable without him. Given half the chance, I have no doubt they would attempt to pursue Thor and return him, Odin's wishes or no... At that discomforting thought, Loki turned to take note of the conversation which had started up as Volstagg asked:

"How did the guard even know?"
"I told him," Loki admitted with a shrug.
"What?" Fandral's golden head jerked upward at Loki's revelation.
"I told the guard to go to Odin and reveal our plan after he had left for the bridge. He should be flogged for taking so long – whatever his excuse was-"
"He was detained by a mage and some students." Sif rolled her eyes. "Hardly his fault. Mage Flarithir is rather adamant at times and-"
"Whatever the reason, he should have hurried. We should never have reached Jotunheim-"
"You told the guard?!" Volstagg was suddenly very upset.

Loki glared at the rotund warrior. Of course Volstagg would take umbrage since it is my idea – and not the ever estimable Thor's.

"I saved our lives, if you remember," Loki said coldly, cuttingly. "If you remember that small detail – I know it must have slipped your minds... but in saving our lives, I saved Thor's as well. Now, as for father's banishment. I had no idea that that would happen. After all, Father has never banished Thor for any of his many other interferences..."

"Loki," Sif strode up to the dark-haired Prince. "You must go to your Father and get him to change his mind! We are at war and it is only right that we have ALL of our warriors on hand!"

For a moment, Loki stared at Sif in disbelief, perplexed as though the dark-haired girl had grown two heads.

"I should go to Odin All-Father and ask him to bring Thor back," he said finally, voice deadpan.
"Yes!" Sif nodded eagerly, laying a hand on Loki's arm. "Surely he would listen to you!"
"Ha. Ha. Ha," Loki finally managed to hack out sarcastic laughter. "He would listen to me, would he? What Realm do you live on, Sif? And even if I were to say anything, and even if he were to listen to me... then what? Would Thor be returned? I think not. And if he was? Have you considered why he was exiled as he was? Listen! I love Thor more dearly than any of you, but you all must admit – must know – what he is. He is arrogant, reckless and dangerous." A beat. Then: "Is that what Asgard needs from its king?"

With that, Loki tore himself away, jerking his arm from under Sif's firm grasp and blindly making his way out of the room. The fools! Idiots! As if Odin would listen to me. As if he would ever really listen to me. Ha! And as if Thor has learned his lesson. As if he ever will! And what is all this nonsense of 'we need Thor for the war'? Is the war to be lost because we do not have Thor with us? As if it is up
to Thor alone to win the war? Thor was the one, for the most part, to cause the war! This exile is the best thing for all of us. Why can they not see that? Loki stopped, leaned against the door post and forced his breathing to slow down. Behind him, he could hear the others talking, murmuring between themselves. As usual, Sif seemed to have a very poor view of Loki and his motivations.

"Ever since that day he arrived in Asgard, I knew he was up to no good," Sif was saying. "He talks about Asgard's good, but he has always had his eye on the throne, always jealous of Thor and wanting power for his own. You can see it – in his eyes."
"Really... Sif..." Fandral did not sound convinced.
"Well," Volstagg sighed, "we should be grateful to Loki – he saved our lives. Again."

A pause. Sif's voice suddenly rose.

"Hogun."
"It is nothing."
"Say it. You just thought of something," Sif's voice grew stronger as she drew closer and Loki shrank back into the shadows, listening carefully.
"Laufey," the quiet warrior spoke slowly. "Laufey said there were traitors in the House of Odin." A pause then he added, "A master of magick could have brought three Jotunn easily enough into Asgard – especially one such as Loki who can walk the Dark Paths and knows all of the doors to the other Realms, using such travel to bypass the use of the Bifrost. Also, he can cloak himself against Heimdall's sight. I am fairly certain of that."
"But – but he was in the throne room the entire time-" Volstagg protested.
"Yes," Fandral was also quick to agree. "Loki has been mischievous, but he never has wished Thor actual harm, nor has he ever spoken of wanting a throne or any such treasonous thoughts. I think you chase phantoms, sweet Lady Sif."
"You mark my words," repeated Sif. "In a few days time, Loki will be sitting on the throne and no one will gainsay him."
"He cannot fight the All-Father."
"Surely not-"
"The All-Father may enter the Odinsleep at any time," Hogun pointed out. "It has been many long years since that happened."
"The last time was in that lull of quiet – a few centuries before Thor was born," Volstagg nodded. "I was a youngling at the time and not allowed to go to war, but I enlisted and stood upon the walls of the city at guard during that time. Security was heightened when he slept. It was only for a day, I remember, but it felt like forever during war-time, lull or no."
"Hm," Hogun nodded in agreement. "A lot can happen in a day."

At that, Loki stole away, mind now in further turmoil as he considered the new threat. They are not my friends, but I had thought them comrades at the very least, and now they doubt me so deeply. Loki bit his lip, kept his shoulders and back straight as he made his way through the halls, green eyes far away in thought, betraying none of the hurt he felt. It seems so unfair that they would think such things about me so quickly. To suspect me of such deviousness. Well... Loki admitted. I do deserve some suspicion to a certain extent, yet I would never – I would never...

But would you not, whispered that darker side of him which even now insinuated itself back into his thoughts. You deserve a chance. Who does not?

Not to hurt Thor. Never to hurt him, nor to take away such things as belong rightfully to him, Loki argued with himself. I know, after all, more than any, what it feels like to lose what rightfully should belong to me...

An throne of ice in a giant hall, filled with the form of a King he could never be. Deep in memory,
Loki wandered the halls, his feet subconsciously drawing him nearer and nearer to that part of him which always called his name.

...the time is coming...

...dear heart...

...the time for your ascendancy...

...is coming...

Thor is gone. Three words which would not let go. Thor is gone, Odin sighed tiredly after a rather tearful and angry confrontation with his wife upon telling her of the news, giving the truth to rumour. Rumours now spreading ever wider until even the furthest Realms will know.

Thor is gone... and Asgard is at war.

Throughout the entire confrontation, Odin had felt as though his heart had turned to stone inside his chest. Everything felt heavy now – as though his very energy had been sapped from his body and no power or will was left. The child of promise had condemned his world again to war. A senseless war. A war birthed out of pride and ambition... A war begun so swiftly – over the course of one day. Unprecedented. Odin sighed. I am too old for this and the son I would have wished for at my side is now gone.

Thor is gone.

And all that remains is Loki, Odin turned the name over and over as he contemplated his second son. His adopted son – another child of promise, I thought. I had thought at one time, Odin mused, that Loki would live to grasp his own fate firmly and would one day be the son to temper Thor, curb his excesses... but Loki has also fed the fires of Thor. This entire venture... the Jotunn's mysterious ability to get to the Vault... Loki is in this... somehow...

As the old king mulled over the problem before him, his feet took him slowly down the various stairs, through the now emptying halls and corridors and passageways until Odin All-Father found himself standing before the Vault doors. Without a word, the guards eased open the two doors allowing the King access. At the top of the stairs, he stood, his blue eye running up over the bronzed ceiling carved with protective runes and down the sides to the many recesses holding the various treasures Odin and his forefathers had gathered for safe keeping. Descending the stairs, Odin’s gaze settled on the tall, thin silhouette which stood motionless before Casket.

The Casket which had sat there in all of its glory earlier in the afternoon. Loki and the Casket. Odin's mouth tightened as his suspicions began to crowd around, clamouring for resolution. Loki the Trickster, the Silvertongue, the Mage of War... is living up to his name... in all senses, Odin shook his head. As I feared, but I listened to Frigga... perhaps to our detriment, I listened to her. Perhaps it would have been better to let him remain as he was – a simple Mage or stable boy... now, the future lies so uncertainly before him, before us all.

"Loki."

At the sound of his voice, Loki laughed softly. The young man had no doubt guessed who it was who had entered, but for some reason, there was a new distance now that lay between them. Perhaps it had been there all along.

"Loki. Stop."
Loki set the Casket down, letting his hands fall to his sides. Cerulean hands marked with swirls of darker blue. Odin stiffened at the significance of such a gesture.

"You are not surprised."
"No."
"And you are not... fearful? Worried? Upset?" Loki turned sharply then, revealing red eyes, blue skin and the markings of Laufey's house upon his brow.

Odin drew in a sharp breath as his suspicions, fears and hopes came true all in one blow. Loki, too, had been born for a throne. All those abilities, with which he had been born, had been given for a purpose. Never to be used. A bitter pill for one so ambitious, Odin thought. Would that drive him to sabotage Thor's reign?

"Do I have cause to be fearful or worried or upset?" Odin countered Loki's question with his own.

Loki's gaze drifted around the room as his pale skin slowly asserted itself, returning the young man's colouration to the usual pale white skin and unsettlingly sharp green eyes.

"Some would counsel you to have care," Loki smiled then, quickly. A sharp smile which gave Odin a slight chill.

So much a son of Laufey.

"What would you hope for me to say?" Loki finally shrugged, moving forward slowly. "What could I say to lay your suspicions to rest? To ease your mind? To show my loyalties, such as they are?"
"I would have you speak the truth," Odin finally countered.
"The truth..."
"The truth."
"What is the truth? Is it something that lasts for eternity, unalterable? Or something that may change depending on the season?" Loki laughed shortly then and then shook his head. "The truth... the truth is... I only wished the best for Asgard. I only wish... I will only wish... Asgard is my home. Why would I orchestrate my home's downfall?"
"Asgard has yet to fall, agreed. Yet, Thor is Asgard and Asgard is Thor... and Thor... your brother, Thor... is gone."
"I did not expect to see him exiled," Loki said quickly. "I did not expect him to go to Jotunheim, nor for him to begin such a war."
"Yet, here we are."
"It was no fault of mine."

A beat and then Loki admitted.

"No real fault of mine. Not entirely at any rate."

Odin sighed, suddenly wishing he could sit down as the weight of the circumstances fell even more heavily on his shoulders. Thor is gone. A war begun... and my only other son upon whom I would wish to depend is proving himself to be just as unstable and untrustworthy. The Norns have wished upon me such an evil day! What did I do to deserve this?

Loki moved forward then, hands nervously plucking at the edges of his coat sleeves.

"Look, Father-"
"Loki. Be silent. I must think."
"Listen, I did this because-"
"Silence!"
"But I-
"How many times do I have to ask you to be silent? Why must you always be attempting to ease
your way with sweet words? Be silent and take my admonition like a man!"
"I just want to – do you not want to know why-
"SILENCE!" Odin's exhaustion and legendary fraying temper came crashing down.
"I REFUSE TO BE SILENT ANYMORE!" Loki yelled back, voice cracking with force as his pale
face flushed. "YOU NEED TO KNOW-
"I HAVE NO INTEREST IN LIES!"
"LIES? LIES?!" Loki was panting now, shoulders rising and falling, eyes wet with emotion. "Lies?"
He hissed. "How about your own lies? Your own omissions? How long did you know what I was?
How long did you hide that truth? How long have you been waiting for me to make a mistake?"

A pause as Odin stepped back, shaking his head with his eye cast down deep in thought.

"TELL ME!"

At Loki's insistent, heart-broken roar, Odin looked up and then said, softly, "I knew – from the first
few moments I saw you. Or, rather, I guessed... but when you were injured in that courageous
attempt to save Thor's life, when your mother ran out of the palace and bore you away to the Healing
Halls, when she tended to you, she noticed your hands... I had covered you in my cloak and ordered
Tyr to bear you away undisturbed... It was – it was." Odin found it hard to say, the memories
crowding in together blurred disturbingly and his speech came slow. "I knew then. On that day,
Frigga knew and she told me – she told me... that her heart called out to yours, as a mother would to
a child. She knew then, that you would have been hers in another time, another place. It seemed only
right to her to take you in as our own and hide your secret until such a time as you deemed fit to
share with us – or learn the truth if you did not know the truth of the matter for yourself."
"So then, you named me Loki because-
"Loka and Loki. It is an ancient story of my forebears and is only in the oldest most private scripts of
the ancient Annals of the Asgardian Kings," Odin edged back, found a seat on rough stone steps and
sighed. "A story so old it was born when the world was young as a child. They came to Asgard and
wrought wonders for our people as we struggled to survive the harsh Realms as they were so long
ago. Loka and Loki. Twin Jotunn and the both of them were seithrmasters in their own right.
Powerful warriors of magick, despite their height. Aesir height, or like Elves – so they were gifted
and blessed. It seemed only natural to Frigga to name you after one of them."
"Do you know how their story ended?" Loki asked finally, bitterly.
"No."
"Ah."
"But your story is not theirs."
"No, it is not," Loki vowed blackly. "So, you knew then. Even before I was adopted... you thought
– what – to use me to control Jotunheim?"
"I had initially hoped that you would provide the necessary balance to Thor's excesses. We spoke of
that, did we not? You agreed to that arrangement."

Odin blinked hazily at the young man who paced back and forth in front of him, obviously angry
and frightened. How long did he carry the burden of the secret that was his heritage? All his life, he
must have feared being shown for what he was... What would such fear bring to pass?

"There was also the other idea," Odin then nodded as another memory struck. Frigga and he before
their fireplace building dream castles in the air. "That we could unite our kingdoms one day, bring
about an alliance, bring about a permanent peace through you... On that day, I would have, in the
sight of all Jotunheim, given you the Casket as a sign of our goodwill... but those plans no longer
matter."
Now with the war begun. Jotunheim will not survive it – Casket or no.

"So I am no more than another stolen relic, locked up here until you mind have use of me?" Loki swung around, fists clenched, green eyes blazing. "You acquired me for some grand scheme, planned to use me as some witless pawn-"
"Why do you twist my words-
"Well? Well? Why did you not tell me from the beginning? Did you not trust me? Is that it? Were you wanting to see if I would show my true savage colours?"
"No, no... I thought you were happy with the life you led-
"Happy? Happy to be ever handling Thor's leash, collared as I was to your demands?" Loki spat out.
"Unable to make anyone happy least of all myself?"
"No... no..."
"You know... it all makes sense now why you ignored all of my criticisms over the years because no matter how you claimed to prize my opinion or thoughts on the whole issue, you could not accept that a Frost Giant was more worthy for the throne than your own son!"
"Loki – no-

Loki’s voice was blurring now as the tall young man loomed over him, angry eyes filled with unshed tears. Frigga, Odin thought, it is as you saw. Ever has he been carrying such pain, for he is wounded – beyond measure, carrying a wound within his heart so big a universe could fit inside the vastness of that Void. Fear and insecurity... what can I say in the face of that? Nothing? Perhaps nothing... and... in the end... it seems that I must leave it to you... Frigga... Loki...

All went dark.

The last thing Odin heard was Loki calling for the guards, panic rising in his young voice.

Loki...

-0-0-0-

Laufey, after returning to Utgard, quickly wrote several letters of commission to the cities of Dagaeheim, Griutunagardar, Skalldi, Thrymheim, Vatnboer and Snjarhamr and sent them with the swiftest couriers and guards. Knowing that the lords and generals stationed in those outposts of Jotunheim would respond with all haste, Laufey ordered his closest retainers, guards and page boys to repack the king’s retinue with the intention of making all haste to Gastropnir. From there, Laufey would begin planning for the last war of Jotunheim.

It will be our last war, Laufey thought grimly as the entire cavalcade rode out on the backs of young jarnkottr, whether we win or lose.

Beside him, Helblindi rode equally silently, his red eyes glancing warily at his now rather grim Fylgja. Laufey was glad. The last thing he wanted was annoying questions from his son.

Helblindi knows how to hold his tongue and his temper after a fashion. Well, at least he is better than that royal Aesir whelp. Prince Thor was to be King Thor? Ha! A glad day for the Nine Realms that was cancelled. Not that it aids Jotunheim now. Laufey shook his head. Well, Helblindi has his own problems. Byleistr will mature as well in his own good time. As for the other...

At the thought of his third child, the unfortunate product of his womb, Laufey's expression soured even further.

The conniving little snake – he thought I would not guess at the truth of the matter? Did he think his father was an idiot? Laufey glared at the horizon of heavy mountains that loomed bigger and bigger
as they drew closer. Well, it would appear to farfetched to any parent – that their child is an adopted royal in another Realm... but this is the Ulfrbarn of which we are speaking... and any child of mine has that kind of cunning to infiltrate a Royal nest like a cuckoo bird from Alfheim. Ha. It is amusing in a way, that Jotunheim's castoff is Asgard's treasure. Ha.

On the other hand, he led four of our kin to their deaths on a whim – or some other dark plan. After all, and here a new thought emerged, Prince Thor was banished. Perhaps the cursed runt is aiming for Asgard's throne? Surely not. But then... who knows the depth of its ambition. It is an abomination for a reason. It brings nothing but death...

Laufey remembered the words of the Dark Elf traders brought to him within a letter from Vatnboer concerning the Royal Family. The suspicions raised by his runtling's suggestion to infiltrate the Vault had led to Laufey's enquiries and the Dark Elves had been more than happy to share their misgivings on the state of Asgard.

Odin was the same as usual – old and powerful and rich and pompous and arrogant. Frigga was her usual nosy self, if charming and beautiful and cunning in her own way. At least Odin had the sense to marry a woman of that calibre, Laufey mused. That was the smartest thing he ever did – and the only thing I ever approved of... Ha. Of course, the largest portion of the letter was dedicated to Thor, the eldest son. Arrogant, foolish, powerful, strong as a jarnkottr and just as slow-witted, Thor's exploits were known far and wide. Laufey had skimmed through it with disinterest – although he found some pride in the fact that his own children were not half the problem which Thor posed. Then, at the end, as if it were a postscript, was a short summary on Odin's adopted second son, a powerful seithrmaster and shapeshifter, who had the ability to mimic many different kinds of magicks including ice. The Dark Elves appeared to respect the young man for his silvertongue and tendency to think before he leaped.

Even then, Laufey was not certain. Not until that day Thor came to Jotunheim and the three guards Laufey had set to watch the younger prince from a distance saw the tell-tale sign of blue.

Loki, Prince of Asgard, is nothing but an illusion. A beautiful illusion that could destroy the very ground upon which Asgard treads.

Laufey hoped.

Yet, he also worried. For instead of dying on the plains of Vollrvatn, the vaetki had survived.

What if it found Meerauk? On its own? What if it met with the Heimsrsal? What if it heard the call of Jotunheim? What if he discovered the secrets of the ancient past? Laufey steered his mind away determinedly from that ancient tale he had heard himself in the dusty caves of Meerauk so long ago. Loki and Loka. Surely it did not discover the truth... and if it did – will its revenge breed true? Will it wait and wait until such a time as it gains power? Will it return?

Surely not, yet... and yet... Perhaps the vaetki would return – to lay another plan, to tease, to taunt, or to wreak its wrath...

The abomination would return in some way or another. It could not help but return for Jotunheim was its future as much as its past.

Laufey smiled.

I will be waiting.
Well, there you go! I hope you enjoyed it!

Let me know what you think! I really appreciate concrit and any other thoughts/shout outs. Of course, if you catch any misspelling or grammar issues, please let me know~!

Thanks so much!

-KI

p.s. Thor's POV is going to be coming in 3-4 chapters or so. We'll see. He'll get a whole chapter for himself LOL. Frigga's POV is coming in the next chapter.

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
oma'auzha – mother-errer
oto'oa - big sister
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fot'r'ro - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvila - high bed
Haugbui Bustathr – the Shrine of the Kings
Hit-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa’a’vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithr master - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col’ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
raudhaust – high bed
Chapter Notes

Well, good news and bad news. Good news: I finished this mighty chapter. Bad news: I split it when I saw that it had climbed up into the 20s for pages. So. CHOP CHOP CHOP CHOP. Good news: I can update in 5 days thanks to this~!

Thank you to all those who are hanging in there~! When I read your reviews, I do feel so encouraged to keep hacking at this thing! Thanks to: lemomina, aylithe, Kai_Maciel, SingSongSilence, YellowWomanontheBrink, beanie, Sassiebone, iBlameGlobalWarming and Uriko.

THANKS EVERYONE!

Also - an additional reminder to folks that the Jotunheim glossary can either be found at my kakashidiot tumblr under the Distortions In Time page OR at the end of ONLY the new chapters posted up here. Don't ask me why it only shows up at the new chapters. It just does.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 60
Consequences II

At the prince's panicked call, the two guards on duty at the main doors as well as the other four stationed at the two side passages came running into the silent Vault, spears and swords at the ready. When their initial glances about the room revealed no obvious threat, immediately they focused upon the fallen king who lay back upon the steps – still, unmoving.

Without further word, the two head guards rushed forward, barking orders for Healers, mages, General Tyr, the High Councillor Margyspeksson and, most importantly, the Queen. Sharply commanded by their superior officer, Commander Freyki, two of the soldiers disappeared to raise the alarm while the other two wrenched the prince away from the side of the king.

Scowling, Guardsman Oster left the side of Freyki and the King to approach the wild-eyed, now increasingly annoyed and agitated young Prince. Young, adopted Prince, Loki thought, his gut turning over unpleasantly as his awkwardly suspicious position became more apparent to him by the minute. The adopted Prince, who was shouting at his father in a highly emotional argument – after the exile of the favoured Crown Prince no less... Loki sighed. I would be suspicious too. Still... must it always end this way?

"You were arguing with the All-Father," Guardsman Oster gave Loki a hard look.

'Obviously' – that was what Loki wished he could say, voice thick with sarcasm and all, but knowing that his position was tenuous at best, the prince held his tongue.
"Yes." Loki took a deep breath, calmed himself down as best he could before replying further. "We have argued before – as anyone would know – and this... this was no different – except for how it ended. I think – I think this is the fabled Odinsleep-"
"Your opinions are unnecessary. Just the facts-"
"It is a fact," Loki replied testily. "He has long been overdue if one were to believe-"
"We shall see-"
"Concerning matters such as these, I know I am in the right-"

Before Loki could press his case any further, Frigga burst into the Vault, her evening gown's train fluttering behind her as she ran down the stairs, unceremoniously pushing the guards away. Behind her, Healers and mages appeared, pallet and medicines in hand, looking more anxious than usual.

"Beloved..." She whispered, leaning over Odin, her right hand stroking his white hair, combing it neatly back before trailing over the All-Father's lips, chest and heart. The golden-haired queen raised her eyes to meet Commander Freyki's questioning gaze. "He but sleeps. The Odinsleep. It has been long overdue and – Loki?"

Realizing Loki was also present, Frigga rose, frowning. Loki lifted his chin, prepared for a scolding or harsh reprimand – or perhaps a denunciation, whispered that ever doubting dark voice within him.

"Loki! What – what are you doing here?" Then, realizing how stiff the guards looked, gauntlets gripping the slender Prince just above the elbows. "Commander? What is the meaning – oh... by the Norns... never mind. I can guess," Frigga sighed and shook her head, looking indulgently put upon as she usually did when she discovered 'her boys' arguing behind her back again. "We will discuss it later. First, we must ensure your father is made comfortable. Come-"
"Your Highness," Guardsman Oster stepped forward, beetle eyebrows knitting together. "We heard raised voices within the Vault-"
"They were arguing? You two were arguing! Again!" Frigga shook her head.
"We believe-"
"It is nothing new," Frigga raised a delicate eyebrow and gave the old guard a look. "As you know it was their habit to clash every now and then. My husband, your King, and my son disagreed on many topics at various times. I will talk with Loki later and plumb the heart of it."
"But, your Highnesss-"
"We will talk." Frigga repeated, voice now positively glacial and slow with emphasis. "Later."

With that, Frigga turned on her heel, a quick glance back signifying that Loki follow. With a triumphant (if annoyed) look, Loki jerked himself out of the now unresistant grasp of the guards and trailed in the wake of the long line of Healers who had efficiently, carefully and respectfully moved the king onto a soft pallet and were now carrying the sleeping Aesir out of the Vault.

En masse, they headed to the King’s personal Healing Room and within fifteen minutes had arrived and installed the king on the usual bed used for such times as the Odinsleep. Lingering on the edges of the solemnly quiet crowd bustling about the bespelled monarch, Loki watched as Frigga ensured the comfort of her husband. After a good half an hour of tidying up the room, checking with the staff for the work schedule and ordering dinner, Frigga shooed everyone out of the room, the better for her to watch over her husband in peace.

Feeling more useless than ever and shoving down rising flashes of guilt, Loki slipped away after promising to join her for dinner. Leaving the dimly lit healing chamber, the young warrior mage looked about in surprise. Somehow, it was already evening. So much has happened today... in so little time... Was it not this morning that we all rose to celebrate Thor's ascent to the throne? So hard to believe that my trick worked as planned – Thor's coronation was halted – but then, before I knew
it, we were off to Jotunheim and starting a war. A war that none wished for – except for the one now gone. Thor will be so angry, wherever he is. Angry and, no doubt, wanting to get back as soon as possible to join the war effort.

Loki closed his eyes, for a second, his dark eyebrows wrinkling his pale brow as anxiety washed over him yet again.

And he must not return, if for no other reason than to give the Nine Realms a rest from his thoughtless warmongering. With a sigh, Loki continued onward, aimless drifting like a dark ghost through the halls. His armour, still scuffed and dusty from the battle on Jotunheim, felt stiff against his back and a little damp, yet the prince paid no heed as his feet carried him through the grand halls.

A war Asgard cannot afford to lose – and never more than before is in danger, thanks to the Odinsleep. Untimely, untimely... and something entirely unforeseen. Who will the Royal Court and the Mage's Council look to now that Thor is gone and Odin fast asleep...

Through the airy hallways and winding passages, Loki paced, deep in thought, wending his way about the palace and then out and down and then upwards again and over until he found himself, inexplicably before the stables. It smelled, as ever, pungent and earthly and green and alive.

So alive, Loki mused, barely giving the pigsty and compost heap which he had so long ago – not so long ago – used to shovel under the burning heat of the sun. What Asgard stands for, what Asgard promises – life. Life and hope. Now, that very life which I embraced is now threatened. Threatened by war. Threatened by war which Thor started – which Thor started because of something I held true to... because of me.

Wandering into the stables, Loki noted how quiet it was. There was only the buzzing of flies, the contented sound of pigs and horses munching on their slops and oats and hay. The shifting of hooves upon the strewn straw underfoot. Not so far away, Loki could hear the familiar call of the local geese, the clucking of the hens in the royal coop, and further away, the distant lowing of the cattle out in pasture. Overhead, swallows swooped in and out of the bard, calling to each other. Looking upward, watching their swift flight, Loki made his way over to a familiar stack of hay bales, neatly tied with the farmers' twine. There was a rake propped up against it, which he moved to the side, swivelling it about absent-mindedly noticing the well-carved steel of the prongs each gleaming and engraved with runes for safekeeping, for productivity and for the blessing of the soil. A product of Fellbjorg, the mining town in the southern reaches of the mountains. A familiar tool which had bruised and rubbed his hands raw long ago.

With that memory in mind, Loki took a seat, leaned back and remembered simpler days. Days when the least trouble he caused was pulling a prank on one of the other stable boys or tracking mud over Mistress Kyrra's newly mopped wood floors.

Those were simpler times, Loki sighed. Not days such as these. What are you going to do, Loki? What can you do?

Nothing, was the obvious reply. You are no Odin, nor a Thor. No one would think to place you on the throne. The best you can do is support your mother and give advice when needed.

Yet... yet surely there is something else that can be done. Some peace brokered, some treaty made. Some way to assuage the Giants... or at the very least remove their threat from Asgard. Some way to prove to Odin that he did not make a mistake bringing you into Asgard, into the family-

Impossible, the darker side of Loki hissed. He will never admit it – neither his care for your, nor his fears. Odin is one not to be trusted, for his heart will remain, as always, shadowed.
Regardless, Loki shook his head in vain attempt to ignore his deepest fears, Asgard's welfare is most important. Thor cannot return, that much is clear, but his followers – the Warriors Three and Sif – no doubt they will not rest until they find a way for the Prince to return.

And what would the harm be in that? Thor, returning, would lead Asgard to glorious battle and Asgard could no doubt win the day against Jotunheim, being as it is... In bringing him back, you would be a hero of some sort.

And forever meld – fall – disappear – within the shadow of his greatness...

No. No. NO. Loki groaned and leaned forward, mashing his palms against his eyes in frustration. Think. Think! THINK! What can be done?

What can be done...

With those thoughts heavy on his mind, weighing on his shoulders, the warrior mage rose and quietly made his way back to the palace.

At the very least, he thought, I must be there for Mother. That, he could hold onto. All of his plans, all of his worries, he had a feeling, would be dealt with in one way or another.

Sometimes, the best thing to do, Loki mused, is wait.

[...sometimes...]

Jotunheim lay hushed. Tense as a jarnkottr, muscle gathered up and quivering, before the jump, before the final catching of the prey, Jotunheim prepared itself. Jotunheim waited.

Laufey quickly made his way back to Gastropnir, knowing that his return to Utgard as soon as may be was crucial. Couriers, along the way, were sent off to all the nearby towns and villages and the further cities. Making his way through the Grarfjall Mountains, Laufey made mental lists – lists for armaments, supplies, conscription meetings, consultations and other councils needed.

Upon entering Gastropnir, Laufey was pleased to find that already several of the called generals were also arriving, allowing for them to draw up swift plans for the various plans and strategies already firmly in place. Unable to linger with Farbauti and Byleistr, Laufey gave each a quick embrace before continuing onto the war councils, drawing his family with him.

To the side, Helblindi, Byleistr and Farbauti sat, taking notes and making their own lists. Helblindi was to join with General Yppa, heading eastward toward Thrymheim, where they would hopefully meet the army amassing before the Kaldrfjall Mountains, supplied by the further villages and the small cities of Vatnboer and Snjarhamr. Byleistr was to stay in Gastropnir with Farbauti, acting as a coordinator of sorts as Laufey was to return to Utgard as soon as may be, the better to fortify the crumbling citadel and hearten the remaining army there.

Already, the announcement for war had rung out from the deep, bell-like voices of the towncriers. Already, the air was filled with the clang of iron meeting iron as the fires of the smithies were once again started with renewed energy to feed the flames of war now lit in the heart of the Frost Giants. Already, the weapon vaults were opened up again, rescuing, counting, sharpening, mending and cleaning what could be scavenged from the ancient war.

Food and clothing and leather and metals were brought forward, scavenged from the land and from the hoards of those more blessed than others. Traders from the North, bearing the rare heillgrjot, were
sent back to get more, this time with a few armed guards to aid them in their quest. Hunters brought forward their bone and their rare metals which they found in the far Thokafjall Moutains, as well as other rare herbs – hota-eik brew, luthrblom, and other such rarities.

The Dwarves and Dark Elves who visited the Realm were brought also with all speed and courtesy further inland, the better to speak with the King’s representatives regarding any new information on Asgard’s armaments and towers and defences. Light Elfling Lords from Alfhheim and others nobles from Vanaheim arrived also, asking if a truce could be reached, but Laufey-King gave none of those entrance to Jotunheim beyond Snjarhamr and none were given audience.

Jotunheim was readying itself for the last war. The war, Laufey thought, to end all wars. If we die, let it not be meekly as a snjarharra within the jaws of a grarulfr. If we must meet our Doom, we shall meet it in glorious battle, triumphant and bold as fire.

Thus, Laufey left for Utgard, leaving behind an energized people, all fiercely gazing toward the West, to the Eybjarg, to the place of their hopes, to the place of the Doom. With a small army at his back to augment what was now gathered at Utgard, Laufey left, refusing to look back at Byleistr and Farbauti who stood upon the ramparts of Gastropnir and looked out silently at the stream of Jotunn now pounding their way westward.

Laufey left with an army, with provisions, with a long (slower), winding caravan filled with weapons and armour, such as what the Jotunn would bear in times of war. At Laufey's side, the generals rode, each bearing their own abilities long honed before in the War. Generals and a few Dark Elves seithrmasters beside. Behind Laufey, a small box sat – an ironwood box, within which laid finely wrought Dwarven shackles, etched with runes and Elvish magicks – his readiness for the Doom of Jotunheim, for that abomination...

Whether Asgard returned – or the vaetki, Laufey was ready.

[...Jotunheim lay hushed...]

[...ready...]

[...ever ready, it waited...]

[...sometimes the best thing one can do is wait...]

Four days had passed and Loki found himself as yet unable to approach his mother, unable to find a moments peace or rest at his father's side, for the war effort was now well underway. The Royal Court and Mage's Council, as Loki had guessed, called for a meeting the very evening Odin fell into his fabled Sleep. It had already been planned – already had been set up by Odin All-Father himself. Thor and Loki would have been there at his side, should have been there, Loki corrected himself, as he sat down at the left hand of the now empty head of the table. The prince's sharp chin rose and his green eyes challenged any who dared question his uncertain position there, knowing as well as he did that whispers already ran about the palace and city like wildfire, spreading ugly rumours that it was he who had put Odin into the infamous Odinsleep.

Fools, Loki sniffed, but underneath his calm facade, the young Prince shivered. Like a herd of sheep, the masses follow a single voice, often without a second thought. Without Thor, many lack confidence – but is only what I expected, after all. In truth, it would better our condition by far if we could all just focus on what needs to be accomplished. Things are different now. If we are to survive this... we will have to work together.

Working together – that was the nub of the issue, for Loki could tell that already the war-hardened
warriors (more of Thor's ilk) were headstrong and less prone to listen to the ideas and strategies of the soft-spoken mages. High Councillors Stafyn and Margyspeksson spoke the loudest and were heard the most often. No matter what Loki attempted to say, more often than not, the young prince found his opinions and thoughts overruled by a louder voice than his. The next four days passed by, painfully slow, filled as they were with hours of wrangling and arguing and nit-picking over what Loki felt to be increasingly unimportant details.

More often than not, Loki emerged from the council chambers, face blushed red from his own hollering. In the end, he snorted, green cloak snapping behind him in irritation as he stormed away to ensure that the smithies and suppliers were on time with their deliveries, in the end we are no better than children, squabbling for those ephemeral positions of power. Passing by the King's main court chamber, the great hall which could open to large proportions if need be, Loki stopped to stand in the grandly carved doorway – to stare down the long red carpet and single file row of guards still standing at the ready. Standing at the ready despite the fact the throne is still empty, Loki shook his head. Ephemeral positions of power... maybe so... maybe not... either way... I can understand why they must quarrel and fight. It is the nature of all creatures... and yet, and yet...

It bodes Asgard ill on the brink of war.

This is not what Asgard needs.

I got rid of Thor, only to get a hoard of older, more powerful, more headstrong warriors. Loki sighed in frustration. Perhaps getting Thor back would not be so bad of an idea. At least then I would just have to get him to agree to some of my ideas and everyone would listen to him and do what he said – without quarrelling...

If he could listen to me...

If only he could listen...

Loki turned away, quickly making his way to the Storerooms. After a fruitful talk with the Storeroom Keepers (for the third time in a row that day), Loki discovered that it was already dinner time. Usually, there was another meeting to be had, but for the first time in the week, Loki found himself free to take dinner elsewhere. At that realization, the young prince ran across to Odin's Healing Room. Slowing down at the sight of the familiar entrance, Loki smoothed back his hair, drew off his cloak and nodded at the guards who opened the doors smoothly.

It was a dim place. A quiet place. Serene and calm. Perfect for the Odin All-Father. Although, if the tales be true, Loki frowned, he must be anything but calm. If he can see all. If he can hear all even now... What would he say to me if he knew that I can barely make myself be heard at council? Disappointing, I suppose.

At the sound of the door opening, Frigga's head rose from her needlework (a new hat for Thor's next feast day). With a gusty sigh, Loki appeared and descended the steps, looking rather upset. Frigga, catching sight of him, laid aside her needlework and rose, arms held out, drawing her youngest into a firm embrace. Kissing him on the cheek, the Queen squeezed the slender frame of her son again, this time a bit tighter, speaking of her inner anxiety and worries. Then, drawing back, Frigga took stock of her son and shook her head.

He looks as though the world was lying on his shoulders – and in a way, it is – now that Thor is gone and Odin is Sleeping. Responsibility unlooked for lies heavily on one... but then... Frigga remembered the many visions of the many possibilities that lay before them all. But then, this had
"You look fatigued. Another terrible Council meeting?"
"Are not all Council meetings terrible?"
"War councils in particular are," Frigga shook her head. "Your father did not, after all, emerge from his mother's womb with his current lung capacity. He always told me that he felt that war councils were more like a fishwife's market than anything else."
"Fishwives?" Loki smirked. "I can see that."
"Although," Frigga gave her son a look. "I think fishwives would get more done if allowed to have any say in the matter."
"That, I believe."

More tired and annoyed than usual, Frigga noted, her eyebrows knitting together in worry.

"Do I need to step in?"
"I do not know, Mother." Loki glanced about the room and shrugged. "In all honesty, I do not know what you could achieve – unless you can somehow place a trance over Councillor Margyspeksson and get him to see reason."
"Oh, by the Norns, that man!" Margyspeksson rose to Frigga's mind as she considered the tall, brawny, blonde-haired, grey-eyed and grey-bearded warrior most famous for his swordsmanship, brawling and beer-drinking. "Well, I should say – men! High Mage Agaeti and Flarathir are never any better."
"At least, High Mage Agaeti is a proponent of peace," Loki sighed. "I still say that we should wait until our ambassadors return from Vanahem."
"Ambassadors?"
"Yes, we handpicked a few of the nobles – and sent Fandral and Hogun with them, since they have been to that Realm often."
"Hogun's family resides there, if I remember rightly," Frigga mused. "I was certain I heard of a certain handmaiden being pledged to his hand in marriage awhile a go."
"Two and a half centuries ago, Mother," Loki replied indulgently, patting her hand. "At any rate, they left to see if it was possible to broker peace with the Jotunn through the Vanir – or the Elves. If the answer is no, we can make our plans more securely. Better to look defensive than aggressive, I always say."
"Hm."

The two took their seats together, Frigga drawing Loki protectively close, her arm twining in his as they sat and watched Odin's chest rise and fall peacefully. *Odin always said that the Odinsleep was something so beautiful yet sad – being in but not of the world – everywhere and nowhere at once. Seeing everything, yet unable to do anything.*

"How long?"
"How long?" Loki blinked.
"How long until they return?"
"Tomorrow," Loki huffed then. "It is not as if I am asking them to wait a week, much less a month! No patience, I tell you."
"Indeed," Frigga's lips thinned. "I would have thought that they would wish for a chance to make peace before rushing off to their combined deaths. I see that I am quite wrong."
"Flarathir is not helping matters in any case... what with his ever inflammatory language..."
"He wants to go to war as well?"
"Maybe?" The young warrior mage sighed then. "He wishes for Thor's return – and then war. They all do, really. Everyone seems to be chafing at the bit, expecting it to be some easy conquest during which they will be all decorated in gold for their pains and reaping the rewards of the spoils taken – although what spoils there are to be had in Jotunheim is beyond me." A pause and then, Loki added:
"So, in a sense, I suppose, Thor would ensure all that, were he here. Everyone knows that he would take joy in finishing Father's work on Jotunheim."

"Heimdall would countermand Odin's order and bring back Thor?" frowned Frigga as she ran through the various options in her mind.

"I know not," Loki shook his head and glanced away. "Heimdall has thus far held to All-Father's - and your - decision... but I could see him bending the rules. If not, some other foolish mage could try to summon him with powerful magicks or dark energy. There was mention of several lost magickal articles... the Tesseract would have been able to return him easily enough – but, as Flarathir pointed out, there has been no sign of it since the Lengi Ofrithr."

"Foolishness," Frigga said crisply. "If our need is great, I will have Heimdall seek him out and we will send one of the Warriors Three down to locate and bring him back. Until then, let us not waste our time considering such matters."

"That is what Councillor Stafyn said. Something about not weeping over spilt milk... but it is hard to say whether he says it out of pragmatism or because he is happy to be in charge while Father and Thor are gone."

"You are there, dear," Frigga drew her son again in a close sideways embrace.

"Well, I am there," Loki hung his head and glared at his entwined hands, "but these days I feel as though I might as well not be..." A pause. "Never mind that. How is... Father?"

Frigga did not respond right away. Instead, she stared at the wide, golden engraved bed before her, piled with furs, enclosing the King. Like a small dome, a wavering, translucent shield rose – a common trait for the Odinsleep, usually extending about the King to stabilize the powers building within. Odin is somewhere in Asgard or out there amongst the Nine Realms or even with Thor on Midgard – or here, Frigga thought wistfully. I wish he could wake now – now while we the chance to breathe and plan. How sorely we all miss him...

Here Frigga glanced at her youngest and sighed. Of course, Loki wishes to be strong. He always feared being weak, or seeming to be weak at least... Still, he cannot bear the burden of our country alone. It is never good for anyone to bear such things without another at their side.

Frigga remembered all those times Odin had returned to her side, to their shared bedchambers, to the fireplace – and sitting there, at her side or at her feet, the monarch had grieved. He had grieved the death of his brothers, his hands shook within hers the night before his coronation and when he had drunk from the Well, Odin had shared a few of the things he had seen. It was forbidden among some circles to speak of such sacred things, but Odin knew, as few did in Asgard, how wise and far-seeing his wife was – and so he had spoken and so she had listened.

As I listen now. As I should have listened years earlier, Frigga closed her eyes, recalling her eldest. I should have realized... I should have realized... She thought of Loki at her side. The one who no doubt had some hand to play in this as well... and who, even now, works to make it right.

"He is doing well," Frigga sighed. "All things considered... as well as may be at any rate."

"How long will it last?" Loki asked curiously.

"It depends." A pause. "It depends."

"The last time it only took a day..."

"Yes," Frigga nodded. "If he takes the time to do it more regularly, your Father need only spend a short time within the Odinsleep. Yet, this time... I do not know... This time is different. We were unprepared."

Frigga battled back tears, her hand now seeking out and finding Loki's, squeezing it gently.

"We must hope," Loki finally said softly. "He will wake. We can feel his spirit stirring and the seithr – the magick – in this place beats with life... Although, I will allow that it is unsettling to see him
"This is your first time after all," agreed Frigga.
"The most powerful being in the Nine Realms lying helpless until his body is restored... Amazing... and terrifying..."
"He put it off for so long though... I fear..." Frigga found her handkerchief and wiped her eyes.
"Mother," Loki drew his mother in for another tight embrace.

Frigga welcomed it, taking in the faint scent of sweat, leather, horse, manure and the faint traces of ink. *A sure sign he has been wandering deep in thought - and worrying... again.* For a moment, they sat there in silence and Frigga thought of the first day she had seen the young man now protectively cradling her. A broken creature, never to be fixed again, Odin had said. A useful man, he had also thought, perfect for the role of adviser to Thor and deserving of a second chance. *All I saw was a young child needing a mother. Today, perhaps, he can be the bastion of strength and intelligence against the oncoming storm... Loki...*

"You said it yourself, Loki. We must not lose hope..." Frigga turned to look at her sleeping husband and thought of her other exiled child, far away, now, from home. "Your father will return to us... and your brother."

Loki stiffened then, the muscles of his shoulder bunching reflexively at the mention of his brother's name.

"Thor?" He said finally, voice rising a little in disbelief. "How long have we warned him? How long have I attempted to hold him back? How long have his tutors lectured him? How long did the Mages talk with him? How long did the Councillors counsel him? How far did the sight of the Well send him? If he cannot learn from any of these... what hope is there for Thor now?"
"Oh, Loki! There is always a purpose to everything your father does. Thor may yet find a way home."

Loki's hand fell away from her shoulder then as he hunched forward to glare at the ground.

"He always has a purpose."

A meaningful pause.

"A purpose behind everything," Loki continued on. "I thought I knew what it was – I, who fear being used and cast aside like a wretched ignorant pawn. To reign in Thor's worse impulses and gave him counsel when need be. In time, to stand at his side and guide him in his rule... but Odin has purposes."

Loki raised his head to rivet his gaze on the white-haired king now lying before him, the view shimmering with gold and the dim glow of the wall lamps flickering about the room.

"He has purposes for me, does he not? Below the truths he fed me – below the – the – lies-"
"Loki!" Frigga took the dark-haired young man's hand then and shook it emphatically. "That – that is not true!"
"Is it not?" The muscle in Loki's jaw jumped as the tension thrummed through his entire body. "Is it
"This is what you spoke of, then. In the Vault. I had been meaning to talk to you, but you have been much to busy-

"He saw it. He knew. He knew! You both knew – and hid that from me. Why? To manipulate me into becoming your puppet king for Jotunheim, to be that foil for Thor that he might shine ever more brilliantly?"

"No, dear heart," Frigga leaned forward, her hand still holding onto Loki's tightly. "Dearest. I asked him to be honest with you from the beginning. There should be no secrets in a family."

"So you perpetuated a lie."

"Is it a lie, Loki? This visage you wear or the one beneath or any form you choose... perhaps for Loki Odinsson, there is no lie, for each one is but part of a larger truth. That larger truth I can still accept, whatever shape it takes."

"Why did you not tell me then at the beginning?"

"Odin... Your father..." Frigga sighed then. "He was so certain of – of your fears... I told him the truth was freedom, but he thought the truth would reveal itself... in time. He kept the fact we knew your secret from you so that you would never feel different – or threatened. You already struggled, Loki, to fit into Asgardian culture without the added burden of Asgardian fears and hatred. I – We believed – believe even now – that you are in every way our son. You must know that... Loki?"

"You could have told me... and – and we could have said nothing more of it – kept it between us," Loki pointed out. "Now... now... I – I do not know..."

"Perhaps you just need to speak with him and share your heart. Even now, you can speak to your father. He can see and hear us..."

Frigga battled back her tears as she watched her youngest draw a little away, reclaiming his hand and setting his mouth into a thin hard line. His green eyes seemed to look far away and for a moment, Frigga feared that Loki would disappear somewhere and never return.

Loki... dear heart... She pleaded, afraid to press her affections any further upon him, knowing that his suspicions, now being raised, would cause him to shy away from any perceived suffocation. Do not throw away the bonds we hold dear, the ties which you even now hold so tightly to...

After a moment, the taut muscles of the warrior mage's back shifted underneath his thin leather jerkin, relaxing. Frigga found that once again he allowed her hand to creep about his shoulder drawing him close. Slumping down a little, Loki leaned into his mother's touch, heart still torn with fears and doubts, yet unwilling to let go this moment of stability. Nestled against her shoulder, the dark-haired prince stared at his father, green eyes unfathomable.

Unfathomable Loki... and what does he see himself as? A power Odin wished to wield for the good of our people, for the betterment of Thor, Frigga thought, but this is no sword that is swung or bow that is bent indiscriminately. This is Loki. This is my son. He must see that. Must know it.

"What do you think he sees?" Loki wondered.

[...he sees all...]

[...he sees...]

[...a bare, sandy desert...]

[...a dry wasteland...]

[...twilight...]
The next morning, Loki rose from his bed at the crack of dawn, quickly washed himself down, drew on his second best set of Court garments and ate a quick quiet meal in his chambers while reading a short treatise on shape-shifting magicks from a distant planet, Kha'ahli 89B. As he stepped out into the quiet hallway, the young prince braced himself for a long day of meetings and councils – only to find, upon arrival at the main war council room, Frigga at the head of the table within Odin's seat.

Carrying out the minutes with gravity, Frigga made short work of discussing what had been achieved in the past few days and was assured that the war effort was going forth smoothly before rising to excuse herself. With a short word to the table of warriors and mages, Frigga encouraged them all in the good work they had achieved so far.

"Odin All-Father, although he sleeps, watches all," she smiled kindly, letting her sharp, wise blue eyes wander about the room, "and I am certain his heart swells in pride at the sight of your combined efforts, your cooperation to safeguard Asgard. My son, Thor, is not here with us – and his presence is missed greatly by many of you, I know. However, I leave in charge Loki, whom I trust implicitly and in whom the All-Father himself has seen great wisdom, despite his youth and relative inexperience. Treat him as you would treat me."

A pause followed, allowing the hinted warning to sink in before continuing further.

"I am sure that in listening to each other and, taking counsel, even from the most surprising of places, Asgard may yet win the day."

Then, the Queen turned to her son and gave him a look, a bright look, a gleaming look which glimmered like the sun upon Asgarthaharr. Loki froze, unable to turn his eyes downward nor to the side, knowing that the others about the table had fastened their intense gazes upon him as well.

"Loki, Thor is banished – and so, whether you will or no, the responsibility lies upon you to be my voice of reason within the following meetings and preparations. Do you understand?"

Loki nodded slowly, green eyes wide. As the weight of what this all entailed slowly made itself felt within the quiet room.

"Until Odin awakens, Asgard is under your safekeeping." Frigga laid a hand on his shoulder, but Loki barely felt it as her voice carried on in soft encouragement. "Make your father proud."

With that, the Queen exited the room, leaving the war chamber in deafening silence.

*Make your father proud...*

After a moment, there was a shuffling of paper further down the table from the Mage's side and
someone scraped his iron shod boots across the stone floor noisily as they resettled in their seats. Somewhere a raven cry ran out and the rustle of black wings cast a dim shadow briefly on the room as the bird fluttered about on the small windows’ railings.

_Make your father proud..._

"Well, then," High Mage Agaeti nodded, giving High Councillor Stafyn a quick glance. "Prince Loki, have you had any ideas come to mind?"

A silence as all eyes turned to the dark-haired, regally garbed young prince who sat in his seat, back straight and expression still. To many there, it was an unusually solemn look for the youngster who had played pranks and gotten into trouble with Thor time and time again.

_Make your father proud..._

Loki stirred. He nodded slowly, turning to look at High Councillor Stafyn squarely.

"I do... have a few ideas..." Loki said carefully. "It is something I am concerned with more and more often as we deal with the minutiae before us – the risk we have of losing the bigger picture, particularly taking into account the enemy before us..."

And with that, the session continued. _This time_, Loki thought, _perhaps there is a greater chance for change._ A great chance...

_My chance..._

_[...this is the time...]

_[...when one comes into his own...]

_[...when one stands tall...]

_[...stands proud...]

Chapter End Notes

Well, I hope this is sounding interesting... let me know what you think~ I do appreciate concrit! Thanks to some of you, I’ve thought twice about some things and added other stuff to maintain quality! Also thanks to zippy zany who pointed out a spelling mistake last time! I appreciated that!

Feel free to give me a shout!

An update is coming in four days or so~!

-KI

_Alien Glossary:_

’auzha – fucker
chi’iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho’ai - lover
Dou’ima – idiot
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fot'ro - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvila - high bed
Haugbui Bustathr – the Shrine of the Kings
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa'a'vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
raudhaust – high bed
Consequences III

Chapter Notes

FINAL PART of this chapter! FINALLY HERE! I hope you enjoy how the changes are settling in...

Finally, the deviation set in. I hope everyone is still on board... (is very nervous) I know that some of you guys wanted more different plot lines and I know some of you guys didn't. In the words of Tim Gunn and other famous Project Runway winners, I really need to be true to myself and what my vision is for this story. On the other hand, I do appreciate all of your guys reviews and input, because it does help me know if I'm totally crazy or not.

So, this is a big thank you to all those people who have hung in there so far and who have been so so so supportive. Thanks to those who reviewed last chappie: lemomina, Kai_Maciel, lilycxavier, YellowWomanontheBrink, iBlameGlobalWarming, and Sassiebone. I'm so blessed to have you guys cheering me on!

THANKS EVERYONE!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 61
Consequences III

[...this is the time...]

[...when one comes into his own...]

[...when one stands tall...]

[...stands proud...]

From that time on, Loki found it a little easier to accomplish what he considered important. I am not King, Loki thought, but I am the closest I can get to the throne... and at least my voice is heard and we are taking more appropriate measures for this war. Of course, the generals and mages still forced through certain things they wished to see done and the squabbles for power continued on, albeit more inconspicuously, but at least now with Frigga and Loki more firmly at the head, there was a general feeling of accomplishment.

The generals continued to increase security for the Palace, which Loki did not protest, knowing that it would result in better protection of the King and (more importantly to his mind) the Queen. Drills and parades and sparring took place every day all day long as farmers and merchants and other craftsmen came in from their fields and shops and markets to take up the sword once more. Even Loki found himself inveigled into some hand to hand combat review with Volstagg, which annoyed him greatly seeing as there were other more pressing matters to attend to.
Such as the younger and more unruly nobles and mages who had looked up to Thor and wished him to fight alongside them. Moving the Mages' focus from looking for ways to return Thor (other than using the Bifrost), Loki managed to curb their interests with reasoning, pointing out that Odin had sent Thor to Midgard for a Reason, that there was absolutely nothing to be done on their part short of overriding Heimdall (which no one wished to do) or sending someone through the Dark Paths (something else everyone was loathe to do, excepting Loki who could not now be spared, and even then, he had never travelled to Midgard before and would think twice before attempting such a thing without adequate research), that Thor was no doubt in good hands and in a much more secure position than them at present, that it would be better to focus on their own (and Asgard's) security than that of one Aesir. With that, the Mages turned to other more practical duties – making potions, harvesting herbs and verifying the potency of healing stones, blessing weaponry, carving spell-runes upon said weaponry, fortifying shields, enhancing other magickal protection seals and casting runes in hopes of divining further guidance from the Norns or the Heimsrsal itself.

Discouraging the Warriors Three and Sif from going out to look for Thor was a much more difficult task, since Loki's recent 'elevated' status (such as it was) seemed to raise Sif's suspicions even more. Loki knew that a few of the younger lords and ladies were already fearing that he would attempt to take Thor's place on the throne. A few others who lacked even more commonsense were laying bets on it. Loki cursed the lot and set those he could to work. Hogun and Fandral were packed off with Ambassadors to Vanaheim and Alfheim. Sif was sent south to Fellbjorg and Sothaborg to accumulate more information on the metalwork in the mines and the conscriptions continuing through the small villages and hamlets in the south of Asgard. Volstagg remained behind to aid General Tyr in fortification of the trenches along the sea and the bulwarks and towers which ringed out the outer edges of the massive city.

It weighed heavily on him, these additional burdens, but Loki soldiered on, as the week drew to a close. If I could but trust them not to suborn Heimdall as they have done so many times before. With the Odinsleep, Father cannot stop them either and Father... has been sleeping for the last five days, Loki thought. A short time... yet it feels unending.

[...]the warp and weft of Fate...

[...]the parts we must play...

[...]let us begin with the small discordant notes...

[...]here it is proven...

[...]as it had been before...

[...]destinies already carved in stone...

[...]or not...

[...]revealed...

Initial responses from Vanaheim and Alfheim did not bode well and when Hogun returned as guard to the courier bearing the latest news, the dark-haired taciturn warrior looked grim. The Jotunn were in no mood for parley. War is forefront on their minds, the Vanir reported, and the Giants would give them no chance for an audience with the King, responding only that the insults and injuries which Prince Thor had inflicted upon them would be repaid ten thousand fold.
Loki winced as he read over King Frey's succinct letter. Reading between the lines of the spare words written, Loki could feel the worry emanating from his uncle. No one but the fools of Asgard wish for war, Loki sighed. Rubbing his forehead tiredly and wondering once again how long he had been sitting in his chair, Loki handed the letter wordlessly over to Councillor Stafyn, letting the older warrior read it aloud to the Council. At the end, Stafyn sat down heavily, with a great sigh and a barely suppressed grim smile.

"So it is to be war then," he said.
"May the Norns be with us and may the Heimsrsal give us strength," breathed Agaeti, looking older than usual.

*The Heimsrsal give aid to all, for their domain lies in the ephemeral border of What Is and What Is Not, Loki wanted to say. As such, can their guidance be any more certain than fickle Fate or the nebulous Norns?*

Loki thought of the dying Spirit of Jotunheim and shivered.

*Although... If it were up to the Heimsrsal entirely, then perhaps I would say it was a war we won long ago...*

At the thought of the Heimsrsal, at the thought of the dying world, at the thought of the war now certainly laid before them, Loki turned the pieces, the tools which lay before him over and over in his mind, shuffling his options and considering what course he could lay which would bring Asgard to safe harbour. *What do I have, he thought, that could end this without any bloodshed on our side?*

*Something that would teach the Jotunn to fear us – that would send them a message – that would not kill them entirely, no, but would force them to retreat... permanently...*

*Or wipe out their pathetic existence entirely,* whispered that darker side from which he found himself hard pressed to turn away. *They are dying after all. It makes no real difference... now... It would be an act of mercy.*

*A sad necessity,* corrected Loki. *A last resort.*

*Are we not at that moment? If it is Asgard’s life you wish to protect, if it is a lesson you wish to teach, if it is a future threat you wish to eradicate, is this not the logical conclusion? You know the power of the Casket, it answers to your call... it will do your bidding... and you know the power of the Bifrost more fully than some of these ignorant warriors do. The true power of the Bifrost combined with the Casket... what could you not do, Loki?*

That night and the following day, Loki wrestled with his decision. Listening carefully to the most recent information sent from Fandral concerning the enemy and gleaning rumours of mercenaries unfriendly to Asgard joining the Jotunn's cause in hopes of overthrowing Asgard's current place as chief among the Realms, Loki weighed his options. Lunch was spent with Frigga, discussing where she was planning to send the city's women and children should the Jotunn find a way to go on the offence. It would all depend upon the direction from which they attacked. If the rumours were true and a few magicians had stepped forward to aid the Frost Giants, then newly made Dark Paths were a potential as well as previously trodden ways through the Void.

As the sun began to slowly set through the golden afternoon, Loki found himself back in his room, summoning the Casket. He remembered the first day Odin had given it to him.

*I should have known then. A fool, Loki, that is what you are. To not have guessed even then! What kind of king would so easily part with such a treasure? Learning another Realm's magick, that is*
what Odin said... but no doubt he wished to see if I could wield the power of my heritage adequately.  

Loki thought of all the times he could have used it – and abstained for fear of showing the truth of his birth.

Foolish, foolish Loki...
Foolish Loki no longer...

He stared down at it. Standing there, surrounded by his papers and books, it seemed even more magickal than ever - the blue and white swirling Casket. His now cerulean blue hands gripped the metal clasps with familiarity. The metal clasps which held the crystals together, which held the Spirit of something so great it could never really be contained.

Not really, Loki thought, lifting the Casket and turning to allow the dim light slanting in through his open balcony doors to light up crystal within, not really. Not unless... Without further thought, Loki let the Casket go to hover momentarily before himself and then twisted his hands in his familiar gesture, storing it safely away in his magickal niche between What Is and What Is Not. No one would know – as no one knew before... that I have retaken it – again.

This time, Father, Loki’s jaw set in determination and his green eyes hardened like steel. I will use it well. I will show you... what I can do – what I will do for Asgard.

-0-0-0-

The journey down from the palace to the Bifrost brought renewed urgency to the sharp-eyed prince as he rode down through the main streets, noting the increasingly frenetic activity among the civilians as they bustled about in preparation for the war. It seemed as though no one was standing about idly.

Men in armour marched in time, practising the synchronised movements which had been familiar so long ago. Others ran to and fro bearing arms or charged crystals or energy cells. Elderly men sharpened knives, spears, swords and mended shields. Carving runes, the more gifted ones provided the standing soldier’s armour and weaponry with additional protection. Down wide avenues and in recessed courtyards, groups and pairs of warriors practised their craft in their spare time, while along the tops of the walls, on the lower ramparts and through the various streets, patrols ran or walked by, keeping a weather eye out for spies. Meanwhile, overhead, the fleygja-skips patrolled the skies and a few of the squads were also sharpening their aerial maneuvers and targeting efficiency.

Women sat on stoops, sewing banners and flags and leather tunics and mending socks and patching breeches. Others were packing herbs and crushing medicinal plants or crystals, humming tuneless magickal melodies as they worked. Elderly women wrapped long white bandages in rolls, sending the large stock piles up to the armouries, the wall towers and the Palace. Bread, pastries, dried fruit, smoked meats, and stews were carefully being carted down in baskets and bushels and crates and cauldrons attended by giggling young women, who at the sight of their Prince riding by gave him shy glances and giggled.

Even the children were kept busy. Either they peered out of the windows, obviously kept indoors where they were left small menial cleaning tasks to finish or ran through the small winding side streets with errands or baskets or piles of cloth or stacks of wood and other items that the warriors or healers or stables wanted.

Without fanfare, Loki rode by, saying nothing but he smiled at those who nodded at him and continued on, feeling heartened by the well-focused activities around him. Although the prince knew now exactly what he needed to do to save Asgard from the pressure of war, the sight of his people working so hard to work together comforted him. There is a reason why Asgard has maintained its
position within the Nine Realms for so long, he reminded himself. Even if the danger is no longer a true threat, it is well to know how closely our bonds bring us together in times of hardship.

In this way, the prince moved on downward and outward to the great gates of the Bifrost and beyond. With a spare horse, jogging behind, tethered securely to his saddle's pommel, Loki moved quickly across the Rainbow Bridge to the Observatory on the far side. When he arrived, the Gatekeeper, standing tall and imperious in his gleaming gold armour, was waiting.

"Loki," Heimdall's deep voice reflected nothing of his thoughts or emotions, as usual. His golden eyes seemed to look through the young prince, as though the Gatekeeper was watching something else, or perhaps reading Loki's mind.

The prince raised his chin and held up a small squared off scrip. Dismounting his horse, Loki let slack the reins and stepped forward to hand the letter to the Gatekeeper with an air of indifference.

"High Mage Agaeti, I believe. The Mages wish to consult with you on some matter... I know not what but..." Here, Loki shrugged. "Perhaps they explained further in their missive."

Loki edged closer to Heimdall's elbow, craning his neck, as though he cared about the reason for which the old fools had wished to meet with the far-sighted Gatekeeper, as though he did not know. He smirked as he caught a brief glimpse of the word 'Jotunheim'. So Agaeti took the hint about further reconnaissance...

"So Agaeti took the hint about further reconnaissance... Green eyes watched the tall, brawny Gatekeeper carefully. Heimdall, face stoic as usual, stored the letter away underneath his left breastplate, sheathed his sword and gave Loki a sharp look.

"You have finished your errand, young Prince." A pause. Then: "Odd that a prince such as yourself would stoop so low for such a task."

"We are all rather short on help these days," Loki replied stiffly. "No hand can be spared for this war - not even mine." A beat, then: "Do you doubt my dedication?"

When Heimdall did not immediately respond, Loki frowned.

"You doubt it. Even now."

"I doubt many things," Heimdall said. "Only what I see with my eyes, do I believe."

"But you have seen nothing, have you not?" Loki cocked his head, eyes narrowing. "You rely on rumours and slander."

"I have seen nothing when there must have been something to be seen," Heimdall finally responded, stepping forward to loom over the slender prince. "I have sought you out on many occasions and have not found you where you ought to be. You have hidden yourself from my gaze... as were the Jotunn who came that day to Asgard."

"You imply I brought them here. You accuse me so easily with little or no evidence to the contrary."

"There is only what I see and what I do not see," Heimdall replied calmly, "and the patterns that lie within such activities."

"What are you trying to say? Whatever you think I have done, I was not the one who started the war and I am not responsible for Thor's decisions," Loki bit out defensively, bristling with barely contained anger.

"I have attempted to say nothing." Heimdall leaned forward, but Loki forced his back to stiffen, refusing to back down although the Prince's clenched fists shook and his belly churned with uneasiness. "Or perhaps I have," Heimdall said softly. "A warning to those who threaten the throne."

"So even the glorious Heimdall stoops to the level of his inferiors, mucking about in baseless accusations."

"Listening to the people, that is a dangerous thing, I agree. However, when it is something I see with my own eyes... Then, I hold my tongue and wait for moments such as these." After a second's pause,
Heimdall straightened and gave Loki a look. "I am no tale-bearer and have spoken of this to none but yourself."
"I should hope not, considering who I am. I am Prince Loki of Asgard and as such, I deserve your allegiance. Mother - your Queen has given the injunction that I should oversee the country until All-Father returns."
"But you are not on the throne," Heimdall smiled then. A small infuriating smile. A knowing smile. "I hold my allegiance to the King - the King, which you will never be, Prince Loki. I must go."
Bowing to Loki – just barely – Heimdall passed the furious warrior mage. "If you will excuse me."

Watching the tall, gold-armoured Gatekeeper walk down the Bifrost to mount the extra charger Loki had brought, the Prince smiled slowly.

"Oh," he whispered, "you are excused."

[...the warp and weft of Fate...]

[...the parts we must play...]

Loki waited. Patience, he thought, rewards the one who waits with the greatest prize... Standing there quietly, after running through his checklist of things he need to accomplish later on in the day, Loki considered his plan once again. Risky, he thought, but the result will be... quite effective, I think. Thor would be right at my side enjoying this one - if he could grasp the subtlety of the moment. Perhaps he would be disappointed he was not down on Jotunheim himself smashing the Jotunn to bits, but Father would approve, surely. Surely... Loki considered the white-haired king who had called himself Father and yet seemed to be so aloof around his youngest. Father will be proud, I should think. Finishing what he started all those years ago.

When Heimdall passed his second illusion stationed just outside the Mage's Academy, Loki set to work at once. Making his way swiftly into the Observatory, Loki withdrew one of the swords he had 'borrowed' from the Einherjar's weaponry room and slotted the blade carefully into the Observatory's podium. Just as he hoped, the runes which he had temporarily etched on the silver blade disguised it enough to fool the mechanism. Smoothly, the walls rotated around, the axis and the outer rings began to spin, the Eye moved its usual journey forward and down, responding to the unspoken command of the sword-bearer and pinpointing Jotunheim.

Loki hoped.

Summoning the Casket out of his unseen niche, Loki held it within his hands, revelling in the power as its icy blast flowed forth ceaselessly outward and upward, following the crackling lines of energy until the power, housed in ice branched like a great blue-white tree.

Now, the power will flow continually up and out, Loki thought. Trapped by ice, looking as glorious as a silvræmhr or hota-eik. A beautiful thing. An alluring travesty. The most elegant weapon of death.

Backing away, Loki stowed the Casket carefully and surveyed his handiwork as it continued onward, unchecked, blasting fiery icy and death upon the unseen land targeted below the blinding gaze of the Eye. The starlight, the fiery glimmer of ice flickered in his wide green eyes as he stepped back toward the door. He could not see Jotunheim. He was not Heimdall, but Loki could imagine.

Shutting his eyes, he thought he could see it as it had happened before – in another life, perhaps – or in a dream. A dream when he was young and stood upon the Svelshelf and gazed into the Void. It had promised so many things.

...DEATH...
Gaze into the Void too long... and it will gaze back at you, the Light Elf librarian had once told him.

...DEATH...

...IS MINE...

...YOU ARE MINE...

I am not afraid, Loki had once stated, courageous in his innocence.

You should be afraid... Elethed also had said.

You should be.

...SUCH GLORIOUS GIFTS...

Loki shivered as the insidious voice curled around in his head, taking root again – or perhaps it had never left. His stomach turned and the warrior mage's hands began to shake. He could see it – the shaft of light and fire and magick increased by a thousand fold thanks to the Casket, shrieking and crackling and roaring down upon the land, cutting into the crumbling wastelands of Utgard and widening as it's beam focussed downward for too long of a time.

Finishing what my ancestors started, Loki opened his eyes again slowly, all those ages ago. I suppose, in the end, I am more like them than even Mother and Father know. Turning away he looked over the edge of bridge carefully, watching as the matter and dust disturbed by the energy field moved lazily in a circle. Soon, he thought, the Mouth of the Void, the Muthr'a'Ginnung, it will form.

It will devour all, for it is always hungry...

...DEVOUR...

...SUCH GLORIOUS GIFTS...

...FOR DEATH...

...DEATH...

It is will always be hungry. Loki leaned away and shivered as the small black hole formed. Soon, Jotunheim will be no more – never to haunt my dreams again, nor to threaten the peace of Asgard.

For a second, he thought he could hear it – the shrieking wails of the Heimsrsal, the rumble of feet running away from the collapsing cliff faces of the Eybjarg, the cry of dying Jotunn – and Loki staggered back, gasping as he shut his eyes to the terror before him. Terror from which he could not turn away.

...beloved...

...no no no no...

...no no no nonononono...

...this was not how it was to be...

He thought of Laufey, tall and remote. He thought of Farbauti, double-minded and kind-spirited. He
thought of Helblindi, proud if uncertain. He thought of Byleistr.

_Byleistr. Gentle-hearted, learned and gracious._

Loki drew a rattling breath, green eyes glittering with unshed tears, as he stepped back from the edge of the Bifrost. His face was set and pale, lips pressed together in a thin hard line as he turned away.

"Goodbye, Byla," he whispered, back to the calling Void. "Goodbye, Meir'brothir."

_Meir'brothir._

[...let us begin...]

Odin's brow wrinkles. His lashes flutter as his eyes roam over Asgard. As he...

[...let us begin with the small discordant notes...]

[...here it is proven...]

[...as it had been before...]

Heimdall sees everything. As a young child, his golden eyes had captured the very glory of the Heimsrsal and, blessed with her grace, the Gatekeeper continues his watch as his father and his forefathers did before him. He sees a droplet fall, years of light away, upon a slender stem in the deep jungles of an alien planet. He sees the girls kick their heels to the stars and the warriors brawl in the deep pits of lost city planets. He sees a jouncing vehicle jolt its way across sand, bearing an unconscious blonde stranger into a small village. He sees a slender figure standing with its back to the gaping Void. He sees the anxious swirl of a great serpent as its world shakes.

As its world shakes...

As Jotunheim shudders...

Heimdall, scattering maps and papers every which way, flees the great halls of the mages and makes his way through the palace at breakneck speed, taking every shortcut he knows to reach the King and his waiting Queen.

The world is shaking.

Jotunheim is breaking.

Doom had come.

[...destinies already carved in stone...]

[...or not...]

[...revealed...]

Heimdall found his way to the King's Chamber and with a peremptory wave of his hand, glared down at the guards who had stepped forward to halt his approach and entered the room, ignoring their muted protests. As he clattered down the stairs, Heimdall caught his breath and then realized with a start that the golden aura around the King's bed had disappeared. The bed itself was empty.

"All-Father-" Heimdall glanced about warily – and then relaxed minutely as the small door, which he
knew led to the Healer's store room and the privy, opened. Odin and Frigga emerged, pulling on Odin's tunic, overcoat and short-waisted vest, clearly in the middle of an argument.

"is madness. I did what I had to do for Thor, but this--"
"These are the actions of a confused heart--"
"All-Father," Heimdall strode forward, took to one knee and bowed his head. "Your Awakening has never had better timing than this. Prince Loki--"
"I know," Odin said shortly, face grim.
"He means well--"
"This deed cannot go unpunished. Damage to the Bifrost will result in--"
"Can it be stopped?" Heimdall asked, rising to his feet and helping a silent, pale-faced Frigga to place Odin's light armour on top of his tunic and leathers.
"It must be. That boy--"
"That boy?" Frigga's voice quavered with unshed tears and frustration. "He is our son!"
"He is destroying a planet and the foundations of an entire Realm! Our position will be threatened as the rest will fear that our next target will be them! To show our abilities so blatantly will upset the delicate balance of--" Odin's rising voice broke off. Then he added, "This is not the Loki I remember, sitting at our table. This is not the Loki I had wished for - I adopted that child in hopes of peace, not -- not this creature of destruction!"
"In hopes of what?" Frigga ground out. "Is that all you saw him as -- a bridge to cross the chasm you dug? To bandage the ills you dealt? Are Loki's fears to be justified after all?"
"His what?"

Odin, Frigga and Heimdall made their way out of the room and down the hall, ignoring the startled guards and continuing their increasingly vocal argument.

"His fears, beloved," Frigga shook her head. "He fears so -- so much -- being used and cast away. These fears, which eat away at him, they are legitimate, considering his past."
"When we spoke in the Vault, I looked in his eyes and I saw Nothing. A Void where his heart lies," Odin shook his head. "Loki is a wild fire, an untamed double-edged blade. I should have thought twice before committing to his potential."
"Thought twice? Committing to -- to-" Frigga's blue eyes flashed, her hands rose in the air with a gesture of despair and anger. "I committed to a son, to a child, to a future -- whatever that was! You cannot make contracts with Fate on such matters, nor can you attach such expectations to your affections. His heart may seem empty, but it needs only to be filled over with our hope, our acceptance -- and our love."
"Well, I do not blame him entirely..."
"I should hope not!"
"But he is not entirely blameless--"

Odin paused as he and Heimdall made their way out to the courtyard which now bustled with frenetic activity as courtiers and nobles and officials and warriors and mages and servants and pageboys all rushed to the battlements to look across the city at the sparkling vision of the gold and silver Observatory flashing like a precious jewel on the edge of the Sea. The ominous creak of metal and ice filled the air and a freezing blast of icy wind blew back over the sea and through the city.

"We are to blame also for putting such responsibility on him--"
"That is not the problem," Frigga snapped. "He was handling the entire situation quite well. No. It is an issue of insecurity. He lacks confidence. Dearest," Here, Frigga tugged on her husband's arm, whipping him back to look at him. "Loki needs, no, he craves your acceptance. Your love. Your praise. Loki -- he -- he merely wishes to prove himself the equal of any man who stands before you, the equal of Thor."
Odin blinked at his wife, mystified.

"What?"
"I think, dearest, he has always found himself wanting-"
"Nonsense," Odin gave a bark of laughter, waving a hand in dismissal. "Surely not."

Frigga gave Odin a look.

"Is he that foolish?" Odin asked uneasily. "I gave him charge of Thor – I looked to his counsel on various matters. I accepted both Loki's talents and his heritage. How can he not see how much I value him?"
"Value? Value? The way you say it speaks for itself. Look, dear, have you ever said as much to him?"
"What – Frigga – we do not have the time for this-"
"We must take the time!" Frigga insisted, voice now harsh with worry. "Or I will lose another son – and this time, I will lose him in such a way that he will never be fully mine again."
"Frigga-"
"I have seen it."

A pause.

"Sire, we must make haste-"

Odin, ignoring Heimdall's reminder, held Frigga's gaze for a moment before letting his eyes wander over the broad courtyard before him.

"I – I – I may have mentioned it-"
"You may have mentioned it," Frigga echoed Odin disbelievingly. "I do not think you have – or if you have, you were not clear."
"I-"
"You must, dearest. When we go to speak with him-"
"We? You are not joining us-"
"When we go to speak with him, yes, I know that as King you must punish him for his wrongdoings and as a father you cannot but allow exhortation and disappointment to take its due. Yet... yet... also show him your love-"
"Frigga-"
"He is your son. Our son."
"And what would you have me do with this son of ours then, wife?" Odin finally asked her, taking her by the hand.
"What you would do with any son," Frigga finally whispered.

A pause and she added painfully, as though her heart was breaking in two.

"What you have done with Thor."

[...let us begin with the small discordant notes...]

[...destinies already carved in stone...]

[...or not...]

[...revealed...]
All my life, all my life, it has lurked, it has loomed in my memory – a shadow of a threat, a dark promise of things to come. It has been my constant companion, my past and my future. It lies there on the edges of my consciousness, whether I will or no. Never far no matter how far I may roam.

This is Jotunheim...

Jotunheim...

no more...

Chapter End Notes

Well, there you go~! The pivotal chapter now done! Craziness.

So there are a few questions folks have raised...

Q: How does Odin feel about Loki?
A: Odin feels affection for Loki - and respect - but at times, I think he can't really show his love for Loki in the way that Loki needs. Also, I don't think his love for Loki is entirely altruistic... so yeah... He does value Loki, but as Frigga says, if valuing something isn't accompanied by love, then it is a terrible, cold kind of affection... and not what Loki needs in the slightest! Odin... (shakes head)

Q: Why would you have Loki destroy Jotunheim? Does he hate Jotunheim that much?!
A: Well. I think one can commit genocide out of necessity and not hate per se. I think the Loki in the film definitely attempts (we don't know if he succeeds really) to eradicate Jotunheim out of necessity AND self-hatred. This Loki has less self-hatred and more fear. I would definitely say that the necessity of the moment is flavoured by the need for revenge and fear/hatred of himself... but I would say that this Loki's response to destroying Jotunheim is a cold thing. Not a hot-tempered thing. Does it make it right? No, but I would compare this to (in a way) the Americans' use of the atomic bomb in WWII. Many people saw it as a sad necessity, but quite a few other people saw it as 'coming to the Japanese' (to put it nicely). So, yeah. A difficult moment for the chara we love... v.v

Let me know what you think~

The next update will most prolly be in 4 or 5 days time. It'll probably be the side story for this fic, which is up on FF NET and etc. The stories are available for public viewing and I encourage you to put that side story fic collection on your favs and alerts. XD

Also, for those who love Hiddles, I wrote a funny one-shot for Hiddles's birthday. A Tom & Loki fic which you can read on my Tumblr (a few pages or so back), or on AO3 called "As Thanks To You a.k.a. The Cake Incident". Enjoy~

-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fotr'ro - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvila - high bed
Haugbui Bustathr – the Shrine of the Kings
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa’a’vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Co'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curun – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
raudhaust – high bed
Well, yet another chapter divided... but that means that I can update sooner since the buffer is slowly starting to widen. I'm getting to a part in the story that I was really, really looking forward to writing. We'll see if I love it as much as I thought I would... v.v

A great shout out and thank you to: beanie, Kai_Maciel, Tiff, lemomina, YellowWomanontheBrink, Petreska, Uriko, iBlameGlobalWarming - for their kind words. Thanks to everyone for reading, following and favoring! I hope you always feel free to drop me a line! I always wonder if there's a readership out there for epic Loki gen-fic... and when I read those encouraging words, I feel like I could write up a mountain!

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELVES!

ALSO, if any of you guys have any knowledge of what life ranch hands lead, New Mexico and modern day ranching stuff, please PM me. I'm researching stuff for a certain demigod who is going to... welll... don some jeans and cowboy boots and a stetson at some point in this fic.

(Did this fic just become crack?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 62
Free-Falling I

[...it is everywhere...]

[...it is gravel and dust and weeds and grass...]

[...it is the wind and warm sunlight and swaying green leaves and dappled shadows...]

[...it is green hills, fertile valleys, meadows of flowers, wastelands of ice and great mountains...]

[...it is everything that Seen, Unseen and Beyond...]

What is life? This is the question asked by so many sages of so many kinds, of so many creatures and beings spread throughout the planets, the galaxies, the universes and the countless Realms. What is life? What is that force which drives it? What is it that sits upon the edges of What Is and What Is Not? What hides within the shadows? What brings forth the light? What hovered over the face of the deep and brooded before all that was?

"Magic is everywhere. It is in the multitudinous voices of the wind. It is in the chatter of water. It is in
the rumble of earth – and the crackle of fire. It is the flashes of lightning and the song of thunder. It is in the roar of a thousand burning suns. It is everything. It is everywhere.

It is Us.”

That is what the Mages of Jotunheim had said, yet it remains a mystery.

The mechanics of such things bear many names and the use of such knowledge, the vague understandings and the brief forays into the Realms of What Is Unseen have yielded powers few can fully grasp let alone wield. Yet, there are some who, being gifted, can carry that burden more easily than others and some races are birthed with natural abilities to form the material world in more powerful ways.

Such are the Elves, such are the Asgardians, the Jotunn, the Fire Giants of Muspelheim and other well known races, such as Dire Wraiths, the Phalanx and Technarchy, the Skrull, Space Phantoms, demons, vampires, a few Midgardians, the Ancients, the Titans, the Watchers, the Elders, the Celestials and others. Through various Realms and galaxies, these kind have bred alongside others less gifted. Yet, the way of those treading the paths of magick is difficult and those who play with Fate will oft pay the ultimate price.

Magick, after all, demands something in return, whether it be natural, learned or bestowed, for nothing can be found that may not be lost and many lose what is most dear in the discovery of such powers. This force, born within Life itself, wends its way around the galaxies, edging and buffering and protecting that Which Is from That Which Is Not.

Those who have long searched for the answers of such questions have themselves come to a variety of conclusions. Some believed Magick is what supports Life – and thus those who wield it must naturally be respected above all. Others believed Magick is born from Life and thus Life becomes sacred and any may be gifted, thus all must be cherished for what role they must play. Yet others believed Magick is nothing but that natural mechanics of the material world and, as such, should be mined and utilized as one would ore or precious metals.

In any case, those so gifted with Magick were prized above all and feared and their power was reckoned carefully in many of the Realms. Many civilizations of ages past and also those present have a variety of rules and measures for such things. The closest galaxy to Asgard, having the most interaction with that blessed Realm, had come up with its own system for the measurement of magickal abilities. The Eno'Keshi'ko. From Eno'sanai, the lowest, to Eno'sa, the highest, those born, studied in or endowed with talent are thus measured.

Yet creatures and beings are not the only things measured by the Eno'Keshi'ko. Depending upon the size of the destruction, magickal-related or magickally induced disasters are also measured thus.

[...gesture without meaning...]
[...motion without force...]
[...so we partake of Life...]
[...but can we understand it truly?...]

Standing on the edge of the Bifrost and gazing down at the creation of the Muthr'a'Ginnung below, Loki wondered what the size of such a disastrous thing would be measured at. Eno'ah? On level with the All-Father himself or the talented Elven Mages? Or something higher? Something like the Ancients or the Titans – Eno'tho?

Staring down, green eyes gazing wide-eyed into the Abyss, Loki, in the face of such destruction, could not help but wonder what it was he saw. He saw Dark, he saw the Void, yet at his back and all
about the winds of magick buffeted like the wind. The Heimsrsal of Asgard howled and shrieked.

...interloper...

...bringer of Death...

...harbinger of Doom...

...Forebear of the Void...

...you should not have come...

...should not have...

...come...

He could not ignore it, nor could he ignore the evidence of what he saw before his eyes – the multi-colours of magick building up and around as matter sunk into the nothingness, leaving no trace of what remained. *Magick building up. If I could reach for it – if I called such wild power to my hand, Loki thought, what would I become?*

The warnings of Elethed returned.

...they do not return, those who fall to the Shadow...

...those who remain are driven mad by it or turn to acts of evil in obedience to those dark urges...

...or...

...or...

...they take refuge beneath the sheltering boughs of Yggdrasil...

...we all choose, you understand, in the end...

...it is a fearsome thing...

Another slightly lisping, honeyed yet rumbling voice rose from his memories. A wise creature, Iormungand, speaking of ancient truths long forgotten.

*How can one resist the call of Life itself? One cannot. One can but give in and not lose oneself in its flow. Yes, its flow - for its currents run as deep as any sea and those who cast themselves without thought may be swept away by it, tugged under and inward and gain the pleasures of knowledge...and the release of Death herself. Such lived the Mystics and the Sages and others before you – and such will live the favoured few long after you are gone. To take part of such mysteries – that is indeed a great honour, a terrible Destiny.*

Loki shivered.

*To commune deeply with Life, one must fully plumb the depth of Death. One cannot enjoy the one without suffering the other. This is the push and pull of Existence. All must walk the road, swim the path, follow the stream – but you have been gifted with awareness, with the ability to make change, according to your strength of will and abilities – and thereby change the Cosmos itself in indefinable, incalculable ways. The only question is – will you rise to the challenge?*
Will you rise to the challenge?

Loki inhaled, fingers twitching, wondering if he had risen to the level where one could safely call upon such powers and mold them to his will – like the All-Father and the Elves.

At such a thought, Loki laughed and stepped back.

Surely not, he thought, clenching his fist. Yet, one day, I will reach it. I will – I will attain that power and truly protect my people. You are young yet, Loki.

But I wonder... The warrior-mage gazed down at his hands and flexed them experimentally. I wonder where I am at now... It has been so long since I have considered the matter.

A pause and then Loki shook his head and set the matter aside for further thought later on. He raised his head as he sensed a dense force of magick headed his way.

Heimdall? Already?

...so we dip into the wisdom of our Forefathers...  
...so we glimpse destiny...  
...yet best laid plans...  
...oft go awry...

As the indistinct figure drew closer, Loki moved forward and then stopped as the long golden and bronze staff of Gugnir came into focus alongside Odin's red cape and white beard. The old King drew closer and then, coming within a few paces of his son, he set down, Gugnir steadying him as his feet took a few unsteady paces on the Bifrost before coming to a complete halt.

"Father!" Loki drew close, eyes brightening. "You woke!"

"What-"

"If I had known you were going to wake so soon, I would have-"

"What have you done?"

"What – Father-" A pause and then the young prince drew himself up, squared his shoulders and lifted his chin before giving Odin an indecipherable look. "Nothing you would not have done."

"What I would do? You are so certain of that, my foolish son?"

"Foolish? What – so, that is how it is to be then," Loki flung his hands up with a sharp shake of his head and an expression of disgust. "Since I am not Thor, what I do, even if it is spares Asgard of war, is foolish?"

"Do not bring your brother into this. Although, if I were to mention him, I would say this is exactly what Thor would do."

"And you would not? Come now, Father, this plan will succeed-"

"I applaud success, but at what cost?"

"Cost?" Loki glanced about, eyebrows knitting together. "I see no apparent cost."

"When the Realms see how dishonourably we destroyed Jotunheim, our reign of peace will turn to one of fear. All those alliances we have built between the Realms will become nothing – and they will turn on us as any would do in the face of such power."

A silence as Loki glanced at the Observatory to his right, an inscrutable expression on his face.

"And what if the Bifrost were to be harmed. The energies brewing beneath us – can you not feel them? You toy with power, Loki, and it will destroy you. It will destroy us-"

"It will not. I considered it and according to my calculations-"

"You considered nothing!"

"How would you know? You never asked me my thoughts on the entire situation, neither were you
there when I constructed my research. If you took the time, you could see-

The two broke off at the sound of hooves ringing over the Bifrost. Heimdall and Frigga were
drawing close. Odin sighed and Loki frowned.

"Is that... Mother?"
"Loki? Loki!" Frigga was dismounting now and running over, worry written all over her face. "Oh –
you are – you are safe. By the Norns, I was worried! What were you thinking?"
"I-"

For the first time, Loki began to truly worry. Why do they all look so... unhappy? He wondered,
glanced over at the Observatory and then back at his parents. The Bifrost and the Observatory are
fine... and the magickal energy, while high has been stable...

It is not your actions, after all. A gloating whisper. I was right, after all. It is you. You. You will
never please, you will always disappoint... You watch. They will turn on you and devour you like
senseless ravening beasts – and there will be nothing remaining of you or your intentions.

"I did it for you," Loki whispered. "For – for Asgard – I just – I just wanted to protect our – our
people-"
"Loki," Frigga sighed, drawing closer.

Heimdall moved past the three and began to make his slow way up the Bifrost to the Observatory.
For a moment, Loki's attention was torn away from his parents as he watched the Gatekeeper attempt
to push past the heavy winds which emanated from revolving mechanism. What does he think he is
able to do? No one may stop it at this rate, unless I teleport inside and turn it off...

"You cannot think this is in anyway possible," Odin was saying.
"It is!" Insisted Loki, turning back to face his father. "In this way, not a drop of our people's blood
will be shed-"
"No, Loki."
"No?" Loki whispered in disbelief.

The brilliance of his green eyes dimmed as realization set in. So perhaps... my doubts were true...
after all...

"Loki," Frigga took Loki's hand and raised it, drawing his attention to her. "You did it for us. Yes.
Yes... but... I think, I know... you know that this is true: it is important that we win, but it is also
important to consider how we win." A pause. "What of Jotunheim? Would you condemn an entire
Realm – containing hundreds of thousands, if not billions of innocents to death because of the actions
of a few?"
"I – I-" Loki's heart-broken gaze met his mother's, then he whispered, "I – I am sorry-
"You should be," grunted Odin.
"Dear!" Frigga gave her husband a look.
"He has used our Bifrost as a weapon of mass destruction! He has allowed his heart to rule his head!
He has brought dishonour-
"You are talking about honour at an hour such as this?"
"Of course he is," Loki muttered, shooting a glare at his father who did not look impressed in the
slightest. (So much for that plan...) "It is, after all, what Asgard prizes above other important things...
such as, say, life."
"Silence, you!" Odin snapped. You, like Thor-
"I thought we were not mentioning him-
"-were given much and have wasted the chance to prove yourself worthy of the position given to
you!"
"Odin-“ Frigga interjected, but she was ignored. 
"Position? What position? I was left with nothing – nothing!” Loki hissed, leaning forward, fists clenched at his sides. "If Mother had not stepped in, Asgard would have been in worse straits-"
"You have so much faith in your leadership, have you? Tell me-"
"I am telling you – I am telling you! I was showing you that I was worthy-"
"Sire," Heimdall's voice broke into the now very loud argument. "It is impossible to access the Observatory, not even to draw close to it. At this rate, the Muthr'a'Ginnung may grow larger and threaten Asgard's foundation-"
"I was monitoring it," Loki said. "It was small-"
"Monitoring it? Was small?" Odin's face was now a deep shade of red, rage now spewing out as the news sank in. "You stand so sure of knowledge, whilst you bring Asgard down about our ears? I brought you into my house, seeing potential-"
"Ha! I knew it-" Loki shot back, darkly gleeful that his fears had been realized after all.
"-not failure!"
"Odin!” Frigga's now angry voice interjected again.
"Alas, you have shown yourself to be just as greedy, arrogant and short-sighted as your brother. You are unworthy!"

Odin raised Gugnir and set it down with a resounding THUD, sending Loki back in a flash of golden and white light. The prince, buffeted by the winds meeting his back and head, fell to the multicoloured bridge, his hands and feet twitching and back arching as golden chains appeared around his body soundlessly. Crying out in panic, the young prince attempted to rise, but his movements were aborted as the chains drew in tightly about him. Wrapped around his head, criss-crossing around his torso before breaking off into a variety of lengths twining about his arms and legs, the glowing metal slowly sank into the clothing, into his skin, into his very soul. As the bindings settled, Loki twisted and turned as though a worm caught on a hook, crying out intermittently. Half-turned on his side and belly, the Prince eventually stilled, shuddering as he began to find breath once again... somehow.

For the first time in years, Loki found himself once again cut off from his abilities. For the first time in years, he felt helpless, naked and alone. He wanted to throw up. He wanted to hide. He wanted to beg.

Yet, somehow, he managed to still his tongue. If Thor could accept it, Loki thought dazedly, so can I.

Before he could move, Loki felt a familiar, gentle hand laid on his back and his neck, easing him around carefully. Looking up, Loki's green gaze met his mother's blue one.

"Loki," she said softly. "Loki – how do you feel?"

Something acerbic rose to his lips, but Loki forced his anger and sarcasm down. Down down down down into that box which held so many other ugly things. He closed his eyes, focused on breathing instead and tried to smile. A sharp shard of smile which cut her heart, he knew.

"I-"

"Hush," sighed Frigga, drawing him closer and gently wiped the tears which ran in silver tracks down her son's face. "That was a stupid question for me to ask. Just breathe. It will be alright."

No, Loki thought, no, it will not be. It can never be.

"What did you do?” Frigga turned to look at Odin who now stood over the pair, looking grim.
"Until such a time as you show care for those about you and discover the restitution necessary to heal the wounds you have inflicted upon our Realm, you will remain limited in what powers you have accumulated," Odin said to Loki, avoiding his wife's hard gaze.
"All of his powers? What were you thinking?"
"Not all of them," Odin sighed. "That would be impossible. A strong force such as Loki cannot live without magick. It is his very being. No. Some remain, enough to maintain what image he wishes to preserve, enough to use his natural talents, enough to complete what task I have set before him."

"Odin-" Frigga's face was set now with anger, but her husband paid her no heed, turning away to join Heimdall.

Odin paused and then glanced back at Frigga.

"Say goodbye to your son."

With that, he continued onward, drawing closer to the Observatory. As close as he could, at any rate, considering the power which now whipped about. Heimdall stood at his side and stared at the mechanism, golden eyes sad.

"It cannot be stopped, I think."
"Loki thought it could be," Odin shook his head. "Foolish boy. To think he could enter such a place unharmed, with such magick currents in the air..."
"If it cannot be stopped," Heimdall's voice was filled with dread at the thought. "More than Jotunheim will be destroyed."
"Not if the Observatory no longer functions."
"How-"
"We should take two paces back. There," Odin glanced around, sketched three runes in the air and slammed his staff down authoritatively, setting the shields in place about the four of them on the Bridge. "In such a way, none of us will be blown off the Bridge."
"Sire-"
"The Observatory... must go."
"Sire," Heimdall's golden eyes widened and then the Gatekeeper stilled, his face hardening as he nodded.
"Stand back, Heimdall."

With those words, the tall Gatekeeper did as he was told, allowing Odin space as the ancient King raised his arms, raised Gugnir, and began to mold the magick above their heads. Loki and Frigga and Heimdall, eyes staring upward, watched silently as the swirling winds coalesced, forming a massive ball of reds and golds and whites. Then Gugnir, slamming down, tugged at the magick force which began to funnel itself downward – swirling about faster and fast, twisting and turning like lightning, like a wind storm.

Loki tried to rise then as the realization of what his father was intending set in. He had just about gathered enough strength to rise to his knees when Gugnir rose and slammed down, this time, drawing the power to the Bridge, shaking the entire structure and laying the first cracks across the multicoloured span before Odin.

"What-!"

Gugnir rose and fell again. CRACK! The magick slammed once again into the precious glittering crystals of the bridge, widening the gaping hole.

"What – stop! S-s-stop! Please!" Loki's voice rose in panic as he attempted to rise to his feet. "I can – I can stop it! Let me – let me help you!"

But his words were swept away by the wind. Or ignored. It was hard to tell which. Glancing at his mother, Loki's stomach felt as though it had plummeted into the Abyss as he caught the tears running down her face, as the full impact of what Odin made itself felt at the memory of one who would now
not so easily be returned.

This -

This was not what I wanted -

"You – you may never see him again – Thor – he is – he is still down there! How will he – how will he return!" Loki's voice rose again, cracking with fear and regret and pain. "I have never been to Midgard – I do not know the way! Thor will be trapped-

Gugnir rose and fell the last time. The Heimsrsal screeched, its voice like metal drawn across porcelain or nails across chalk, shattering the Bridge, as it spun and battered its way downward. A sphere of light and sound and force erupted, hitting against Odin's shields which splintered a few seconds later as the Observatory tore away from the edge of Asgard and plunged downward – over and off the edge of the world. Over and off the edge of the world and into the Void below. There was a crashing, a clattering, a roar of waves, the high-pitched keen of crystals shuddering as the tongue of the Bridge settled.

Then, as the Observatory disappeared into the Void, releasing a last blast of magick upward into the sky, Asgard fell silent.

Not entirely silent – but for once, the four could hear themselves think, could hear their heavy heartbeats, could hear the crash of the disturbed sea against the far rocks of the city.

Odin and Heimdall stood for a moment on the edge, looking over, until the King stirred. Jerking his head, Odin commanded his Gatekeeper:

"Bring him here."

There was no question of who. Heimdall strode over and, ignoring Frigga's protest, jerked Loki away and to his feet.

"Wait!" Frigga repeated, following now quickly. "I need to say to Loki. I need to say goodbye so my son!"

At that, Odin sighed and then he slowly nodded before returning to channelling the remaining magick which still swirled about the Muth'r'a'Ginnung, which now was slowly shrinking, slowly closing. Ignoring the dark whispers that emanated from it -

...YOU ARE MINE...

...MINE MINE MINE...

The white-haired king continued to build up what dark energy was now available to him. The Bifrost was gone, true, but he still could muster enough power here to send a person through time and space to another place. From the destruction of one thing would come the birth of another.

Behind him, Frigga drew Loki close, pulling him into a tight embrace. Loki, in return, clung to her, burying his dark head in her shoulder, breathing in her scent, knowing somehow that it would be some time since he would see her again – if at all.

Do not think about it. Do not think about it.

"You will be banished like Thor," she whispered. "I do not want you to go-"
"I do not wish to go – but – but... I – I understand," he choked out, for the first time, feeling regret.
Regret. It angered him. *What did I do wrong? Why must I always feel as though I have done something wrong when I know that others in my place would only do the same?*

But Loki said nothing of that. He knew better than to sully that last moment with the one person in the world who had truly listened to his heart, the only one who cared.

"Where-"
"I do not know, my son," Frigga drew back then to cup his cheek gently, her fingers then slowly moving upward to tuck a lock of dark hair behind his right ear. "But know that - as far as you travel, no matter into what dark places you stray, no matter what terrible workings you weave, you are always welcome at my side."
"I know," he whispered, forcing back tears. "I will always come back."

Heimdall was pulling him away now.

"I am sorry," Loki managed to choke out. "I – I will miss you-"

Two steps further. Loki glanced back, unwilling to let go, but all too soon, his mother's hand his were separated.

"I love you," he whispered, finally finding the courage to say those words.

Frigga stepped forward, her tears beginning once again, but she halted at the sight of Odin's face as her husband turned around to survey his son who now came to a stop before him. Heimdall moved back to join Frigga, still silent, knowing that anything he could say (if he had anything to say) would not be welcome here. Loki's face was pale, his mouth set, his fingers twisting together and his green eyes glittering with emotion, but he did not say anything in protest. Odin nodded with approval.

"Go forth, my son," Odin said quietly, clasping Loki on the shoulder before turning away. He paused, opened his mouth, looked away. "As with Thor," he stopped and then started again, painfully. "As with Thor, your presence will be... Your mother and I will miss you. Thus, I send you, hoping that your return will be as swift as the eagle flies."

With that, Odin clapped Loki's shoulder again before taking a few paces back. Then, Odin raised Gugnir, watching Loki turn to watch him, shoulders tensing as the magick above them began to race and dance down to the proud golden staff and the powerful mage wielding it.

"I have taken your power, my son, and set to you the same task as I set to your brother. Likewise," Gugnir rang out, "in the name of my father and his father before - I, as the All-Father, cast you out!"

With that, golden light and dark energy shot forward, striking the slender warrior-mage full on in the chest and in a matter of seconds, the prince flew off the cracked edge of the Bridge and downward, following the arc of the All-Father's will and command until a crack, a wedge in Space and Time opened and Loki, Prince of Asgard, disappeared from sight.

"Where did you send him?" Frigga asked. "Will he be able to find Thor?If they could help each other."

"No," Odin said, looking older than usual. Slowly and almost painfully, he turned away from the over-powering vista which now hung visible at the end of the shattered Bridge. "If he wishes to face his future, Loki himself, Loki alone, must heal the wounds he has inflicted – and come to grips with his past."

"No – no – you did not-"
Frigga drew closer, hovering at the edge of the Bifrost, watching the Muthr'a'Ginnung finally shut and the nebulae and planets beneath came into view now changed from the positions they had held before. The Mages at the Academy would no doubt make the charting of the new formations an assignment for their students. *Foolish thoughts for me to think at a moment such as this,* Frigga thought sadly, and then smiled as another memory of Loki working on his assignments in her garden struck her. *Although... Loki would have enjoyed the challenge.* The Queen closed her eyes, forcing herself to stop crying.

This was no time for tears.

"He must learn, Frigga-"
"But not there! They will tear him apart when they discover what he did! What were you thinking? Honestly?! At this rate," she sighed, "you will be the death of our family!"
"Nothing will be said of what happened this day – to the Court or the Academy or any outsiders. We shall say the Observatory malfunctioned. For now, at any rate. Loki's actions will remain between us three –" Odin sighed and then corrected himself. "Us four." He gave Heimdall a look, to which the Gatekeeper nodded in silent agreement.

"But you sent him to a Realm – knowing not if Jotunheim still stands!"
"If Jotunheim had fallen, my Lady," Heimdall finally spoke up, "we would have felt its death in our very marrow, for, as you know, we are all connected. Even now." At that his golden eyes seemed to rove over an unseen vista and his face saddened. "No. It stands, it holds firm. There is hope – even for Jotunheim. Even for our Prince."

"That is what I expected," Odin nodded gruffly. "The Observatory would have needed much more time to work its way about the entire countryside of Jotunheim."

Frigga turned back to look at the stars spread out before her, but they brought no comfort as usual, for she knew that none of them held her two sons.

"Come," Odin said softly, drawing his wife away, his hand about her waist in comfort. "We have much work to do."

[...those prepare who must...]
[...the great and the small...]
[...for the fulfilment of prophecy...]
[...and what must be...]
[...must come to pass...]

Chapter End Notes

A question to be answered–!

Q: Where are you getting all your words for the different languages? Are you making them up or is there some place you look?
A: I get many words from Old Norse dictionaries, Elvish dictionaries, some Old English sounds, Dwarvish lists and a smattering of weird stuff I just make up randomly as well as mixing Korean, Japanese and Chinese sounds for a more different feel in opposition to the Scandinavian flavours. I also go onto the Marvel Wiki and look at names of
various characters from races and try to extrapolate the language from those as well.

Q: Is Jotunheim destroyed?!?! [a.k.a. YOU KILLED BYLA?!?!?!?]
A: Hm. Well, all I can say is that we are seeing a situation from one point of view.... We don't know how it's really going down in Jotunheim.

Hope you enjoyed it! If you did, please let me know~

-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
Eno'Keshi'ko – the system of Eno, a type of magical level measurements
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fot'r'ro - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvila - high bed
Haugbui Bustathr – the Shrine of the Kings
Hit-i-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegia – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa'a'vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
raudhaust – high bed
Well, now I'm looking back at what I've written... how far we have gotten to this point. This roller-coaster of story is still forging onwards, somehow. I know that more than a few passengers have since then disembarked, but I am always hoping that new fans will get on this ride and have fun with what I'm doing. Of course, I'm aware that no author can please everyone and in the end it is better to write something that pleases oneself, still, I do find encouragement from hearing from folks who let me know there's an audience who cares. Fanfiction is a wonderful art which I enjoy participating in - being a reader and writer - and the power of it lies within the fact that is made for free. So much time and energy is spent on these stories of ours, because of our fervour for the fandoms. So, while I know that it's embarrassing on some level to be caught writing fanfic (most of my fam don't approve), it is something I am proud and happy to be a part of.

The Loki fandom, something I am relatively new to, has been - continues to be - so vital and energetic. Although the factions are many and the drama on Tumblr can get scary, I am glad to continue forging onward with the fandom and enjoy what we are all creating in our own spheres. That being said, once again, I send out a huge thanks to those people who stoke the fire already within me, for those who faithfully encourage and support me even if things are freaking them out or setting them on the edge of their seats: Kai_Maciel, beanie, Uriko, lemomina, Ventriloquist and iBlameGlobalWarming~~~!

I hope you enjoy this new installment of ANGST!

GET OUT THOSE HANKIES!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 62
Free-Falling II

[...those prepare who must...]

[...the great and the small...]

[...for the fulfilment of prophecy...]

[...and what must be...]

[...must come to pass...]

Loki's eyes fluttered open, his blurred vision slowly coming into focus, revealing a world of deep blues and blacks and dull greys and sharp whites. A vista of stars – of nebula and distant suns and
clusters of other radiating objects – juxtaposed against the all too familiar, stark landscape of his native world. Jotunheim.

_Inhale._

Cold sharp air brought on a brisk wind. Nothing else stirred and under the weight of the silence, Loki found himself unable to move. Unable to rise and meet the sight of what remained of the icy Realm.

_Exhale._

The cloud of his breath rose before him and dissipated within seconds. The exile prince ached all over – and the cold was not helping. Loki shivered as the force of the freezing temperatures began to set in, stabbing like sharp knives through the thin material of his leather jerkin and wool.

_Inhale._

_I have to move, _he thought, _I have to move. Surely someone will come along... and if I am caught in this state..._ It did not bear thinking upon. Forcing himself to his feet, Loki rose up and looked about him, staggering a little as he gained firmer footing with his unsteady balance on the uneven, sloping ground.

_Exhale._

_J ust keep breathing,_ Loki told himself. _Keep breathing. The dizziness should pass._ He hoped.

With that thought kept firmly in mind, the Jotunn slowly moved forward, catching his breath and forcing from him a sharp grunt of pain as he made his way down the small hillock of snow to the flatter plain below. Looking around him, Loki tried to find his bearings. There were pieces of wall about and the remains of a wide, stone road, filled with potholes and cracks, which curved inward from the edge of the cliffs to what looked to be a part of a city. Raising his eyes and focusing on the distant towers, Loki recognized the south-western portions of Utgard.

_Utangard, Citadel of the Pale Moon._

Entirely reshaped – and missing a large chunk of its westernmost quarters to such an extent that the cliff faces of the Innaheim were entirely remade. Far, far in the distance, he could see that the natural wooded land bridge which had connected the Utanheim to the Innaheim, usually a black-brown smudge on the horizon, had disappeared entirely. Loki shuddered as he turned about in his place, taking in the newly gouged pieces of cliff-side to the south as well, which fell away to the fathomless depths of the Eybjarg. Wincing a little, Loki's wandered across the widened chasm, mentally attempting to measure the new width of the Eybjarg. It was emptier now of its little islands of land which had clung onto lower portions of the larger continent. On the far side of the chasm, the Utanheim, Loki guessed that it too had been partially obliterated. Hlutí's little cabin was no doubt gone. The Prince shivered. The Eybjarg, emptier, looked larger and even more ominous.

As ominous as the silence of the wind and the stillness of the land. Only the distant rumblings of buildings in the distance and the occasional shuddering of ice and rock bore testament to what had happened here only an hour or so previously.

Loki sighed but there was nothing to say and no one to say it to at any rate. _At least, _he thought, _they do not know that I was responsible... yet._ Allowing his white skin to transform to his more natural colour of blue, the Jotunn warrior-mage picked his way carefully across the sheets of snow and ice, keeping a wary eye out for thin, crumbling ground.
By the time he found his way to the closest wall of what could have been a storehouse, Loki felt more fatigued than he would usually. *It is, I suppose, the lack of magick... A long time has passed since I have undergone such magickal binding.* Propping himself against a fairly stable piece of stone, Loki leaned back, resting his head, chin raised, and trying to keep his mind clear. *Where to go. Where to go. Where to go where to go where to go.*

His mind was blank, running through all the options available to him. *Should I stay? Should I go? If I leave Jotunheim, would I be able to fulfil my father's requirements to regain my magick? Probably not.* Rubbing his hands over his face, Loki sighed again and then froze at the sound of a low rumbling chuckle.

"Well, well, well. Is it the Jotunn vaetki or do my eyes deceive me?"

"I am no illusion," Loki stiffened and nonchalantly attempted to step away from the wall, but already his legs were starting to buckle from his bone-deep exhaustion, "but fear no trouble, for I will be on my way soon enough."

"Hm," the Jotun rounded the wall then to look down at the runtling before him. "Not soon enough according to the King." A pause and then, the tall, broad-shouldered, squat Jotun added darkly: "He has been waiting for you."

Loki began to edge back, but his foot caught on a rock and as he stumbled, swaying to regain his balance, rough Jotun hands swooped down to grab him by the shoulder. Fingers wrapped firmly about the prince's legs, immobilizing him, and lifted Loki up and away from the ground. The giant's left hand gripped Loki close, while his right shifted upward to constrain the warrior-mage's hands.

"Let – let me down! I can – I can walk!" Loki struggled, summoning his knife and attempting to hack at the giant's wrist. To no avail, for his arms were unable move and the odd bronzed bracers attached to the guard's forearms blocked any other sort of attack.

"Ahhh... the creature believes it has honour and courage-"

"What – what is that supposed to mean?" snapped Loki. "I am the son of Laufey-King himself and as such I deserve some respect-

"The only thing you deserve," was the responding calm words, "is the mercy of death and the chance to join your august forebears. If you had been dashed against the rocks as a babe, I doubt we would have all those troubles which plague Jotunheim to this day. A living curse, a poison which must be purged."

At those words, Loki's struggles increased, but exhaustion all too quickly set in and before long, the pain in his chest, his arms and legs overcame him. Hanging limply in the firm grasp of the giant, Loki fell back against the Jotun's chest and drifted off in a haze of misery, shivering from cold and general aches. Some time later – it felt like forever – the two arrived in the heart of Utgard, which appeared, to Loki who blankly watched over the Jotun's firm fists, more busy and frenetic than usual.

As they moved past, Loki caught sight of children peering out of windows, clearly disallowed from running about outside, jarnkottr corralled behind stone fences and within ice stables, youths sewing and running errands and carrying armour and stacks of jarnvithr and warriors sharpening blades and practising drills and summoning ice and otherwise preparing for war. Fires burned in corners, murky and faint in the fog, and Loki could have sworn he saw, bent over a few forges, the short figures of Dwarves or the lithe frames of the Dark Elves.

Utgard had come alive.

Before he could gather his wits to ask the guard what was happening, Loki remembered, with a sick thud in his stomach, that to Jotunheim, no doubt, they were still at war, devastation or no. Perhaps the destruction had filled the giants with even more resolve. Loki licked his lips, but before he could
say anything, the guard strode into the courtyard of the King's Hall and then moved up the stairs to confront the guard. At the sight of the short Jotun within his grasp, the guards nodded, opened the hall doors and ushered the guardsmen in.

Upon arriving in the hall, a wave of whispers arose before suddenly falling silent. Loki craning his head back, managed to get a glimpse of freshly pressed banners, newly slatted window shutters, polished stone and fresh ice. In front of him, Laufey sat, face inscrutable, waiting as the guard had promised. At his side, Helblindi sat, back stiff and straight as a ramrod, eyes staring at Loki with unblinking intensity.

Then, without warning, the guard bowed, taking to one knee before casting the runtling down on the ground. Hissing and biting back a groan, Loki found himself tumbling across the floor, landing more or less face down. There was a telling silence as painfully forced himself to rise to his feet. Loki felt that it took too long to get there and when he finally found his balance and looked upward, his stomach plummeted further at the sight of Laufey's cold face.

Never welcomed anywhere, I suppose, Loki coughed a little, running his hands back through his hair, attempting to try to neaten his no doubt disarrayed appearance. He was wearing his usual light hunting clothes – the long tailed jacket, the knee-high leather boots, the tight leather breeches he favoured with the short, light chain mail underneath, and over it all a green tunic and another light-weight leather jerkin. All of it in muted greens and golds. Hardly fit for an audience with a King. Although, he smirked, for Jotunheim it should be acceptable.

"You have brought me a fair gift, Guardsman..." Laufey paused.
"Guardsman Skyr," said Loki's captor with another bow of the head. "I am glad to be of service to his Highness."
"And I am glad to repay such kindness with fair reward," was the smooth reply. Laufey flicked a hand and one of the well-dressed courtiers to the King's left stepped forward, a grey leather pouch in hand, no doubt filled with coins.

Accepting the gift with another bow of his head, Guardsman Skyr withdrew, leaving Loki to stand alone before his Father, the King.

"Father-"
"Long ago, I was given a gift, a chance to ensure my line," Laufey waved a hand, silencing the silvertongued trickster. "A gift, my beloved told me, and if the omens were read aright, a being of great ability. Yet, time has shown that all this creature has brought has been nothing but empty promises and certain death."
"Listen – I do not know what you heard but-"
"That you were able to worm your way as a poisonous snake into the bosom of Asgard..."

Loki fell silent, red eyes widening as his blood froze within his veins at Laufey's casual observation.

So he knew... he knew he knew he knew...

"...that is admirable – and as one who was born to cunning, I applaud you. Yet, although it would be in our best interests to nurture such a leech within the heart of our enemy, the damage you have wrought on our people, the promises you have broken and lives for which you must be held responsible – these, all these, bear testament to the unfortunate fact that alive you are nothing but a threat to the peace and health of this Realm."
"Look. I do not know what you are talking about-

Loki felt a chill run down his spine. Surely he could not have already heard about the Bifrost.
"You stand upon the side of Asgard, do you not? Answer, beast, if you can find words to defend what you think you hold – honour."
"Asgard is my home," Loki said carefully.
"And you betrayed your kin, the ones who I placed in your care?"
"I did not kill them."
"I never said you did... you are too careful for that, I think." A pause. "He is of Asgard. So self-proclaimed, he can be nothing but a captured prisoner of war."
"Asgard is not at war with you."
"Not at war?" Laufey leaned back. "But a few spans of time ago, the Bifrost rained down destruction upon our heads, destroying the west and southern side of Utgard, decimating the upper and lower wastelands as well as removing our nearest passage to Utanheim. Not to mention the total destruction of the remaining islands of the Eybjarg... and you say that we are not at war?"
"I came – I came on the All-Father's behest," Loki insisted. "He told me to say that they have no interest in pursuing war. Indeed, I think this most fair, considering – considering that they could use the Bifrost again in such a way and decimate Jotunheim for all time."
"Hmmm..." Laufey leaned back then. "So we must forgive them of their trespasses, forgive them of the lives of the Jotunn who fell to the Void, forgive them of their attempts at wiping out our kind..."
"Is that not the fate of those who played the game of Fate and lost?"
"A game," Laufey mused. "Is that what you see it as?" A pause and he nodded, suddenly looking amused, which was not comforting to Loki. At all. "Then, young one, I can say with certainty that now... you have lost."

Laufey jerked his chin upward and Loki suddenly turned his head – too slowly to counteract the rising butt of a spear rising and then falling.

Then there was dark.

[...darkness fell...]

[...silence fell...]

[...on Jotunheim...]

He opened his eyes. Darkness. Closed them. Darkness. He attempted to take stock of his surroundings but found himself unable to move about, restricted by unusually cramped quarters. There was nothing. There was only darkness and silence and the musty taste of dust on his tongue and the dull scent of jarnvithr wood treated in its usual reason and the rough walls which closed around him and the sound of his rising panicked breathing.

Chains clinked as he moved his arms. Moving over the shackles, his nails traced out the familiar engravings of Dwarven and Elvish runes. They are attempting to seal my magick, he shook his head in disbelief. I could have told them there was no danger... With a sigh, he set to exploring his prison, attempting to keep his fears at bay, to keep rational.

As his fingers trailed along the edges of his prison, he began to realize that he was seated, legs slightly folded, within a kind of chest or box. Not a coffin, thank the Norns, but still no less ominous. Reaching up, his left hand found the rather low ceiling. A large chest, more than likely used for clothing or potions or papers.

No. Oh no. No. Nonononono...

Realization sinking in, his panic increased as he groped about trying to find some way to get out.

He needed to get out – but there was no inner catch and only a couple holes, one at his head and one at his feet, both of which were large enough for him to slip two fingers through and no more. However, the provision of air did not relieve his fears. Already he could feel the fear and darkness scrabbling at the edges of his mind like a rabid dog. The nightmares were returning.

Nightmares of stifling dark, nightmares of emptiness, nightmares of silence and falling – always falling – and the blank eyes of the stars and the empty staring of the planets and the moons watching him fall – and when he fell, there were only wolves and cold and running and running –

He was always running.  

...COME...

...LITTLE ONE...

...YOU ARE SO CLOSE...

...SO CLOSE...

No. No. Nononono.

Loki's feet and arms lashed out as he yelled in protest. Not begging, he told himself as he banged on the lid of the chest and as he kicked at its sides. After several moments of frenzy, the exiled prince collapsed, feeling a little breathless and dizzy. Obviously the holes were only so big and it would not do him good to expend what little air he was given.

Thus, he lay there. Just breathing. Lay there and shut his eyes against the dark and imagined the green swathes of farmland stretching away from the east side of Asgard, of heavily scented orchards filled with red and yellow and purple and orange ripe fruit, of the scuffling of falling leaves in the autumn and the sharp, clean bite of winter spent in the mountains, roasting the haunch of a great deer over an open bonfire. Loki imagined his bedroom, probably now shut and clean and ready, waiting for his return.

If I ever return... Loki steered his mind away from the pessimistic thought. Too late. Too late. Too late.

Already he was plummeting back down -

No.

...CLOSE...

...SO DEAR TO MY HEART...

No. No. No.

Frigga laughing and singing as she sat at her weaving, as she leaned back from a hard hour's work in her private garden, as she baked her family's favourite dessert – a kind of cinnamon and dark sugar cake. Odin in his study, peering at some tomes and discussing Dark Elf politics, at the Council table looking blank-faced yet again as another warrior stood and ranted about something the mage's had done, then he glanced at Loki and gave the young prince a private smile – a flicker of private amusement. Loki had always found himself returning the smile, feeling glad that Odin had shared that moment. Thor, smelling of burnt leaves and sweat and horse and leather and steel, laughing and dismounting and calling his name. Thor, happily carrying the picnic basket from their packhorse,
excitedly boasting about what he had accomplished on their quest and wondering what kind of feast they would have when they finally returned home.

Loki counted the sunshine of his days and hoarded the good things with which he had been bestowed. Just as Elska had taught me so long ago, he mused, shifting a little to find a more comfortable position, folding his hands over his stomach. Something good will come out of this, surely. Surely. Surely.

His hopes echoed like a meaningless mantra in his head. At the sound of scraping, clattering and footsteps, Loki twisted about, attention riveted. There was talking and shifting and lifting and swaying as Loki's chest was picked up and moved.

To where? Loki turned about and tried to peer through the hole closest to his head. Nothing seemed very clear. There was a flash of grey – stone? – darker grey and black – the sky, a wall? – white, blue and other formless shapes. Rocking back and forth greatly, Loki felt a jerk pull him upward and then down sharply, landing, it was apparent, onto some cart or perhaps the carrier of a jarnkottr. He could see the black and grey fur bristle for a second before the chest was shifted and then all that came to view were the slats of the jarnvithr saddle-back.

There was growling and snarling and the usual sound of a domesticated jarnkottr and the 'wup wup!' of the drivers filled the air, muffled by the wood around Loki. With sharp jerks, they started, rocking with the familiar rise and fall of the jarnkottr's loping gait, and the awkward run continued on for what seemed to be quite some time, allowing him to fall once again into fitful sleep. His dreams, haunted by visions of the Void and the shadows which lurked within, disturbed him and before long, Loki was wide awake again and gasping, feeling anger and fear surging up within him in response.

"This is not something I had agreed to," he growled to himself. Of course, no one was listening. Really, Loki groaned, as his head banged unpleasantly against the ceiling yet again. What was Father thinking?

You know what he was thinking?

Be silent. It is not true. It is not true. Not true, not true, not true...

Oh, the Norns...

He was going to be sick. Before Loki could start protesting again, the jarnkottr came to a shuddering halt, throwing Loki against the hard side of his cage. There were shouts and instructions being banded about and stamping and the crackle of ice as the jarnkottr were contained in the usual way – thick ice stables rising around their bodies and neck, containing the partially wild creatures. Peering out of the air hole, Loki could see the edge of fur and a glimmer of stars.

Suddenly, the chest was jolted and Loki slid uncomfortably back onto his head and shoulders as he was tipped downward. Luckily, someone appeared to have caught him. More footsteps crunching over ice. More swaying. Then it stopped, was set down, while more talking ensued overhead quietly. Straining his ears, Loki picked up the words 'Highness', 'Laufey-King' and 'ceremony'.

Ceremony? Loki's heart began to beat faster as true panic set in. What ceremony? Am I to be executed? Surely – surely not...

Just as he was about to attempt kicking out the side of the jarnvithr wood, the chest was picked up again and everything fell quiet except for the slow footsteps of whomever was carrying him. Loki tried to peer out but all he could see was grey foothills, white ground and the starry sky above.
Some time passed, yet eventually Loki's chest and porter came to a halt. He was set down and after a few seconds, there was a fumbling at the lock. As quick as he could, Loki crouched down, preparing to spring out. No sooner had the lid started to rise, but the small runtling pushed up and forward, attempting to clamber out – and yelped as a familiar hand descended to yank at the chains about his wrists, lifting up the twisting, slender frame of the young prince.

"Quiet."

**Laufey.** Loki curled his lip and spat in his father's general direction, trying to kick at the giant's unprotected midsection – and failed miserably.

"You bring shame to your House with such misbehaviour."
"Why would a supposed abomination such as I care about a thing like shame?" Loki ground out, glaring up at his father as Laufey looked down at him with a scowl.
"That is true," Laufey finally replied. "Yet, this is the final hour. For such a one as you, this is the day you are free from those burdens which had been placed upon your shoulders. This is the day you will join the company of your forefathers and find peace."
"Wha-?" Loki's dark eyebrows rose, his red eyes widened and his jaw dropped as he attempted to make sense of his father's obviously recited words. "Wha- What are you talking about-
"This is the Ritr-Re'konning. The Rite of Returning, the Cleansing which should have happened all those years ago, on the day of the abomination's birth. Let they who failed to bear their responsibility grieve at the pain they inflicted. Let they who failed to bear their responsibility accept the reproof – and let them pay the penance."
"No!" As Loki's feet touched the ground, he jerked back, teeth bared in a snarl. "No! By Helheim – this – you cannot do this to me!"
"For the good of Jotunheim, for the greatness and continued prosperity of the Realm and the people therein, I return the one so cursed upon me-
"I – I am not going – you cannot-
Loki was digging his heels as best he could into the hard soil, snow and ice upon the ground in vain attempt to slow Laufey's steady progress to the edge of the cliff face. Impossible. It was like attempting to stop a snow avalanche – and his leather booted foot caught in the crack of the stone paving which led to the edge of the cliff, causing him to stumble forward, nearly falling onto his face.

Stone paving. He thought wildly as he glanced about him feverishly looking for any hold to grab onto. A road. An ancient road.

**Utangard and Innagard. The Citadel of the Pale Moon. The Tower of the Cold Suns.**

An ancient road now leading to nowhere. Leading to the Void.

Loki shuddered at the thought.

*Let me die quickly,* he begged internally. *Let him cut my throat before I am cast off. By the Norns, I cannot...*

"...darkness you were born to darkness you will return. May the light of the For-Eldra shine upon your face and give you peace."

Loki stared up in disbelief at his Father's – **NOT-Father's** – rough face, stony as though carved out of flint or obsidian itself. Laufey was going to do it, going to do what he should have done all those years ago.

**Heimdall. No... the Bridge was broken. Odin. And Father busy and tired. Frigga. Would she know?**
Now they stood at the edge, the two of them, gazing down in the Abyss which swirled about lazily. The worlds, the Sages had said, are filled with colour and light and the energies of magick. However, the Muthr’a’Ginnung is cold, is death, is worse than death – it is nothing. Looking down at the black hole which had been for so long feeding off the giant Realm, Loki thought he knew now what had threatened his dreams.

All those years, listening to the Voices of the Void, he thought. Hearing it in my dreams, feeling its cold breath drift across Utgard and creep into the shadows. Gnawing away at my thoughts... it was here... all the time... I merely did not wish to face it, the reality of it, the reality of the fact that I was destined for it.

"This is the road to Innagard." Laufey's rough voice broke the silence, broke the ceremonial forms. His red eyes glanced down at Loki's smaller, frightened and angry red ones. "Now," he continued, moving his gaze upward and across to the Eybjarg before them. "Now it is the path to nowhere. It is a path to the Void. It is a path to Death and the freedom that it is beyond."

A pause.

"It is the only gift that I can give you, lagreinn."
"Gift?" Loki snapped trying to jerk away – and failing yet again. "You call this a gift?"
"Accept it for what it is."
"I accept nothing."
"So typical of your kind, lagreinn."
"Loki."
"What?" Laufey blinked and raised an eyebrow at Loki.
"My name." Loki set his jaw, clenching his teeth. "It is my name."
"You named yourself."

Definite amusement.

"No," snapped Loki. "It is my given name."
"Who gave it to you? Your..." A pause and then a sneer. "Family?"

Loki did not reply, but his red eyes glittered like hard stones, boring into Laufey, who shook his head.

"They were more foolish than I thought... but I suppose they came to their senses, sending you down here."
"I was sent to you - to help you!" Loki protested. "And I can – I could help-"
"You have done nothing but bring death and trouble-"
"That is a lie-"
"That is a truth," Laufey hissed back. "You brought death to our people and misfortune to our land and no doubt had a hand in starting this war-"
"There is no war!"
"There will be."
"There is no need-"
"There is every need."

Loki sighed, shut his eyes and turned away forcing down his bile and his hatred and his fear and his self-loathing and his regret. His regret his regret his regret. After a moment, he pulled again at the chain, drawing Laufey's attention downward.
"If you are so bent on this," he finally said in a quiet, hard voice, "then do it. Quickly."
"You rush so easily and headlong into death-"

"Do not – do not-" Loki found himself having to breath a few more times before he could calm his flaring temper, "do not talk to me about rushing headlong into anything. You are the savage beast who succumbs to the ignorance of time and sates the appetites of his superstitious backward people with the unnecessary and wasteful death of the one who could-"

Laufey's hand rose and then swept down, slapping Loki hard across the face, bringing silence once again between the pair. Giving a half sob of laughter and one of tears, Loki turned away as best as he could. The king took the chain in both of his hands, stepped forward closer and closer, edging out to the road's very end – what looked like a flat bridge.

A flat bridge to nowhere. It jutted out quite far from the land, allowing for a perfect place for such a Rite as this. Loki knew that long ago, his kind had been tossed over the edge, never to be seen again. Then had come the traditions of compassion, killing babes in the womb who showed signs of being runts. *Now, I will suffer the fate of my people*, Loki thought numbly as he was carried to the edge, as the king – *not his father, never his father* – held him over the edge, toes dangling over the gaping Muth'r'a'Ginnung.

*Now, I will fall to the darkness...*

He would not cry. He would not cry – but already he could feel icy trails on his cheeks. Silent yet telling.

*I do not want to go. Not this. Never this.*

"Once, I had a child. Once, I bore a babe... and from this day onward, I will be one upon whom the blight has cast its curse and having cast shall never know his child again... shall never see his lines pass onward."

Laufey paused and then, hesitantly, laid a hand upon the dark head before him. The curling, wild hair seemed so soft. Refusing to meet Loki's gaze, Laufey turned the runt, so that it could face its fate with open eyes. Grasping the shackles, Laufey iced the links with his strongest magick, breaking them in two.

"Go forth," he whispered softly and let the shackles go, flinging the slender form out into the centre of the Eybjarg. "Go forth... Loki. May the skies open for you, may the stars light your way, may your soul find wing to the For-Eldra. May you have peace."

And Loki turned, as he fell. Laufey caught a glimpse of red eyes closing and arms spreading wide as a bird to fly. Brilliant red eyes the colour of blood. Farbauti's eyes.

[...what has come to pass...]

[...or not...]

Laufey stood there in the silence.

[...silence fell on Jotunheim...]

[...silence fell...]

He stood there in silence for many hours – and did not stir until Helblindi ventured closer and called his name. Fylgja.
He would never be a Faetha. Never again.

One more curse to bear.

For all time.

[...fell...]

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed it! If you did, if you didn't, please let me know~ I really do find a lot of inspiration and encouragement from folks. Concrit is always hearted. XDD

-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
chi'i'ano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
Eno'Keshi'ko – the system of Eno, a type of magical level measurements
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
udji'oo – a drug, like opium

Asgardian Glossary:

bikkja – bitch
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay"
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation
fotr'ro - footstool
Ginnung – the Void
harhvila - high bed
Haugbui Bustathr – the Shrine of the Kings
Hit-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth)
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style
Laegja – the Immersion
Ofolr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void)
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring
Runa’a’vetr – Winter Solstice
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers
seithr - magic
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror
Skjald-borhyrr – Wall of Flame
Skipa – the Infusion
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril)
stormerki – mysteria
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)

Elvish Glossary:

skreyppa – slippery one
gargani – snake
fintalenir – trickster
vanwa – defeated one, impolite term for "loser"
caitahto – liar
curunar – fiery one
Lachruth – Flame Fury
Col'ca-cenedril – Box of Mirrors
Cebir-Gondlug – Spike-Stone Dragon
Am'loce Norie – Dragon Race
raudhaust – high bed
This past weekend was my birthday - and it was pretty amazing~. My friends and I love watching Project Runway and once I told them I had imagined myself in a similar kind of show – except for writing. That was a few months ago. So, my three friends (the Americans: Emi, Bri and Kate) have a thing where we make for each other themed parties. Last year, my b-day party was Star Wars, Kate's was Harry Potter, Bri's was Portal and Emily's was Candy Land. This year, my b-day party was Project Paper. Basically, for the entire weekend we wrote stuff for challenges. The final challenge was so hilarious – we entered Emily's room for the final writing challenge – and at the sight of eight – EIGHT – (whispers) eight~ pictures of Tom Hiddleson on her dresser top, I kinda let go a squeal and proceeded to hug said pictures. In the end, like Project Runway, we had to write with our "muse" in mind. It was hilarious. Emi, who isn't much of a Loki fan, picked randomly and got Loki. LOL. I laughed so hard. I chose the Dragonfly Suit picture of doom and Kate had another one with his leather jacket on. Brit randomly chose Prince Hal. It turned out quite funny. In the end, I was able to start a couple of multi-chapter Tom and Loki fics which will be posted at some time when they are a bit more complete. BUT. SO. HILARIOUS.

I really can't have asked for a better birthday and better friends to share it with. They even ran out and got extra stuff so my British co-worker (and friend) Grace could also join us. Really, can anyone have better friends? (Friends who put up with my obsessions?) I think not. THANK YOU GUYS~! YOU ROCK~

Anyways, moving onward, what we now have is the all too necessary chapter for Thor. v.v Sorry! I'll be working on the next chapter for Loki as soon as possible! I apologize for the wait times. T_T I actually went back and reread my previous chapter and was suitably horrified by the quality of work put out. So many errors. Urgh. Thanks to everyone who pointed out what was wrong. I really appreciate those little things being picked up. You guys rock~

Thanks to the wonderful reception and comments by new reviewers and old. I appreciate you all! Thanks to: Kai_Maciel, lemomina, Spatzenhaus, beanie, lilycxavier, Uriko, tisiphone21, Sassiebone, aylithe, SingSongSilence, iBlameGlobalWarming, Petreska, Silvermoon_of_Forestclan, and Misty Dawn.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 64
Thor: The High Road... I

There was only light, a blur, a roar. There was only pain – no, not pain – it was something else entirely. A blankness. A numb feeling spreading outward from his chest. An unfamiliar sensation. He did not know what to think, only that he never wished to experience it again.
There was only light and stars whizzing past and a shining path and a planet coming into view – green and blue and white and brown. A pock-marked pale moon flew by. The sky was swallowed by the vastness of dark before him, but the light pierced through the clouds. Before he plummeted further into the shadows and the cold wet clouds and the whipping winds, Thor caught one last glimmer – one last glimpse of the sun peeking round the rim of the world, before he continued to plunge downward.

There was only light and he found himself unable to breath. He was blacking out now – vision spotting with dark – or was it just the night?

He was falling now through darkness and the ground was rising up to meet him. Arms rose instinctively to brace himself – but then, there was a pair of powerful yellow-white beams bearing down on him, which swerved to the right sharply before a grey metal body hit him with a THUD! The last thing Thor saw as his head and chest met the black metal frame of the unknown object were the silent stars.

Then there was nothing.

-Thor,-

Thought shifted like sand, like grains of wheat, like silken spools of thread unwound and falling through his fingers. Incoherent and scattered, Thor grasped at the threads of consciousness as his blue eyes flickered open.

What – where – where am I? His second thought was: Home. I need to get back home. Then - Heimdall. Heimdall – he will be watching.

A far away voice, urgent and hurried, sounded through the black which cloaked his gaze. Something about aid. As he clawed his way to consciousness, Thor blinked hazily. Above him, a blurry circle of white slowly came into focus, a face, not the moon. At the sight of delicate eyebrows, kind yet worried eyes and slightly parted, gentle-looking lips, Thor could not help but groggily smile in response automatically. Beautiful, he thought. She is beautiful.

"Are you – are you OK? Please tell me you are not dead." The light brown-haired maiden repeated. "Seriously, are you alright? I am so sorry – so so sorry – we totally did not see you in the-

"What did you do, Jane?" Another voice broke in somewhere above them. "You just hit some guy! OMG, that's, like, totally not going to do you favours with-

"Darcy." A man's voice.

Turning his head, the blonde haired prince frowned, trying to orient himself and the other voices which moved above him. The uncertain silence was broken by the second female voice.

"Whoa. Does he need CPR? 'Cause I can totally do CPR..."

See pee are? Who – what? Thor frowned at the unfamiliar people now crowding around, attempting to process the unfamiliar idioms which filtered through the All-Speak awkwardly. It does not matter, he shook his head and blinked again rapidly, trying to clear his spotting vision. Asgard matters... the war... Father and Mother and Loki all alone... With a grunt, Thor pushed himself away and clambered to his feet, finding himself a bit more dizzy than he would like.

"Heimdall! Heimdall! Open the Bifrost!" His throat was dry, tongue gritty with sand. Already Thor found himself disliking the place. "I need to speak with Father! Please!"

"Uh – sorry – excuse me," interjected the girl, giving him space yet looking more confused than ever.

"Heimdall?" A tall, grey-haired man with light blue eyes stepped forward. "Did he just say-"

"I don't know what he's sayin', but he's freakin' me out, seriously," a dark-haired girl said, rifling
through her purse.
"Is he drunk?"
"Dunno – maybe? Crazy drunk for sure."
"Heimdall?" repeated the man.
"I think we need to take him to emergency," said the man.
"We can't!" The first girl shook her head, kneeling down to pass a metal box in her hand across the Bifrost's mark. "Do you see this? What is it? We need to have a look-

Ignoring them, Thor gazed up at the unresponsive stars and looked for any tell-tale glimmer of light. For the first time in his long life, the world about him and the skies above him seemed shrouded and dim – as though the very life and colour had been leeched from them, as though everything had been doused in shadows. This world, also, felt uncharacteristically heavy for him to move upon, as though the very air was itself a burden.

"Heimdall! Open the Bifrost!" Now, anger was rising within the prince as he realized that his long-time ally had more than likely turned his back upon him. Vehemence roughened his voice as Thor continued, moving around the Bifrost mark. "I must speak with Father! Father! I need to speak with you! This has gone on-

The girl jerked her head up, then glanced at the older man. A beat and then she jerked her chin back at the metal box behind him.

"Hospital. You go. I'll stay."
"You? What Realm is this?" Thor loomed over them, fists clenching as his anxiety mounted.
"Alfheim? Nornheim? What planet is this?"
"New Mexico?" The second girl asked, pulling.
"You dare threaten me - Thor - with so puny a wea-

Before he could finish his sentence, there was an odd zapping sound, something pricked his skin and fire and heat and lightning roared through his veins. For a moment, there was nothing but sharp pain and the taste of iron and ozone upon his tongue and the whole world shook. Then it went dark.

-0-0-0-

Light, soft and pink at first. Warm, he thought slowly as the fuzziness of his mind slowly evaporated. Warm light? Maybe... The Healing Halls? Have I gotten hurt again on some quest? No. No. He had thought those thoughts before. All wrong. All wrong. It feels all so wrong. Valhalla? Surely... surely not... For if I was felled, I was defeated neither in glorious battle nor in a duel. Memory was returning now. By a young maid no less. A girl. A girl wielding some unknown weapon. Thor groaned. I will never live this down. If Loki or Fandral discover this...

At the thought of Loki and Fandral, Thor's memory returned with horrific clarity. His Father's face. The disappointment and regret. Then the anger. The bright light. His armour falling away with his powers. His fall. Falling... falling for what seemed like eternity – and then dark and the young maiden and the others...

With a soft groan, he shifted, now hyper-aware of his surroundings, as he turned his head. A firm pillow. A low hum. A continuous mechanical sound more common in space-faring ships. Stiff sheets under his hands – and voices moving about him in an airless way. Unfamiliar voices.

 Thor tensed. As moments passed, panic began to set in. His eyes would not open. His eyelids felt so heavy as though they held the dead weight of Mjolnir itself. Yet, they also felt papery, thin and coloured with light, banishing the darkness little by little.
More incomprehensible chatter filtered downward into Thor's scattered consciousness. *Where am I?* *Who are they? Why...?* As Thor attempted to piece together what he could, lying there quietly, his limbs slowly gained new life. After a moment, the exiled Asgardian found the strength to open his eyes, blinking slowly as his vision sharpened.

"Hi," smiled a brown-haired man, suddenly hovering over him. "Feeling better now?"

*Hie?* Thor blinked, uncertain how to respond to this new individual as he tried to piece the sounds together. They were familiar, similar to Asgard's language, yet not entirely understandable. More panic rose within the Asgardian as he realized that the All-Speak was not working entirely as it should.

"Just taking a little blood," went on the man, a hand raising with a small, clear tube removed from a crinkling bag. "A prick and it'll be over before you kn-"

Realization set in and Thor's disgruntled face twisted into outrage as he pried himself upward. Like a wolf springing from the underbrush, he leaped from the bed, only to find that someone had dared lay a hand on his shoulder, attempting vainly to get him to lie back down.

"How dare you attack the son of Odin?" He snapped, shoving the offending man back. "Sir, you need to lie down-" Another blue-clothed man was stepping forward now, hand raised. "I just need to check-"

"You have no right to-"

Instant pandemonium. The entire situation devolved from that point onward. Making his way to the door, fending off the attacks of the blue-clothed and white-coated men and women, Thor's eyes darted about the white room looking for escape. Just ahead of him lay a door. *Freedom.* Thor began to move forward.

"We need some help! We need some help!"

Voices rose. Arms closed about him, attempting (and initially failing) to restrain Thor. Several of the men went flying and when no weapons appeared, Thor forced his way grimly onward, realizing that these beings were weakling Healers.

*They have no right.*

Moments later, after several people began to yell about emergencies and needing security (what ever that meant), others joined the fray, swarming upon him from all sides and slowing him down. He was so close now. *So close. So close...*

Just as he reached the door and was attempting to work the handle, there was a lick prick on his left buttock and outrage swamped him as he was slammed against the glass and metal of the door.

"You are no match for-" He roared and then faltered. "-for the... mighty..."

That was all he got out before things got fuzzy and bleary and faint and heavy – and then, dark.

[...silence...]

[...the silence is everywhere...]

[....yet, some places resist it more than most...]

[...some Realms hold tightly onto Life...]
The next time he woke, Thor woke alone. The room was a smaller one, now empty – the walls, a pale blue, and the windows framed in white around the clearest class he had ever seen. A square room, Spartan and clean and empty. Empty, he saw, save for the bed, the mechanical boxes which had been set about his bed. For the moment, they were silent and still.

Lying there in the quiet, the prince in exile took his time to take better stock of his surroundings. This time, he knew better.

He knew better... now. Loki, he thought, would have thought first before he acted. It filled Thor with frustration as he remembered that one short month so long ago when he had first met his adopted brother, when Loki had been no Realm's man, when their names had been forced upon him with as many restrictions and rules. Loki's eyes, then, had been dull and cynical and world-weary. Thor, looking into those tired green eyes, had felt saddened somehow - and old.

This place, perhaps, was another such place. This time, however, Thor winced as frustration once again set in, as he twisted angrily at the black bonds which had been strapped about his ankles and wrists. This time, Loki is not here.

Thor recalled those days when they had first learned how to fight side by side. When we became brothers in everything but name – so swiftly, yet it seemed so natural at the time... It is a pity Loki is not here, Thor sighed. He would have a few charming things to say and a good hundred plots to weave... Now, I am on my own.

Alone.

The realization did not sit well with Thor. Within seconds, he began to work in more earnest, while keeping a careful eye on the door. No one came in to watch him, allowing the prince to twist one wrist out of a less than securely strapped restraint. One hand now free, it was no difficulty for Thor to release the others – and, exchanging his short white shift for an ill-fitting pair of pale blue pants and a shirt which seemed to be a little too thin for his liking (were all the inhabitants of this planet clad in pale colours and papery clothes?), as quietly as he may, the prisoner escaped, leaving behind the empty room, the mute machinery, the sharp clean scents and the promise of captivity.

When in a strange land, Huntsman Harthr had taught Thor long ago, keep your eyes as sharp as a hawk, your ears as keen as a mountain goat and your nose as discerning as a hound. Walk quietly and watch carefully. Be mindful of your surroundings and let no creature come upon your back without warning.

When visiting a new Realm, his father had admonished his two sons a few years earlier after a particularly disastrous diplomatic mission, bear the pride of your country, know who you are and give a good accounting for the Asgardian name, for not only are you of Asgard, but even more importantly, you are my sons.

When you meet new people, Thor, Frigga had shaken her head as well at the news of said failed diplomatic mission, for the Norn's sake, be gentle! A gentle heart is a welcomed heart and welcomes others in return. Here, she had given Loki a look as well. A sharp tongue and sour face beckons no
one – and as the proverb goes, you cannot catch flies with vinegar. Come now, would you woo a girl with such manners? The men of Asgard must learn grace as much as any woman.

Opening the room's door and peering down the hallway, all of these words now ran through Thor's mind. It was hard to remember them all – all those admonitions and scoldings and long tirades on etiquette and manners and social graces. Graces which he had studied for long hours under the equally watchful and dull care of his tutors. Loki, of course, always remembered his lessons. He was an apt student in such things – although his temper and sensitive nature oft got away with him and he would end up in a similar situation to myself – or worse. Thor grinned. Ah well. In the end, we both returned home with bruised heads thanks to Sif – and with awful premonition.

With this mind, Thor lifted his chin, gave the hallway a second sweep and made his way out and down to another door. It too was cold and metal and held glass a third of the way up, revealing a grey wall, a short path, some greenery and beyond, a broad vista. Behind him, three people passed from one room to another. Thor glanced back and took stock of them again before passing onward.

So similar to Asgardians – yet not, being smaller and obviously weaker. No sign of other races, creature-like or snake-like or elf-like. Thor ran the various planets and Realms through his mind, but the only option that seemed to be possible was also too fantastical to consider. Midgard? Surely not... surely...

Deep in thought, Thor slipped out and down the small walkway, recalling his adventures long ago in the Realm of Midgard. Largely uninhabited, the universe spanned great distances – and the one galaxy ruled by the Skrull and Kree had been considered off bounds by Odin's decree. Not that I considered such things back in those days. At any rate, there was Midgard itself, in a fairly empty galaxy... Thor mused. But after Loki came... after Loki came, I did not visit Midgard again. When last I left it, the planet was barely developed and the people had not yet fully mastered the land, nor many of the animals. There were tall folk in the lands to the North, I remember, like Aesir who rode ships and worshiped us as gods...

Thor's eyes wandered over the low, trimmed bushes, the few trees spotted here and there, the occasional pile of dust which seemed to lay over everything. The strange, hard, flat, black rock upon which he stood – and a dozen other metal conveyances. This land is much more developed, he frowned, perplexed. Surely Midgard did not achieve so much in so little time?

He sighed. No matter. I need to find news of Mjolnir. If it has arrived, I must fetch it and return to Asgard as soon as may be. Loki and Father and Mother will need my aid for the war. The Jotunn must pay for what they have done – and I would not abandon my people in time of need. That is not what a king does...

Moving forward with determination, Thor kept his shoulder's straight, eyes forward and step certain as though he knew where he was going, as though he was not barefoot and unused to the strange clothes upon him, as though he belonged. No sooner had he passed another few vehicles, the white one which he was walking past suddenly jolted to life and the last thing he thought, as it knocked him to the ground, was –

Not again.

-0-0-0-

The universe began with a game of catch. So the natives of Theslo'konosis say – a ball of light and a ball of dark tossed between Life and Death in the Palaces of Emptiness. They had stood there for eons, for uncounted ages of time, thus trapped in a single dance, until, wanting a new kind of play, Life and Death agreed to toss both balls toward each other at the same time. Thus light and dark
energy collided and the resulting explosion created the universe. Thus was creation begun; thus, Theslo'konosis created. If one visits the first planet of the Theslo'konosis system on the annual alignment of the Sun, the magickal equinox, dances are held by the natives to recall the Beginnings of Time. The men, dressed in light, toss black balls of thin wire, and the women, dressed in dark, throw back their own white, glowing orbs. Some may consider the Festival of Beginnings odd. Yet, there is beauty even here, for the dances are arresting, the men handsome in their lively glory, and the dark-lashed girls haunting, wreathed in their torn and fluttering black garb.

Not odd to the natives. As they know on Theslo'konosis, *Death is, after all, a woman.* Surely everyone knew that.

There are other creation stories, many tales as there are peoples spread across the realities of What Is Seen and What Is Not. Tales of gods and monsters battling for glory. Tales of Life and Death playing catch. Tales of horrors and darkness and maiming. The birth of Life, some have concluded, always carries the stench of death.

On Asgard and Jotunheim and Alfheim and Vanahem, the Ancient Sages, as in many other developed Realms and civilizations, long abandoned the myths of old in the attempt to better understand the universe. If the stories and long crazed scrolls filled with suppositions and propositions and theories and half-formed ideas were to be believed, That Which Is Seen and That Which Is Not were born at the dawn of Time from the Twin Paradoxes of Existence. Twin Paradoxes, as the Sages tell it, were birthed from the hand of some great being, now long forgotten, or from the sentient Life and Death themselves. Or perhaps it had just happened with no meaning attached to it and offering no meaning for anything that followed. In any case, on either end of the spectrum of What Came To Be, light burst forward and magick and heat and ice and such energies and particle diffusion to bring all the Realms, known and unknown, into being.

The Realms themselves affected the process and were affected in turn, depending on their proximity to the beginning of Life. Muspelheim and Niflheim, born first on one end (so the Sages theorize), full of volatile energy fed light onward to Svartalfheim and Jotunheim and beyond. Asgard, too, on the other end, rebounded with light on the mirroring end of the Twin Paradox and fed magick to Alfheim and Vanahem beside. Nornheim and a few other smaller Realms (the existence or independence of which are oft disputed) also came into being – and in between, cradled against the turbulent blasts, protected on all sides from utmost harm, Midgard lay in relative peace.

The Realm Eternally Sheltered.

-0-0-0-

When Thor's eyes fluttered open finally, the ex-god felt a returning wash of annoyance sweep over him as he discovered that he was, yet again, tucked into another bed. This one, however, was less pristine than the other – warmer, softer and more comfortable. Propping himself up on his elbows, the blonde looked around curiously, taking in a small window opening up on a narrow vision of blue skies and a few wispy clouds, a stack of metal boxes and cabinets, piles of paper, other mechanical boxes all blinking with red and blue and yellow dots – some fast, others slow. There was a kind of black chair on small wheels before the desk filled with the boxes, another kind of stool also with metal legs and there were broad boards on the walls above and around – stuck with gently fluttering papers.

*A scholar's room*, Thor supposed. *The old man's?*

Holding his breath, Thor listened carefully for any sound. There was only a distant clatter, other odd mechanical and puttering sounds – and closer by, soft chatter. Rising from his bed, Thor looked down. *Still in the odd garb*, he grunted unhappily. *I must change that... soon... The son of Odin must*
not be seen running about any planet – even if it is only Midgard – wearing the clothes of an invalid. To be taken seriously, I should don some kind of casual wear at the very least. At that thought, Thor opened the door and peered out.

An odd sight met his eyes. Tables and desks and randomly scattered chairs about a wide room were littered with wires and rope-like, coloured coils and boxes and blinking mechanical contraptions and tubes and thick books and a variety of instrumentation that could only mean one thing – an academic's study. It was difficult not to compare, not to recall his younger brother's rooms. Ignoring a twinge of regret, Thor focused on what stood before him. I had no idea that Midgard had such a high level of academics, Thor thought. If this is indeed Midgard. It is difficult to tell for certain. Loki would, no doubt, already have a firmer grasp on the situation. Thor sighed again at the unwelcome, returning thoughts of his younger brother and walked further into the middle of the room, drawing the attention of the three pairs of eyes toward him.

Silence fell between them – an awkward kind of thing which gave him pause and he lingered there beyond the table, feeling more uncertain by the moment.

"You're awake!" said the dark-haired girl.
"Hi," smiled the other – the first one he had seen.

In broad daylight, her slight form seemed even more small than usual, but her sparkling eyes and her wide smile seemed no less lovely than before. Her clothing was strange – a kind of blue, oddly tight pants with a strange, square emblazoned shirt. Not squares, he corrected himself, lines... and odd boots. Certainly not proper for any lady of the court, nor for any servant. Perhaps she is also an academic young lady of a lower clan?

"Hi, my name's Jane," she came forward, holding out a hand. Sideways. Thor glanced down at it and then up back up to meet her eyes. Wide, pretty eyes which seemed as frank and open as the blue sky outside the wide windows. Taking her small hand in his, he leaned forward briefly over the proffered hand in his best bow and gave the back of it the barest kiss. The maid squeaked and jerked her hand back without warning, holding it tenderly within her other hand, face suddenly turning red.

"OK," she smiled even more awkwardly as possible. "That's, um, sweet, but, uh...

Do they not show respect to woman on this planet? Thor wondered. He was about to ask when the girl hurried on, her eyes avoiding meeting his now, wandering about the wide, round room which opened on all sides with large windows.

"Well, my name is Jane and it's great to see you – just great – you know because we have questions, a lot of questions and, um – your name is Thor, right? Like, wow, so that means you must be, what... Swedish? Danish? Icelandic?"
"Yo, Jane. Slow down... I don't know if he's getting anything you're saying – maybe he's blonde from the roots down," interjected the other dark-haired girl, winking at the old man as she took a seat and leaned forward briefly over the proffered hand in his best bow and gave the back of it the barest kiss. The maid squeaked and jerked her hand back without warning, holding it tenderly within her other hand, face suddenly turning red.

"Questions?" Thor asked.

"Yes, well, we have many, many, many questions, but, um, first – we should probably get you into something a bit better...

"You don't have men's clothes," said the older man, "I'll have to go out and get something."
"No, it's OK," Jane sighed, "I think I have something stashed away that might fit."
"Jane-"
"It's OK," smirked Darcy, glancing over at the scholarly man. "You missed it. His name was
Before Thor could fully process what was going on, he found himself being herded by the young girl, the young female academic – Jane – toward a small room. A privy, he realized, as he peered further in, catching sight of a too-small bath, an odd long metal contraption attached to the wall which he supposed must also carry water, a sink and an odd, cool-feeling white chair with a lid. Ah. Thor nodded, satisfied when he opened it, peered in and found himself confronted with water. A privy indeed. *If this is Midgard then they have certainly moved-

"Ah! OK. Here we go..." It was the girl again. Jane. At his elbow, this time bearing a few garments in her hands. "I think they might fit." Her eyes ran up and down his form again and her cheeks grew just a little pink. "Sort of. Uh. Just try it out and give me a holler – uh, a shout – if you, um, have any trouble."

With that, Jane fled and Thor was left alone to manage the new clothing she had given him. The pants were a tight fit, but Thor managed to edge them onto his hip bones well enough. Wandering out, slowly letting the shirt unfold, Thor approached the group of scholars who were once again standing about one of the tables looking nervous and excited and worried all at the same time. Typical scholar problems, perhaps, or perhaps, Thor thought, remembering how much trouble he had brought his mother in the long ages past, *perhaps it is something I have done – or not done – again.*

"You know, for a homeless dude, he's pretty cut," the dark-haired Darcy was saying as Thor moved closer to Jane, glancing over the shirt she had given him. A short-sleeved, flimsy cloth in a deep blue. Thor winked at Darcy, not entirely understanding what the girl had meant but gathering the general meaning nonetheless.

*Some things,* he grinned, *some things never change.* With that, Thor leaned forward, picked up a pack of metal tied together by some sort of cord, only to have it snatched from his hands by Jane. His mouth opened in protest – and then shut as he caught sight of the harried look on her face.

"Excuse me, excuse me... um... Don't touch that, that's – that's important stuff, why don't -"  
"What is this?" Thor pointed at a piece of paper which seemed to have somehow gotten stuck to the front of his new shirt.  
"Oh, ohhh..." Jane quickly ripped the paper off, blushing a deep red. "My ex. Good with patients and bad with relationships." She glared at her feet for a few seconds before shrugging and halfway turning away. "I'm sorry about the clothes – they're kinda – well they are the only clothes that will fit... around here..."  
"They will suffice," Thor said with shrug.

He had worn worse, had worn less. No matter.

"You're welcome," the mortal girl huffed.  
A pause. Then, Thor said, "This is Midgard, is it not?"  
"Midgard? Um... no – no – it's-"  
"New Mexico," Darcy said, giving the old man a meaningful look. "You don't remember?"  
"Jane..." murmured the old man, warningly.

The old man... *Selfig? Selfigsson? Selvig? Something.* Thor sighed. *So much to learn... if I am to discover how to return home as soon as may be...*

"New Mexico," Selvig finally said. "A southern state in America. You're not from around here, are you."

"No," Thor finally said. "New Mexico of America is on Midgard?"
"Midgard?" Selvig frowned. "You mean, Earth? Yeah, it's on Earth. Where do you think we were?"

The three mortals shared a glance before looking back at Thor, but the ex-god turned away, feeling a little more dizzy than he would like – dizzy and achy and his mouth felt oddly dry and empty. Thor glared out at the depressing vista before him – the dirt roads, the ramshackle plain-looking houses, the puny people who passed by looking incredibly down-trodden. So I am on Midgard then, he thought. So far from Asgard. An entirely different Realm. What was Father thinking? Thor had no answer to his own question and no answer seemed to be coming any time soon. He needed to think this through. He needed to have a plan. He needed more information. Most importantly, he needed to eat.

"This mortal form has grown week. I need sustenance," he announced, turning to look at the three others expectantly.

"Great, just great," Darcy sighed. "Now we have to feed him."

"We'll just take him out," Jane shrugged.

"You do not cook?" asked Thor, eyes wide and eyebrows raised.

"We'll just take him out," Jane shrugged.

Jane and Darcy shared a look and then laughed.

"Unless you have a death wish," Darcy snorted.

"I have other, better things to do than cook," protested Jane.

"Yeeaahhh," Darcy smiled.

"It's not like you're any better!"

"True, true," Darcy nodded, "but at least I have the power of the Pop-tart. You can't even manage that!"

"I get distracted!"

"Uh-huh, you keep telling yourself that." Darcy then pulled up straighter and, getting another look from Jane, sighed. "Hey – don't look at me. Look, here..." With that, she got up, scrabbled around in a drawer and drew out a brown and cream-coloured flimsy box. Opening it, she drew out a silver-coloured packet that looked flat. "Pop-tarts."

"Pop-tarts?" Thor repeated slowly, eyes resting on what looked like something a babe would eat for a snack.

"Pop-tarts? Now?" Jane sighed.

"Well, unless you wanna poison him with your version of eggs and toast," Darcy rolled her eyes.

"It's just a snack. Before lunch."

Darcy was unwrapping the pop-tarts and stashing a couple on a plate and popping it into a small white box attached to the wall on top of a marble-topped table which lined the small kitchen wall. After less than half a minute, there was a sharp ding and the plate was removed revealing sweetly scented, slightly steaming slabs of what seemed to be some dark flat cake.

Taking the plate in hand, Thor picked up the first slab. It fell apart at his ungentle touch and the heat stung his skin not a little. He dropped it back onto the plate, frowned at the flat cake before deciding to take a small piece. Dropping the crumb on his tongue, Thor allowed the sweetness to sink in, blue eyes flying open in delight at the taste.

"This is delicious! I wish for another!" Thor shoved the rest of the pop-tart into his mouth, ignoring the burning sensation which followed across his tongue.

"OK, OK," sighed Darcy, getting up to pull out the rest of the pop-tarts. "How many more? You are a big dude... so... hey... a few more won't hurt, will they?"

"If it is allowed, seeing as-"

"No, it's cool. We're chill."
Thor, sitting back to eat the rest of 'pop-tarts' as they came two by two out of the white box (which Darcy called a microwave), listened to the argument now rising before him.

"He can't just eat pop-tarts," Selvig was saying.  
"Lunch out will take time-
"Jane! Lunch is an important meal! I'm sure we can all enjoy a good meal and do all the talking there-"
"It's not lunch yet!" Jane protested.
"Brunch then," Darcy shrugged.  "It'll be good to talk around food anyways."
"Sounds doable," Selvig nodded.  "Any good places around here?"

Thor set the plate down, pop-tarts now sadly all gone and looked down the main stretch of road which seemed to originate from the very door of the house in which he had found himself.  He wondered for a few seconds if it was possible that any decent place could be found in such a tiny hamlet.  Probably not, but you have eaten worse... and perhaps there are more of those pop-tarts which were so delicious as to most certainly be a dish prepared in Valhalla itself.  Midgard certainly has improved its technology and abilities since I last arrived...

Behind him, the others were involved in a heated debate over whether to go to some kind of organic cafe (was it something that only offered vegetables? Thor hoped not) or some kind of diner (what was coffee? Why was it important that it be brewed well?).  In the end, the diner was agreed upon and the four were leaving the building – unlocked, to Thor's amusement and interest – and walking down the main street.

As the two girls pointed out the various sights of potential interest (that's the general store, that's the hardware store, yeah, animals, that's the fruit and veggie seller Jane likes), Thor followed along behind, listening carefully and keeping his eyes roving for any sign of his hammer, any sign of anyone looking like they were speaking about Mjolnir.  No opportunity arose, and before long Thor found himself seated before a small table and listening to the order that the girls gave the serving maid.  Some kind of cake and a drink.  The brewed drink.

_Splendid._  Thor's spirits, once again rose.  He became even more animated when the breakfast fare arrived.  The others finished their plates soon enough, but Thor's belly would not be satiated so easily.  Another twenty minutes followed of idle chatter as Thor's plate was steadily replenished with the sweet, flat "pancakes" and various kinds of juice drinks.  The brewed black coffee arrived finally and Thor accepted his share with a nod of thanks.

"So," Jane said, "what I want to know is – how did you get inside that cloud? We saw you in the pictures in the middle of it – how did you get there?"
"Yeah – and how could you eat a whole box of pop-tarts and still feel hungry?" Darcy asked, eyes wide as Thor finished up yet another stack of flat cakes.

Thor did not reply at first, wondering what he could say to the Midgardians without them thinking him mad.  Obviously these Midgardians were not like the others he had met so long ago.  _Loki always tells me to think before I say or do – but what can one know what to say or do if one is in an entirely new situation? On that planet long ago, he warned me against openly speaking of my Father, do those same rules apply here?_  Stalling for time, Thor took a long swig of the brewed drink before him and smiled as the strong taste on his tongue moved in a warm stream down his throat.

"This drink," he said, holding up the cup and examining the black liquid therein closely, at once forgetting his current dilemma.  "I like it!"
"I know! It's great, right?" Darcy smiled.
"ANOTHER!"  Thor smashed the cup against the floor.
The girls rose, gasping, eyes wide and Selvig eased back a space, looking even more suspicious of Thor than ever, although what Thor had done was beyond his ken. From the far side of the room, the dark-haired older serving maid rushed over, exclaiming and Jane rose, with many apologies. As the serving maid disappeared for a broom, Jane whirled about and glared at Thor. The ex-god froze at the sight of her disappointed, perplexed eyes.

"What was that?"
"It was delicious. I want another."
"But you could have just said so," Jane shook her head.
"I just did," Thor said blankly.
"No. I mean, ask nicely! Show some respect and don't break people's stuff! You know, it's kinda... rude! I don't think you would do that in Iceland!" A pause and then Jane turned to Selvig for obvious help. "Would they?"
"I don't think so," Selvig said slowly, blue eyes sharp. "Not when I visited anyways."
"I meant no disrespect," Thor said slowly. "I am sorry if you thought as much."
"OK. OK. So... no more smashing, Deal?" Jane asked.
Thor nodded slowly. "Deal."

With that, the conversation turned to other matters and Thor, once again, wondered how it could be— that such a world should exist, such people, such women, such food. Mother would have told me to have faith in other worlds. She would tell me that Asgard does not alone carry the burden of civilization, nor does it alone hoard wealth and knowledge and power. Even here, Thor thought, young Midgard strives to raise itself out of the dirt of its ancestry and darkened past. Perhaps this is what Father wished me to learn? That these are the people whom I must protect—and remember them and know their weaknesses in the truest way possible? Perhaps that is what I must come to realize—that there is worth to be found in any man... in any place... Perhaps... Or perhaps not.

Thor could not know. Not for certain. Not yet, at any rate. He could only hope—and that, Thor knew, was one thing he could do. Hope and strive and fight.

[...yet, some places resist it more than most...]

[...some Realms hold tightly onto Life...]

Sitting there, Thor allowed himself to revel in the relative quiet. There were no courtiers about calling his name, asking for unwanted advice, or offering fulsome praise. There were no ambassadors to listen to, to pander to, or to tolerate. There were no monotonous tutors, no obsequious mages, no envious warriors, no wars to fret over, no fears or responsibilities to shoulder. There was only him. There was only Thor.

Thor and a flimsy red table and plate of food and a full belly and new friends and hope.

[...here, here...]

[...here, the spaces are filled with sound...]

"I don't know nothing about satellites," a man was telling Selvig and Jane who looked excited about something. Obviously Thor had missed a conversation while he was deep in thought. "But it was heavy. Real heavy. Nobody could lift it."

Nobody could lift it.
Nobody could lift it.

[...here, here...]
Well, there you go! Thor... Thor... (sighs) 1/3 Thor chapters. One down, two more to go... But the next chapter will be a Loki one. For my sanity - and yours.

WHAT... LOKI DIDN'T DIE?!

Dear Reader, of course he didn't... I'm a stickler for tags and would have tagged this tragedy and character death if that was the case. And I have been promising Avengers... so we have still a good 30-40 more chapters to go. I hope I can hear your input and comments along the way~

See ya next week~

-KI

Author's Note 1: On Thor's Abilities - By the way... In my story (and in the MCU-verse, I think), Thor wasn't stripped of immortality or godhood – he was stripped of his abilities, powers and state of being. I would surmise that Odin shifted his atoms so that Thor gained the mass of a human and not of Asgard. He also probably took away Thor's natural connection to Asgard's more natural, subconscious magicks/scientific manipulation. That's why Thor was able to be pricked with the needle in the first Thor, but why bullets and stuff later on don't affect him (or Loki) in Avengers. One of my pet peeves is when fanficcers have these casual moments where Thor or Loki give blood, or get injected or what have you – when they are impervious to bullets later on. Please. Keep your facts straight. K. Thx.

Author's Note 2: Plans for Following Chapters - The following plan for the next part of the Arc (between Thor and Avengers arc) is that we have a chapter of Thor and then a chapter of Loki alternating for a bit. Expect a lot of hum-drum for Thor and Armageddon/Indiana Jones/Hunger Games craziness for Loki. I'm so excited and I hope you guys are too!

Author's Note 3: What I Am Writing - Some have asked me about my other written works/"are you published". The answer is - no, sadly, I am not yet published. I am working toward that. Hopefully this summer I can finish editing another piece of original fiction and self-publish it to Kindle. The plans for Distortion In Time is a bit more complicated. Basically, I'm going to write 2 books - one fanfic, the other, original fic. Both are going to look almost the same for the first 50 or so chapters, but will diverge wildly after that (because I can't sell stuff that is fanfic). I will hopefully publish the original-fic!DiT on Kindle/Lulu... and maybe people will buy it. The fanfic will stay up here, and I may arrange to make a non-profit hard copy version for folks to buy. All that folks would pay for would be postage and the money necessary to make the book. Let me know if you are potentially interested in having a hard copy. I'm considering sending a copy of the fanfic (and original fiction) to Tom Hiddleston himself. First fanmail ever in my life and super embarrassing and I'm pretty sure he has no time to read a gargantuan fic like this, but yeah. We'll see...

Asgardian Glossary:
bikkja – bitch 
Brenna-Fir – the Immolation 
Drakka Thyod – Dragon Race 
ergi - womanly, weak, "gay" 
Fiendfyre – a phoenix-firebird 
Flauguna – flying feet/teleportation 
 fotr'ro - footstool 
Ginnung – the Void 
harhvila - high bed 
Haugbui Bustathr – the Shrine of the Kings 
Hiti-mothr – Flame Fury (also known as Lachruth) 
Kaesia-Seithr – Spirit-Spear style 
Koma a Aldr – Coming of Age 
Kveykva-herklaethi – Light Armoured style 
Laegja – the Immersion 
OfoIr Leith – Dark Paths, Other Ways (crossing the Void) 
Ominni-tith - the Forgotten Times 
Rikr-Hringraevi – Grand Cycles of Time 
Runa a Fyrsta – Rites of Initiation 
Runa a Kelda – Rites of Spring 
Runa’a’vetr – Winter Solstice 
Saga-Vefr – Story-weavers 
seithr - magic 
seithrmaster - mage, sorceror 
Skjald-borhyyy – Wall of Flame 
Skipa – the Infusion 
Skokkr-a-Mir – concealment skills, Box of Mirrors (also known as Col'ca-cenedril) 
stormerki – mysteria 
Tveir-Andlit – illusionary skills, Double Face 
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Wisdom)
I'm so so so so sorry guys for the wait! I had writer's block and a pretty intense work week. But I come bearing gifts - namely an 8K chapter! I hope you guys enjoy it. Lotsa world/ship building and more info and vocab and other things.

Thanks so much to: sassiebone, Petreska, iBlameGlobalWarming, SingSongSilence, Kai_Maciel, YellowWomanontheBrink, Yuurei, lemomina, Silvermoon_of_ForestClan, and beanie. Thanks so much for your comments and input!

Up ahead... Firefly shout out (sorta), butchered Russian? and a Tom Hiddleston-inspired character. XD
Let me know what you guys think~!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 65
Loki: The Low Road I

[...what is it to be nothing...]

[...to be vaetki...]

[...it is to be one with...]

[...the Nothingness...]

[...the Void...]

He was falling. Falling. Always he was falling in his dreams, falling backward, eyes cast upward at the rapidly receding safety of land. There was nothing but cold and dark and the spinning stars and the icy crags of the icy Realm's underside.

Panic, petrification froze his limbs and his breath caught in his throat. No chance to scream, no chance to cry out... There was only the long slow fall through space, inexorably drifting downward and then he was pulled, stretched, and dragged into the gaping mouth of the Muthr’a’Ginnung. No chance to scream, no chance to cry out... a voiceless, silent fall.

In his nightmares, he had screamed. In his dreams, he had cried.

Reality, however, was all too different.

There was only the fall. The pull. The rising wall of particle diffusion, the swirl of dark magicks... and then the dark.

[...one with...]

[...the Nothingness...]

[...the Void...]

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Reality, however, was all too different.

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[...one with...]
...the Void...

No time. No thought. No being.

...the Void...


Alive.

At that thought, Loki managed with some inner strength he had never known he had had before to turn onto his side, raising his head slightly in an attempt to gain a sense of bearing. All his blurry vision could focus on was grey. Grey and black and lines of glinting things. So he lay there and waited and breathed.

After a few minutes, Loki's acute discomfort passed and, releasing what little hold he had over his remaining abilities, allowed blue to creep over his skin, enveloping him in relative warmth as his native heritage came to the fore (why had he turned white before? I cannot remember...). Bit by bit, awareness became more grounded and his limbs found enough strength to scrabble against the rock – although movement was limited. Air was limited. Loki found himself hard put to remain calm as his lungs found the atmosphere inadequate for his needs.

Darkness once again began to spot his vision, but not before Loki glimpsed a blur of white and blue and grey. A lighter grey. A moving block of oddly bright red. A small white blur reaching for him. Something glinting drawing closer. Loki thrashed weakly – but then relaxed as metal and plastic pressed around his mouth offering an additional puff of canned air. An oxygen mask, he thought desperately. Someone... His red eyes turned upward slowly attempting to focus on the figure above him, but all he could see was a dark black glimmering mask – some kind of face shield, he supposed – a bulky grey-white and blue body suit, a large pack and a long red canister.

Oxygen. Technology. Life. Loki's hands rose then, gripping the arm which pressed the mask to his face in silent empty plea. Please...

As if able to read his mind, the face mask nodded and then shifted Loki upward. Loki's lips parted then in a silent, rather airless cry of pain. Darkness blotted out the starry sky and the grey, lifeless world about him. He blacked out.

-0-0-0-

The universe of Midgard, the Sages say, is a great one and empty. Yet even here, there is life.

...there is life...

...where there is...

...there is hope also...
Even on the edges of one of its smaller galaxies, clings a teeming planet full of life. Ignored by most as rather barbaric and backward, this small green-blue planet by most is known as Midgard – and is considered by none to be all that important, although it too, unknowingly, fell under Asgard's imperialistic care. Midgard, third planet from a well-fueled sun, lay in what some called the Shen'grid, the Protected Zone, the Safety Belt, the Kholathan. For some reason, the beings there evolved slowly and only on a few occasions sent out various metallic satellites or ships to the moon or its orbiting plane. Time passed and no apparent sign of further colonization showed – but the few colonies from the Skrull and Kree Empires, which had settled on the galaxy's far edges, watched carefully from a distance.

The outer ring of rock and dead planets and asteroids protected the system from serious harm. To this silent world of ice and metals, the O'zara'li Corporation came for mining purposes. They came swiftly and silently, took what they needed and shuttled it back to the home colonies on the other side of the galaxy. There was no contact made with the protected planet. None was needed. None was wanted.

Asgard was watching.

...there is life...

...where there is...

...there is hope also...

...so fostered...

...it springs forth in bounty...

Silence. Silence of a sort. Not really silence at all, he realized after a moment. Loki blinked a few times, his vision clearing slowly and revealing a dark grey grill above him. Panic welled as memories rose -

A far away time. A time of aching solitude. The honeycomb cells of the Mah'konai where he had learned the horror of the anonymity of owned things – and patience. He had learned that as well. That was what he called it, anyway. Better word than what it actually was, Loki thought, jerking upward and looking about wildly, right hand rising to his chest and neck, checking for shackles. Broken.


Never again.

Closing in on him like a coffin, the walls had surrounded for a time that had never seemed to end. Even to this day, Loki mused, I still do not know how long I actually spent in that dim world. Pushing those horrors, those terrible memories down, Loki imagined as was his wont a large chest so bottomless and firmly sealed. Carefully locked, with such seals and padlocks as time would allow him, it sat there in the shadowed recesses of his mind.

Leaving that behind him, Loki opened his eyes once more and focused on the room in which he now found himself. A dimly lit place, for above hung long thin tube-like lights which flared a pale yellow. The room itself was square with metal walls, one of which sloped a little outwards as it rose up to the ceiling, and small. Cramped, even, Loki mused, noting how there seemed no apparent furniture installed in the room. There were square lines set into the wall. Pull out furniture? He wondered. More than likely.
Leaning back, Loki stilled his breath and listened carefully. Passing chatter outside his door, the stomp of boots on grating, a clang and metallic rumble – and underneath it all, the steady thrum of great engines. Yes, Loki shivered, *I am trapped on a ship.* Drawing his knees up to his chest, the exiled Prince rested his forehead on his knees, attempted to calm his breathing and focus on what to do next.

*Gather information. That's an obvious first step,* he told himself. *Appear amenable. Friendly. Woo their goodwill. Find their weaknesses and exploit –*

Before Loki could consider the matter any longer, the grey scuffed wheel on the battered black and green door turned, opening to a brighter hallway, revealing a squat silhouette of a humanoid figure briefly before Loki's visitor stepped forward into the only light turned on in the cabin.

Squat, square-shoulder, with a blue-grey stained one piece suits favoured among most utilitarian space-faring folk, side pockets and snaps and straps and loops. Above the black, worn boots with thick brown treads, baggy pants and half-opened collar was a thick neck, corded with muscle beneath tan skin if the sun had recently touched it. Judging by the sallow look of the Narodian, Loki gauged it had been in space for a good few months.

*Narodian.* Loki knew the folk to look at. A few had passed through Sharda'aa, but only the rare few had lingered long. *Workers who tilled the ground in contentment,* pirates and travelling fighters had spat. *Farmers and well-meaning folk the galaxy over,* Now, however, Loki found himself minutely relaxing in relief.

"You're up," said the Narodian.

Loki nodded.

"Worried there... for a few parsecs," grinned the man. "But you look more alive now, as opposed to, well, then."

Without by your leave, the newcomer, self-avowed rescuer and obvious worker pulled down another bed from its inset niche in the wall. Loki took note of the red handle which the worker had twisted before pulling out and down.

"Name's Nesta," A nod and another quick smile.
"Ah." Loki paused before supplying another name. Surrendering for just a few moments to memory. 
"Kol'la."
"Kol'la..."
"Hm."
"How did you get out there – lost like that?"
"How do you know that I am lost?" Loki lifted his chin, suppressing a flinch as he realized he wore his Jotun skin and no doubt looked very much like a being out of his native surroundings.
"Well. No one hangs about on a 'roid for the fun of it," Nesta chuckled then. "Although... I suppose one might end up marooned... Were you spaced?"

The worker's obsidian gaze suddenly sharpened.

"Spaced?"
"Well, you sure aren't from around here."

Loki refused to respond, giving Nest a hard red stare back.

"Ah. No." Loki supposed ejection from a Realm was in an entirely different category all together. "Ah."

Pause.

"So you aren't well... hopped on Hona or Phero or anything like that?"

Loki shook his head.

"Do you even know what Hona or Phero are?"

"Drugs?" hazarded Loki, wracking his mind for any memory of a mention of those names. The closest word he supposed was related was Fiero – something mammalian creatures were fond of taking. Mammalian, animalian – any kind of beast like organism which could find exhilaration in the release of one's mating instincts. "You speak of Fiero?"

"Ah. You definitely aren't from around here," Nesta nodded as if proved right. "That's Skrull for Phero."

"Skrull?" Loki tensed. "Skrull are in these parts?"

"Well, yeah, Nosta scratched his head and then chin thoughtfully. "This is a Skrull vessel..." A pause. "A mining ship. Third Class Hauler."

"I see."

"Three work crews and our captain," Nesta supplied helpfully. There was a fond note in his voice. "My people aren't fond of ships, but this boat and crew are better than most. I'll be sad when I get back home."

"Home."

"On the other side, far from here. This is the more forsaken part of the Galaxy. Well – except for that one place we never visit..." Nesta shivered. "That's real close. Too close – but the Cap says we need some pu'lotni, so here we are."

"I see," Loki murmured not really seeing at all, but deciding that keeping his ears and eyes open would probably do him mere good than listening to the ramblings of the ignorant if good-natured Narodian.

"Hm... well. It'll all come in time," Nesta shrugged. "Captain says that you'll probably wanna ride back to some form of civilization-" Pause. "Unless you actually wanna hide out on the asteroid – although it'll be largely uninhabitable when we leave-"

"Here is good," Loki assured Nesta quickly.

Although knowing the exact location of 'here' would be wonderful.

"Well, you're in luck!" Nesta went on. "We got a free bunk here – I mean, right here – in this room, rather... on account of Elja getting spaced."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Got all spaced out on T'chata'ko. Idiot. Everyone knows lizard physio and 'sect plug don't mix – no matter what you shapeshift. Went crazy, you know."

"Crazy," Loki repeated blankly.

"Cap spaced him when he went for the Stunners – kinda harsh, but pluggers are just asking for it, if you ask me."

"Right."

"So don't take stuff like that. Cap isn't called Captain Steel Balls for no reason. Stay on course and you'll be all good."

"Very clearly."

"Great!"

Pause. Nesta stood and jerked his head.
"Wanna see the rest of the ship?"

Loki blinked and then gave the man a quick smile, infusing what warmth he could into it.

"Please," he rose to follow Nesta out of the tiny quarters into a narrow tunnel which could be called a hallway in other places. *Corridor more like,* he corrected himself. "Well. Great. A quick tour before we kit down," Nesta nodded and then paused, turning to look up at his taller companion. "Get you some victuals while we're at it, maybe."

"Sound plan," Loki smiled down at the short Narodian, ignoring a sudden protest from his empty belly.

"Good. Let's get going then. So... here you can see our quarters," Nesta waved a hand back at the door through which they had just exited. "Well, I'm mighty glad you're my bunk mate. Ever bunked with a plugger? Ha. Well. Don't. It's like-

With that, the two were off, Nesta bustling down the bright corridors, chatting with his usual vivacity while Loki drifted along behind.

Silent, yet watchful.

-0-0-0-

_Perseverance is for the living; hope is for the dying_, Nesta had said, had quoted with an odd air of sagacity. For a moment, a sharp, vivid image filled Loki's mind. A picture of Nesta seated in the warm, red glow of a cozy, homely kitchen, surrounded by contented faces with a horde of babes clustered about his knees excitedly begging for a tale. Loki shook his head, snorting dismissively at his maudlin thoughts.

"Perseverance is for the living; hope is for the dying." Nesta said, paused and then chuckled. "An odd saying, some think – but a true one, nonetheless. An ancient Phylloxian saying. Hm. Yes. They may have been forgotten but their wisdom has not... well, at least not in my quadrant. Ah, but of course you have no idea what I'm talking about. No matter. You will, eventually... or you won't. Ha. That can be true too. Many pass through the halls of wisdom, but few may carry out more than the air. Well – that's another Phylloxian saying, not to say that my home is a hall of wisdom. No. Anyways..." Pause. "That's what the name is – her name, as the Captain likes to say. *Tro'watal*. Means 'perseverance', you know, from the saying. The old clunker used to belong to a Noradian – before he retired. And Cap took it off his hands. Those Skrull know how to drive a bargain! Yes. But she's a beaut, despite her age. Third Class, Long Range Hauler with the usual Infinitytype Engine complete with Oxorbal Generator Crystal, you know? Energies that are renewable – solar and other wavelengths – all above my head, I'm afraid. You could ask Engill. One of the more chatty engineers around."

Listening to Nesta's chatter with half an ear, Loki watched his surroundings carefully, attempting to note and memorize the location of the central 'Mod' – the transport which ran along the length of the ship on the upper side of the hull. It was the link between the main sections of the ship – from the fore to the aft, in which the 'hyper-light' engines lay with the aforementioned Oxorbal Generator, seen only through the wide view ports surrounding it on all sides. Connected by struts and various metal supports, it hung suspended in its socket toward the back of the ship. Brilliant white with shades of blue, the orb looked beautiful to Loki's eye. It too thrummed with power and, leaning against the transparisteel windows, he closed his eyes and listened. From far away, Loki fancied, he could hear singing.

Within minutes, Nesta forged onward, shooing Loki forward to inspect the half-filled hold, a dark and stale pit which would, in a few week's time, be carrying a precious cargo of various kinds of ore. Just after the hold, between the cargo and the crews quarters another Mod ran downwards to the sub-
light engines below.

"We'll get you down there another day," Nesta went on, waving a hand airily. "Not that you'll get anything – just a bunch of wires and screens and consoles and buttons. Ah – and now we are at the crew quarters, which you know. Of course. Five levels. Well, six if you count storage and the trash compactors and sewage treatment facility. No one goes down there except for the odd engineer or deck hands – that's us – for repairs. Not that you'll be asked, no fear. So, yes, five levels. Three for the three platoons. Headed by the three First Officers. Each of them take alternating shifts."

Here, Nesta came to a wide, similar-looking hall with the usual grating above and solid metal walls with no sign of decoration or art. Down one side a row of glass-looking stuff protected various charts - star and shift-related duty tables. Purely utilitarian, Loki mused, as with the rest of the ship. No real surprise. What I would have thought for a mining vessel. Utilitarian – and the corridors all too similar. How to tell them apart?

"This is the schedule. As you can see, the next two shifts are Platoon Frei and Sa and then there's us – Tho. Yep. Each platoon mans the bridge, engines and mining 'chines. One pilot, navigator and comm officer, two techies, four engineers and three deck hands. Or four. We've got four. You're one now – if you wanna ride back with us."
"Your Captain is amenable?"
"Wha-?"
"Your Captain will allow my presence on board so easily?"
"Well, yeah. Sure. As long as you aren't plugging."
"Right."
"Hm. Let's move on then. Ah. Here's the Mod." Nesta got back inside the small travelling – box, Loki decided that was the most suitable word for it. Coffin also came to mind. He flinched at the thought.

One thin wall away, he thought, and then there is nothing but cold hard space... It didn't bear thinking on.

"So, yeah, where was I?"
"Uh," Loki paused and squinted in thought as he moved backward mentally through the conversation. "Levels?"
"Right! Five levels. Three are set aside for the crews – a level for each platoon. There's also the level set aside for meeting rooms, canteen and the like and then the uppermost floor belongs to the first Officers and Cap. The furthermost part – where we're going now – the, ah, the fore of the ship, that's the Command."

With that, the Mod came to a shuddering halt, it's scratched, scuffed doors jerked open, revealing a wide, sweeping, circular-shaped room. Along the innermost walls, consoles and brightly blinking panels lay, watched over by the various command crew on duty. The Consoles ended with a section of black wall which then gave way to a large screen – or was it transparisteel – or both? It was hard to tell, but currently what floated past were slowly rolling asteroids.

Deceptively slow, Loki reminded himself. If we are in some kind of orbit, we are all speeding along, at quite a quick pace. If we are not adequately shielded, in a very short time, we will end up crushed like flies under the broad hand of a fisher's wife. Before Loki could query about the ship's defences, the largest chair, which sat a little higher than the rest, looking down at the navigator and pilot seated before the transparisteel screen-window, turned.

A great, black presence in the room, it commanded attention – respect – as any throne in any domain. It reminded Loki of Shax's favoured seat in his study. Odin's throne, even. Then it swivelled,
revealing spare lines, lithe muscle and the green skin of a Skrull. A female Skrull in an imposing, impeccably spotless black and green, form-fitting space suit. Loki stiffened and raised his chin a little as her glittering, hard eyes like cutting stones surveyed him carefully. Carefully, quietly – cool.

*Hard as steel is the Cap,* Nesta had mentioned somewhere between the canteen and the Oxorbal Generator. *Nickname’s Cap Gan’ga’war, on account of, well, her steel guts. But you won’t find a more fair captain in these parts.*

"So..." A telling pause and then. "This is the one you found," Captain Mal’myrn said softly. "Outside, I heard."
"Yes, Captain," Nesta nodded, back straight, eyes suddenly holding a serious quality – holding her level gaze calmly.
"How did you come to be in these parts, wanderer?" The Captain tilted her head thoughtfully, looking Loki up and down from head to toe slowly. "It is a mystery indeed – for you cannot have been there long. We had only just pumped oxygen into the containment field – yet there had been no sign of any spacecraft or teleporter activity on our sensors."
"I..." Loki hesitated before deciding to settle for a half truth. "I fell through the Void – through a kind of hole, what some may call a wormhole..."
"A wormhole?" Captain Mal’myrn murmured. "A fantastical notion – to survive such a thing with no obvious space gear-"
"It was sudden."
"It must have been," was the sharp reply accompanied by an equally sharp look. "From where do you come?"
"Another Realm."

At Loki’s words, the rest of the crew jerked to even closer attention and Nesta’s eyes widened.

"It is true," Loki hastened to assure them. "But it is not a common thing to – well – to arrive like this or rather, this was a single event that-"
"True, it may be," Captain Mal’myrn raised her hand, silencing Loki. "Our people also come from another Realm and the Kree, the Chitauri, the Asgardians and many others have achieved this – through technology or other magickal means. If it is as you say – a singular event and not a planned invasion, then our facilities, such as they are, are open for your use – at a price, of course."
"Of course," Loki nodded. "I can give you what aid I can, having some strength and resilience-"
"Still..." The Captain rose to her full height – not as tall as Loki, but still imposing thanks to her thick-treaded, black combat boots. "Your... kind... I do not think I have met before."

Here, long fingers reached up and lightly traced the lines which ran up Loki’s neck to his chin. Suppressing a flinch, Loki kept himself still and settled for a long glare down at the She-Skrull who had so boldly touched him. Captain Mal’myrn merely smiled in response and continued on undeterred.

"Blue skin with such markings and eyes as hard, as bright, as gloriously murderous as a blood stone... I have heard tales of a Realm filled with such a people – an icy Realm... but they were Giants in the stories – like those of the Fire Realm. Perhaps, that is your home? For you are yet of a size... although... your clothing reeks of Asgard or Vanaheim..."
"Perhaps," Loki smiled thinly in return. Jotun meant savage in most parts – but her words seemed to be more laced with wonder – or desire – than distaste.
"Then you are a long way from home," she drew back, her own red eyes calculating. "We are in the Realm of the Eternally Protected, in Midgard’s domain. No one may lay foot on that fabled planet, but our people have come to enjoy the galaxy and others close by. There are some planets farther in where you may find a way back to the Realm of Jotunheim."
"My thanks," Loki allowed a smile. "I will give you what service I can in return."
Captain Mal'myrn smiled then, slowly - as if amused. Perhaps she perceived no need for him, or what he thought he could offer. Loki's pale blue cheeks blushed deep violet as she turned away with one last lingering look, full of amusement, at him. Somewhere, at Loki's elbow, Nesta was snorting or chuckling – or something.

"I will keep that in mind..." She sat back in her chair and crossed one booted leg over the other. She left the sentence un-ended, eyebrow rising in silent query.

"Kol'la, Captain," Loki said with a short bow, cheeks still flushed.
"Kol'la," she seemed to taste his name with fondness. "I look forward to your... help... and hard work. I shall see you soon, perhaps."

With that, the audience was ended, the Captain swivelled back around and focussed once again at what had been scheduled for the day. The extraction of some silvery metal, apparently, if the rotating pictures on the console screens were to be believed. Loki and Nesta did not linger. Withdrawing back into the Mod, the two travelled back to their shared quarters in silence – almost silence.

Nesta was still coughing or laughing.

Loki glared up at the Mod's harsh white lighting.

_This is going to be a long trip_, he thought, recalling her glinting, predatory gaze. _A long trip._

-0-0-0-

The following week was spent working, sleeping and eating. Learning the new rhythms of life aboard the _Tro'watal_ was no easy matter, but Loki had always prided himself on his ability to adapt to any situation. So, with the intensity he usually applied to magick and academics and politicking, Loki set about learning everything he could. The exact location of the ship was not readily apparent to him, and even when he got his hands on a few of the local star maps, the entire Realm looked foreign to him. Deciding that it was better to focus on the here and now, Loki moved onto other things.

He learned how to manipulate, recode, rewire and reprogram the basic console and datapad usually allotted to each crew member. The automated drink brewer, the rations dispenser and any of the engine and comm room consoles were considered off limits for dismantlement (which he could understand - although the ban on the drink dispenser not so much). He learned what each job aboard the ship entailed: with whom the comm officer's communicated and how and why, what the ship's Interface was and what it could achieve (and not), what the engineers could and couldn't actually fix or control, how the hold was divided, what the mining shafts actually did (the first thing he learned) and all the powers of the Captain pertaining to the day-to-day affairs of the ship.

He learned the more important details of the living habits of his crew mates: how deeply Nesta slept, how hard it was to wake him as a result and the annoying accompaniment of snoring to said deep sleep, how the Insectoid engineers disliked being spooked and that engineers rarely had senses of humour. There were also the all important stim drinks which he discovered quickly how they affected a Jotun (absurd amounts of frenetic energy which unfortunately obstructed his ability to focus) and how important they were to the Captain and her daily mood.

There were other useful things to understand. The difference between inter-system, inter-stellar, inter-galactic and inter-dimension travel. Different engines were used in different ways, power was gained differently, maps and time became more complicated and, the further the distances, the greater reliance on robotic and mechanical-based calculations. The numbers were, he was assured time and time again, mind-boggling.
Thus, Loki came to grips with the use of consoles and datapads, a kind of technology rarely used in Asgard. Asgard, which had the Bifrost and no need to think of alternative energy sources or the issues entailed in long-distance space travel (gravity, waste disposal, appropriate nutritional and solar light intake, for starters). Loki, more than ever, began to feel something akin to respect as he watched Nesta guide the bottom-most section of their mineshaft to the appropriate location, so the mining bots would gain easy access to the hold of the ship.

In the end, he thought wonderingly, *there is advancement even in backwater places such as this. Truly, how often we forget the small things which flourish in the shadows?*

An image rose then in his mind of a day long forgotten, now remembered. A cold day, a moment of realization as ice flowed from his fingers and he had known then with startling clarity – he too was alive. He too was a creature. He too had being. He too was someone.

*Small things flourishing in the shadows.*

*...even here...*

*...there is life...*

*...and where there is...*

*...there is home...*

Travel between the stars is a laborious task, even more so travel between Realms. Those with magick, those with the Bifrost, may rely on direct manipulations of Reality's variables. Those not so gifted, however, must rely on another kind of magick – one of numbers and scientific laws and a high level of technology to predict, discovered and stabilize the appropriate rifts through time and space. Some civilizations had even managed to discover various processes to travel faster than the speediest particles in existence. Probability machines and difference engines operating on various levels aided the Skrull, the Kree and others in expansion of their empires, in the never ending search for resources. Thus, in Midgard's Realm and in Jotunheim's, the Lizards and the Fish-folk travelled far and wide borne on their various ships, powered by the energies, the lights, the Voices of the stars.

*...life everywhere...*

*...if you know where to look for it...*

*...life is...*

The mining planet, which Loki found difficult to refer to thanks to the throat-gargling name, was ugly. Ugly, grey, black and over all gloomy. *Niflheim has more character than this place,* Loki grimaced as he looked out the grimy window of the quarters he and Nesta now shared at the local "inn". *Really,* Loki grunted, *I would find Tro'watal more hospitable than this place. Captain Mal'myrn said unloading and doing repairs are a noisy task, but in retrospect, I fancy that noise is preferable to... whatever this is...*

Loki scrunched his nose as he compared the planet to dark moon mining corporation which had once owned him. This place, probably because of the modicum of light, seemed even more depressing. His red eyes wandered over the brown skies, the low-hanging thick black clouds, the endless vista of pipes and stacks belching forth endless streams of equally black smoke and rails and tunnels and the swarm of air-born traffic lines crawling above the city like a dotted trail of insects.

*Sharda'aa...* Loki twisted about at the thought and discovered that Nesta was already pulling on his
jacket and shuffling into his 'land shoes'. Instead of wearing the usual grubby, bulky uniform of deck hand and miner, Nesta was wearing a kind of canvas tunic and matching grey-brown pants which didn't do his sallow skin and darker features any favours. Loki himself had already changed into his leathers, green tunic, darker green vest and favoured dwarven-made, dragon-hide boots. His more conspicuous hunting gear and jacket were still packed away. How people felt about Asgard in these parts was anyone's guess and Loki felt he would not like to assume anything.

Better discover those things in a more cunning way, he had thought earlier. Better not court disaster in an already tedious situation. Particularly with my magickal abilities so limited.

"You are going out?"
"Just around the corner for evening meal."
"Oh."
"You should join. The place isn't much to write home about – but the food's hot and pretty safe to eat – relatively speaking, y'know. Really the best place to nab some victuals – one of the first things I looked for on my first trip out. Especially since we got at least a day in the Stinkhole."
"Stinkhole?" Loki asked carefully double-checking his vests' inner pocket for his small coin bag which now held some of the quadrant's 'cred coins'.
"My name for the place."
"Rather apt."
"I'd like to think so," Nesta turned to quirk an eyebrow up at his taller crew-mate. "Joining?"
"If it is truly no bother-"
"None at all. The more, the merrier, as they say."
"Who says?" Loki asked curiously, ducking out the low door to follow Nesta down the catwalk which ran along the front of the hotel room doors. He looked back, apprehensively, but apparently the door had already shut and locked behind them automatically. Shaking his head, Loki moved onward, following Nesta to a lift which took them down to another catwalk which eventually took them to a small market-styled eatery.

After ordering some food which looked rather odd – and not very appetizing – the two men took a seat at an already half-full table of miners. Of course, within minutes, Nesta was chatting with each being as though he had known them all of his life. A remarkable trait, Loki thought, and all the more powerful thanks to his sincerity.

"But then Kol'la here fell out of the sky," Nesta was now regaling his tale for the fortynth time – with the same enthusiasm as the thirty-nine times before. "That was an eye-opener, make no mistake – what with his startling arrival and all. Wormhole, Cap thinks. From another Realm, most likely."

As several of the other miners grunted in a chorus of agreements, Loki found himself cough-choking on a particularly long string piece of, well, he never did find out what it was exactly, but suddenly his food was going down the wrong pipe and all he could think of, as Nesta thumped him helpfully on the back, was – they don't exist?"

"Well," one quieter miner, a half-breed by the looks of it, pointed out, "didn't the lizards come from their own dimension?"
"Ah? Really?" another asked doubtfully. "I thought they came from the Fen'chi Galaxy?"
"Not originally," Nesta said. "Captain Mal'myrn's a Skrull. She says they also have territory in another Realm – or two – alongside the Kree-"
"She says – but that kind of tall-tale telling is just the sort of thing your kind believes in." The first, loudest and obviously more respected leader of the group, Roko, spat and added with thick scorn. "Noradians. Believe everything."
"Well, I wouldn't say that-" Nesta replied mildly.
"He's right though," Loki found himself interjecting. "There are many Realms in existence. Most say Nine... although some argue ten since Nornheim may be separate from Niflheim-"
"Have you been to all them Realms?" asked a miner.
"Well, no-"
"Ha! So you just fall for the stories as well-"
"What? No. I've been to a fair few-"
"Re-ally," snorted Roko, disbelievingly. "Which ones?"
"Well... Jotunheim, Nornheim - although there is some debate on whether it is merely an extension of Helheim and Niflheim and I went to Niflheim – briefly, mind you – Svartalfheim, Vanahelm.. Alfheim-"
"That's some fair travelling," Nesta's black eyes were wide.
"Well, it never – it is not really important or strange for some-"
"But how can we know you aren't just talking it up?" argued Roko.

Everyone turned to stare at Loki in wait for his response. Loki sighed. This is a first... How does one prove what simply is?

"You cannot," Loki finally admitted. Then, seizing the opportunity, added. "Yet, I assure you, I have been to those places and more beside. Asgard. I forgot to mention that one. Perhaps you have heard of it?"
"Asgard?" Nesta frowned. "No... Can't say I have..." He turned to the miners. "What about you boys?"
"What place is this Asgard?"
"Is it full of women? Is it like this world – or fairer?"
"Or Noradian," laughed Roko. "Bucolic and simple."
"Rustic, maybe, but we're happy." Nesta shrugged. "Better to believe in something than in nothing."

Loki turned the phrase over in his mind.

"Another Phylloxian saying?"
"Yes... how did you know?"
"Easy enough," Loki shrugged.
"Phylloxians," laughed one of the miners. "Hah! There's another child's story – just as far-fetched as the tales of the Golden Realm."
"Golden Realm?" asked Loki, leaning forward. "Asgard? A golden Realm so fair beyond imagining populated by a people who live very long lives-"
"Hmmm... Long lives? Eternal more like. The Golden Realm, the Realm Eternal also it is called."

One of the miners elaborated further. "A children's story of a wondrous place-"

Even Nesta was nodding.

"This may be Asgard-"
"Heh. Unlikely," Roko shook his head.
"Wh-"
"I mean, you said you went to this Askard place-"
"Asgard-"
"Yeah, whatever," Roko waved a hand dismissively. "But to go to the Golden Realm, the Realm Eternal, you lack the most important prerequisite... unless you aren't telling us something."
"What is that?"
"You gotta be dead, if you believe such things. Which I don't."
"Eh?" Loki's read eyes widened.
"Dead," Nesta repeated helpfully as though saying it again would bring enlightenment or logic to the
"Why dead?"
"It's where all good people go."
"Where they go?"
"Yeah," Nesta nodded again. "After you die – you go to the Realm of the Gods. Land of plenty and eternal spring and beautiful gods – women and men alike – and all who live there are imbued with long life and magick... A land where all may achieve those powers and become gods themselves."
"Wait – maybe we are speaking of Valhalla." Loki stopped, uncertainly.
"I dunno Val – or whatever you just said," Roko shrugged, "but either way, it's gotta be crock. A plugger's crazy dream."
"Oh. I dunno about that." Another miner who had until then been silent piped up. "Skrull say that the Realm exists – and you can go there... and Tak'ko, before he left to go back to Fen'chi, said that everyone knows on their home world that the gods of the Realm Eternal sometimes go abroad and raise mayhem... raining lightning and devastation wherever they go."

Thor, Loki found it hard put to keep his face impassive at the mention of lightning and mayhem and devastation. Of course, they would have heard of him – even here where scepticism of basic facts about Reality holds such strong sway among the people. The exiled Prince did not know whether to laugh or cry at the thought.

"Skrull will say anything," Roko clunked his pint of ale a little hard onto the table in emphasis. "We established that already. Fairytales. Golden Realms, Phylloxia – what next?"
"So... if Asgard isn't real nor the other Realms... if the Skrull lie – then what is halting the attainment of Midgard?" asked Loki innocently.
"Midgard?" Nesta blinked.
"You do not know of it?" Loki asked nonplussed. "Captain Mal'myrn mentioned it."
"Is it a galaxy? A Realm?" asked another.
"A star system, for certain."
"A planet," Loki said slowly, racking his memories of the ancient scrolls he head read in the Mage's Academy – and of Thor's bombastic tales no doubt highly exaggerated yet no doubt holding a grain of truth. Somewhere. "A populous planet, I heard tell... I have never been there but my brother had visited a few times. A folk which look not unlike Nesta here – perhaps a bit taller. Fair-skinned and short-lived. It is considered off-limits for most."
"Ahh... So'shah!" Nesta nodded. "A good point, Kol'la. A good question."
"Doesn't exist," Roko repeated with a grimace. "Mark my words. It'll turn out to be a weapons manufacturing planet for the Fish-Folks or the Lizards."
"Surely not. I have seen long range observations of it-" Nesta protested. "Engill, our engineer, told me the life signs on the planet are staggering."
"That's no argument-"
"And there is no sign of inter-system movement," Nesta continued. "Trust me. We just came from their Outer System Belt. No sign of spacecraft, as usual. None further than their orbit anyway. So-"
"What?" Loki jerked as Nesta's words sank in. "We were – we were within sight of Midgard?"
"Maybe?" I don't know for sure if it's the same planet which you speak of – this Midgard..."

The Noradian trailed off as he caught a glimpse of something terrifying pass over his new friend's face - something sad and painful swiftly buried.

"That place-" Loki found himself speechless as he attempted to corral his racing thoughts.

*It was so close. So close. I could have been with Thor... it would not have helped me, more than likely – nor would it be what Father wanted... but at least we would be together. At least there would be a chance that I could be found and Mother would not worry so... as she must be...*
"That place..."
"Yes?"
"Nothing..." Loki finally managed to whisper, adding faintly, "It is nothing."
"Well," Nesta gave Loki another worried look before turning back to the miners and continuing. 
"Whether you all believe in dimensions or not, Kol'la's appearance was a strange thing in and of itself. Undoubtedly strange."
"Magic?" asked someone from further down the table.
"Well... he's blue," added another with a taunting smirk. "Maybe he's one of your Ancients, Noradian."

Everyone laughed heartily at that – excepting the usually cheerful Nesta. He looked sad – almost grim.

"Wha-"

Yet, before Loki could pursue the matter further, Nesta turned to him with a speculative look, pushing aside his metal bowl and spoon to pull his large pint of ale closer to him.

"I'd been meaning to ask about that," he said thoughtfully.
"Ask what?"
"If you have such abilities – changing one's shape – one's skin and so on. Changing, some call it, shape-shifting or myech'myena, in Noradian."
"To a degree," Loki replied carefully, knowing from hard experience that trumpeting one's abilities – or lack thereof – was as bad as trying to cross the Waestrfold during bilgesnipe migration.

_Might as well call oneself 'easy pickings' or 'worth the fuss', he thought quickly. Guessing from what I can and cannot do, I am probably not much more than Eno'mah... which does not leave me with the most defences._

"The colour-" Loki finally added in a vague kind of way, since everyone appeared to expect for him to elaborate. "Among other things."
"I see..."

For once, Nesta seemed to quieten, sitting there, looking at Loki in a preoccupied way. Subdued. A gleam of regret and hope in his eyes mixed equally. Loki shifted uneasily.

"You seriously don't think-" guffawed a half-breed.
"You're right, Roko – they do believe everything!"
"Seeing is believing, I guess!"

More laughter.

"Let'em dream, boys, let'em dream," Roko took his fourth pint of ale from the lithesome, half-feline waitress. "They'll wake up soon enough."
"Nesta-" Loki started, then stopped at the curt shake of Nesta's head.
"Later," said the miner curtly.

Loki nodded and reluctantly let it go.

[...there is life...]

[...where there is...]

[...there is hope also...]
Later that night, after they bedded down in their respective bunks – Loki on top, Nesta on the bottom – the two men lay in the dark, waiting for sleep to find them. Silently. Relatively silently. There was the slight shifting as Nesta turned for the fourth time, obviously finding it difficult to fall asleep right away and in the distance, Loki could hear the everlasting stream of traffic passing over head and the clanging of shift bells and wail of sirens and various alarms. A busy world for a dying one. Like a carcass is swarmed with the busy bodies of the death-watch beetles, Loki mused. At the thought, Loki shivered and shoved the horrid image aside.

"Nesta," Loki asked, his voice seemed to be swallowed by the dark about them.

All was dark – except for a square of purple strips which blinked on and off slowly. A sign which managed to filter through some kind of grating beyond their window, Loki supposed. Annoying. For a moment, he considered getting off the bed and turning down the shutters, then dismissed the thought, opting to turn onto his left, the better to ignore it.

"Nesta," he repeated when he received no response.
"Hm."
"You said... well, they mentioned earlier something about the... Ancients? Who were they?"
"Oh..." A pause, then: "Yes. Well. They are long gone from these parts."
"Why?"
"Our..." Nesta sighed. A shifting sound and then he continued slowly and more clearly, "Our ancestors, long ago, when we were young and desperate for survival and security..." A pause. Then, lower. "They were hunted for their abilities – their magick. Enslaved out of greed. The children were weaker, you see, and easily caught. Enslaved and pursued out of greed and fear."

Nothing was said for a moment and then Nesta added even more quietly, "Until they left, never to return."
"They died?"
"Not all." Pause. "They moved on... if you believe the stories of our ancestors. They hid, I suppose. Somewhere out there, they remain hidden, their skins and shapes protecting them. Perhaps... perhaps they are out there still. And now – now," Nesta sighed, "we regret."
"Why?"
"We have settled, our home planet of Norad is secure and we can look back now and see what we lost. We could have lived in peace. Could have aided one another... The chance is gone."

Loki had nothing to say to that. He wanted to tell Nesta everything could be made right. He wanted to say that there was always another chance. He wanted to say that some things once broken could be made whole with time and care. Yet, Loki found it, this time, impossible to lie – even for comfort's sake.

"Maybe... maybe that's why I fought so hard to haul your hefty ass back to safety..."
"Ahhh," Loki hummed noncommittally.
"You kinda remind me of the stories about them."
"Oh."
"You know... in my tongue, phyllox is the word for blue."

An odd silence followed as Loki digested this seemingly unrelated piece of information.

"Hmmm... yes... phyllox..." Nesta added drowsily. "Their skin was blue... the colour of pye'nee bird's eggs and Norad's darker skies." With that silence fell again like a thick shroud between them and Loki's breath seemed to somehow exhale entirely from his lungs as he struggled to process the Noradian's words.

"Nesta, did the stories say from whence they came?"
No response.

"Nesta?"

A soft snore drifted up from the bottom bunk. Loki sighed.

That night, he dreamed of blue-skinned Jotun warrior-mages traversing the stars. Maybe... He was always running after them, calling their names, but they did not answer. Maybe... there is another home...

[...there is life...]

[...where there is...]

[...there is hope also...]

[...so fostered...]

[...it springs forth in bounty...]

Chapter End Notes

So... 8,000 words later, here we are. Less angst. That's coming later. Fufufu. We'll see how far down the rabbit hole our fav character goes~

Below is a shorter glossary since we are far from Asgard and Elvish stuff and Jotunheim.

Next up may be another Thor chapter. (BLAH!) I'll see if I can somehow cramp everything into one last chapter for him.

Thanks so much for reading! Let me know what you think! Concrit and spell-checking/grammar nitpicking is appreciated.

-KI

Information on Levels of Mage/Magical Abilities

Level 1 – Eno'sa
Level 2 – Eno'tho – Thanos
Level 3 – Eno'frei
Level 4 – Eno'ah – Elven Mages/Odin
Level 5 – Eno'ko – Asgard/Jotun/Any Other Healthy Realm Mage/Prince Loki before Odin caps him
Level 6 – Eno'yul – Sharda'aa/Regular Mage
Level 7 – Eno'vee – Uncollared Kol'la
Level 8 – Eno'mah – Collared Kol'la/Current Prince Loki post-Fall
Level 9 – Eno'lei
Level 10 – Eno'sanai

Numbers (for this quadrant):

0 - nai
1 - sa
2 - tho
3 - frei
4 - ah
5 - ko
6 - yul
7 - vee
8 - mah
9 - lei

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
Eno'Keshi'ko – the system of Eno, a type of magical level measurements
Fen'chi Galaxy – Andromeda Galaxy
gan'ga'war – steel balls
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
Kholathan – Safety Belt/Protected Zone
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
Morning-star - a mace
myech'myena - shape-shifting
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
pu'lotni – plutonium
pye'nee - a kind of bird
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
Shen’grid – the Protected Zone
So'shah – Earth/Midgard
tro'watal – perseverance
udji’oo – a drug, like opium
Hello everyone! I'm super sorry about the long wait. I know that a few of you enjoy reading this fic and you guys have been so supportive... but life and writer's block happened. Luckily I have a good 'Net friend, a few encouraging reviewers (old and new) and a good BFF (who sat through an hour of brainstorming and detail setting to get me out of the writer's block). Thanks to everyone who's making this happen.

Thanks to: Kai_Maciel, lemomina, Sassiebone, beanie, YellowWomanontheBrink, HillElizabeth, iBlameGlobalWarming, Crazy_Cat_Lady, HaHo28.

This chapter is shorter than the recent ones... I'm sorry. T_T The good news is that I will get out the next one really quickly if my writer's streak is still with me.

Flashbacks ahead.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 66
Loki: The Low Road II

Can you hear it – the sound of distant singing -
the sound of the Voices, the sound of Life.
Stand still, sit now and listen.
It is the sound of the Voices, the sound of Life.

Come, people of Norad, who travelled far,
to hear the tale, to know the lesson.
This is the fate, the circle of all living things
to live the story, to know the lesson.

We are the earth, the soil and rock,
planted, unshaken like great trees and mountains.
Here we have rooted ourselves in this Realm,
founded, most certain like gold whota and grey bollen.

We are the life, the growth and springtime,
yes, we are the Norad.
Thus we have travelled and made all things our own,
thus is the fate and the burden of the Norad.

[...can you hear it?]

[...between the silences...]
Long, long ago, when the worlds and the Realms were young, when the distances seemed
immeasurably vast to most races still struggling to come to understanding of life, the sages tell, a
race rose up – strong and adventurous. At a time when inter-system travel was in its early stages for
most races and beings, these short, yet hardy folk found within their community, ready young minds
most cunning and able. So gifted, their domain spread not only to planets within their home system
but to the greater galaxy beyond. Sharing their knowledge and selling their much wanted
technology, these beings, known as the Noradians, reached across the Spindle Galaxy of the
dimension later known as Midgard.

The Spindle Galaxy, to some. Known perhaps, they say, as the Fen’chi Galaxy to many who began
their lives within it. So populated by the Noradians, it is no surprise that, in time, they would reach
beyond their own environs to further and further lands, remote places far from their home. To
Midgard’s own galaxy, which the Noradians called Mye’hyoi Peyt.

Myeh’hyoi Peyt. There, they found such planets as would support their space-faring captains –
colonies of fair farmland, lush grass and open fields. There, they discovered strange stars and alien
peoples. There, they heard of tales concerning worlds which lived in another time and space
entirely. There, they learned the power of magick and came to fear those who wielded such things so
ably. There, they learned of the Protected Land - So’shah, they named it – and heeding the words of
the Lizard Folk who arrived one day in great grey ships through, they said, a vast Void and the
spaces between to the worlds of the Norad.

And so, the Sages of Asgard wrote, the race for survival began in earnest. Many creatures died in
the battles for resources and, in the end, the Noradians lost. Not entirely – but from the final War of
S’kyt’ar, the Skrull established themselves as the ruling class...

Until the Kree and the Chitauri arrived.

Thus the tales speak of the Norad Empire and their people. Thus it is told.

"Last night," Loki said, finally finding a gap between Nesta’s almost frantic chatter. "Last night, you
spoke of an ancient people... a blue-skinned race."
"Yes..." Nesta sighed then, no doubt realizing that his intense crew mate would not be so easily
deterred.
"You called them... Phyll-"
"Phylloxian. After the Noradian word for the colour ‘blue’, for their skin."
"From whence did they come?"
"No one knows... it happened a long time ago, Kol’la. A long, long, long, long time ago... so
long ago even we cannot tell the time in our language."
"I see..."
"But there are some..." Nesta hesitated, uncertainly.
"Some?" Loki found himself leaning forward, pushing away his breakfast bowl of unsavoury gruel to pin his companion with a hard look. "There are what?"
"There are some who know the Tales..."
"Tales?"
"Yes... The Ra'ska'yeo Phyllo'xia. The... the Tales. The Tales of Phylloxia."
"You can tell them to me?"
"Me? Alas, no. Only the l'gon may speak of them. Only they remember." Nesta wrinkled his head. "Our people are not gifted – only with cunning, with words... and with memory."
"Memory..."

Loki thought of the visions he had experienced walking through the mists of Meerauk and stifled the shiver which ran down his spine. The ghosts of the past and the Jotun, Miot'vithr. What he had spoken of that day...

Now that you know... your heritage, your abilities... the power which flows in your veins, knowing that you may unmake what was made and make what was unmade. Knowing the Casket of Winters calls to you, its Other-Soul... Knowing this, what lies in your heart for Jotunheim?

Knowing the Casket of Winters calls to you, its Other-Soul...

...its Other-Soul...

I will not soon forget.

The Bifrost crackling with power and the ice of the Casket spreading outward forcing the beam downward on the dark land. Loki shuddered, suddenly feeling nauseous.

Knowing the Casket of Winters calls to you, its Other-Soul...

"Yes, memory," Nesta nodded, seemingly not paying Loki's stillness any heed. "I can not speak of such things, not a Noradian such as myself, but perhaps... how can I say it... they see – and in the seeing, there is knowing; and in the knowing, there may be sharing; and in the sharing, there is understanding."
"Another Phylloxian saying?"
"Um, yeah." Pause. "Yeah."
"Perhaps, I could visit a l'gon."
"You could visit a l'gon," Nesta repeated thoughtfully. "There is one on my home world – V'slozh'noi. We all it Veh'slo, for short. On Veh'slo, there is one who could aid you, could perhaps bring you to that time, could share with you such knowledge as they have. Her name is Myerah and she is l'gon."
"If it is no trouble to your people," Loki said carefully, searching for any trace of worry or anger or suspicion on Nesta's open, sallow-toned face. There was none. "I would be honoured to hear the story of the Phylloxian race."
"It is a tragic tale," Nesta sighed. "They were enslaved, they left. That is the sum of it... but, you know, there are other things on Veh'slo."

What other things there were, Nesta would not say, only shaking his head uncharacteristically somber. Then, he smiled and the mood of the small room lightened as their attention was drawn to the datapad at Nesta's elbow. Sharp, high-pitch beeps sounded through the ensuing silence as the screen lit up in its usual bright white, revealing a short message from the Captain, calling all the crew to the ship.
The *Tro'watal*, having released its cargo now had stowed away in its hold a new shipment of refined bars of metal, bound for a variety of planets, including Veh'slo. Dropping off Nesta and any other Noradians who wished to stay there for a time, another group of Noradians would join the ship for the second round of deliveries before returning to Veh'slo for its next run to the Shen'grid. *The seemingly eternal cycle of life*, Nesta said, *as the flower blossoms, grows, dies and begins afresh.*

*Not all flowers can bloom forever,* Loki wanted to point out, but he refrained. It was impossible to squelch Nesta's high spirits on a regular day, much less in the face of the man's return home to his family. The exiled prince, feeling more dour and alone than ever, held his tongue and hid in his rooms until his night shift came around which entailed, as usual, a lot of walking about the ship and triple-checking the cargo holds and main power and data cables.

[...can you hear it?]

[...between the silences...]

During the 'night hours', the silences aboard the *Tro'watal* hung heavily. As Loki walked down corridor after corridor, quickly and quietly, surrounded by grey and black grates and metal walls and thick doors and bundled wiring, he felt a need to break the quiet with something – anything – the clang of his boots on the grated flooring, the clatter and creak of doors opening before him, revealing more passages equally empty and silent. Pausing at the fifth way-station by the Oxorbal Generator, Loki slipped his datapad into his pants' side pocket, plugged in his hand-held stabilizer machine and double-checked the power rates and generator's emissions.

He stood there. Watching the numbers scroll past slowly, followed by rising and falling moving graphs.

He stood there, back to the wide windows and the pale, enthralling light of the generator, and found some comfort from the distant voices of the stars.

[...can you hear it?]

When finished, Loki turned, slung the stabilizer on his back belt clip, sauntered over to the windows and leaned forward, elbows propped upon the railing to watch the slowly swirling currents of power which were caged before him. Alluring.

Leaning his forehead against the window, Loki shut his eyes and listened to its siren call – a distant, thin, high voice. The kind of Voice he had long been missing. *A familiar friend,* he thought, *and now missing from Jotunheim... perhaps forever.*

*And it is your fault, bringer of death,* whispered that ever dark side within him. *From nothing, come nothing, and what came from darkness, returns there also.*

"No," he whispered to himself.

*No.*

[...the drums of war...]

[...are calling...]

With that, all once again fell silent – inside and out. Until he heard the tell-tale quiet step of leather boots on metal and the soft breath of someone behind him. He did not turn. Just from the hard tang of ozone, grease and an odd scent of scrub-bush mixed with the absence of sweat betrayed their
"Captain," he said softly.
"Kol'la." A pause and then the Captain joined him, her elbows resting beside his, eyes trained on the generator before them. "Fancy finding you here... you have been... strangely absent since I last saw you."
"I have been busy."
"Yes," she sighed then, "I imagine so. Still. I didn't expect to find you here." A pause. "Not like this at any rate."
"Like what?" Loki asked, a little sharply.
"Like the pluggers... pressed against the glass." Captain Mal'myrn said slowly, ruminatively, eyes far away. "Standing on the edge... lured by the light..."
"Like moths to a flame?" He laughed, then sobered at the image which rose in his mind's eye – fragile wings crumbling to ash with the whole world about him. "Most hold that light is an omen of warmth... and growth. Life."
"'Lured by the light indestructible, lured by the darkness inevitable' – that's a Phylloxian saying for you to mull over. It's all the same, they said. It all ends the same." A beat. "In death."
"Death," echoed Loki softly.
"They're not wrong. I've seen it before – ejecting themselves into space, into the path of long-armed flares, into the hearts of stars... The Tro'watal has seen such a thing before and may yet again before its last run."
"What happened?"
"Popped open the escape hatch, the one 'round the corner. We use it from time to time for the repair of the struts, you know, the ones which secure the generator. So, we didn't miss O'xol for several hours."

A moment of quiet thought followed, of memory. Then the Captain exhaled a hissing sigh.

"We checked the logs, the databanks, the holovids – saw the whole thing... ejecting, drifting, then swallowed by the light and the energy of the generator. That's when we found his stash. And the crazed logs he typed into his datapad," she grimaced then and added bitterly: "All there for those who could see it. Only then."
"You did not," hazarded Loki, detecting within her story, within her quiet words a heavy burden, some kind of self-condemnation.
"I was his..." Another pause as the Skrull Captain searched for an adequate word before adding lamely, "captain."

And something more, Loki thought. Undoubtedly.

"From that day forward, I vowed never to allow pluggers on board – and above all, those who hide it, who lie to me-"
"You may search my quarters," Loki said evenly in reply to her unspoken threat and question. "You will find nothing."
"Hm. But that is no surprise. It is well-known that many enhanced beings with higher levels and abilities in magick can naturally tap into what the pluggers seek. Do not some mages and seers seek death in the wake of Enlightenment?"

Mal'myrn's question brought to Loki's mind another time and place – a Realm now so far it seemed impossible to imagine its very existence. A shadowy library on Alfheim in the King's palace and the warning words of a wiser elf.

...it is difficult to say – for certain... for they do not return, those who fall to the Shadow... and those who remain are driven mad by it or turn to acts of evil in obedience to those dark urges... or they
take refuge beneath the sheltering boughs of Yggdrasil. We all choose, you understand, in the end. However, they understood the process better – or perhaps see it clearer...

"They were the first," Loki had guessed. "The first to cross the Void."
"Indeed," Elethed had replied gravely. "For some, to face their fears; for others, to succumb to them."

...it is a fearsome thing...

...the mystics, are those few Elves, Light or Dark, who tie themselves ever closer to Yggdrasil's magickal stream of Life – and thereby tap into the dangerous knowledge that may one day tear the soul apart...

...kind-hearted, clear-eyed Hluti...

...the Well...

The Well. At the memory of sipping from its clear, cold waters, imbibing of the very soul of Asgard itself, Loki shivered. What visions he had seen, he would never forget for his long life, nor would he be able to fully speak of it. Something so sacred as to be utterly beyond the most golden words.

The Cosmos – full of colour and fantastic things and Life and possibilities. The Void – black and filled with nameless things and Death and inevitability. Eternally battling. And there he stood, as he always had, upon on the edge – but not as his Vow had stated. Never as his Vow. Never would he be able to fulfill that promise. I am a liar, he thought, as he gazed into the Abyss. And always shall be. Ever shall my back be to Valhalla and the Light and ever shall I face this emptiness.

...the Well and the following realization...

What destruction would such power wreak in you… and the mystics as such were ever bound to solitude and wandering… Few are left… but some works remain, surely...

...for the Spaces Between span vast distances through the Dark, which even the armies of Hel and our other Kin also fear to tread. This Dark is empty, if tales are to be believed. Yet, some aver that they have heard the Voice of the Dark, the Voice of the Dark that whispers in the night. It craves all things, these mystics say, for it is eternally hungry. It is calling...

"Sometimes," Loki finally broke the silence between the two of them. "Sometimes?"
"Sometimes," Loki repeated. He met her eyes then, red steel meeting red. "Standing on the edge, you said. You have to face forward and look out across the abyss."

...LITTLE ONE...

Standing on the edge of the desert-like ice shelf, feet planted firmly, dwarfed on either side by two thurblakulfr, the ulfrbarn braced himself into the wind. Black hair whipped forward like a tattered flag and bright, red eyes stared out over the short expanse of ice before him. Behind lay the Svelshelf – a vast plain of frozen cold beneath one's feet – rising to meet the blue horizon and the great cold suns edging up over the world as it seemed. And before him... a few steps forward and his toes hung slightly over the edge of the Svelshelf and the rocks below it which hung downward. Downward. The ulfrbarn felt it – the pull – the nothingness calling – the Void –

This was the edge of his world.

...LONG HAVE YOU LOOKED...
Headed out toward the stars, it lies – a bridge which spans the places of What Is Seen through the spaces of What Is Not. A physical bridge and a metaphysical bridge all in one – the Bifrost. Long and thin it stretches from the heart of Asgard’s great capital, beneath the palace, down the centre of the city and out to the far-reaching expanse of Asgarthaharr and beyond. Perched on the edge of the sea, the Bifrost ended with the gold and bronze dome of the Observatory.

Staring down, green eyes gazing wide-eyed into the Abyss, Loki, in the face of such destruction, could not help but wonder what it was he saw. He saw Dark, he saw the Void, yet at his back and all about the winds of magick buffeted like the wind. The Heimsrsal of Asgard howled and shrieked.

...LONG HAVE YOU HOVERED ON THE EDGE...

...ON THE BORDERS...


An ancient road now leading to nowhere. Leading to the Void.

Now they stood at the edge, the two of them, gazing down in the Abyss which swirled about lazily. The worlds, the Sages had said, are filled with colour and light and the energies of magick. However, the Muthr’a’Ginnung is cold, is death, is worse than death – it is nothing. Looking down at the black hole which had been for so long feeding off the giant Realm, Loki thought he knew now what had threatened his dreams.

All those years, listening to the Voices of the Void, he thought. Hearing it in my dreams, feeling its cold breath drift across Utgard and creep into the shadows. Gnawing away at my thoughts... it was here... all the time... I merely did not wish to face it, the reality of it, the reality of the fact that I was destined for it.

This is the road to Innagard.

...OF MY WORLD...

...YOU ARE MINE...

"You cannot turn your back," Loki shivered then, clasping his lightly shaking hands together to force his betrayed emotions down. "You must not turn your back on it. It is there... always has been, perhaps, waiting to swallow us whole. Some, some may stand on the edge and, facing forward, warn those who do not heed the call of the Fates."

-0-0-0-

Captain Mal'myrn turned her head then, slowly, the muscles on her pale green forehead knitted together in a frown. Leaning back on the rail now, she studied her new and still mysterious crew member's suspiciously blank face. The man's darker tinted lips were drawn flat and tight and the muscles around the edge of his sharply defined jaw bunched and jumped with tension.

"And in staring into it," Mal'myrn asked softly, "what will one lose?"

At those words, his red eyes – such vivid red gems – slid sideways to meet hers. Brilliant red, she thought, hard like stones, guarded as strongly as the Emperor's palace on Tarnax II. Yet, beneath... beneath, such powers, so leashed – like the fire mountains of Muspelheim. Such fury, such... power. And beneath that – beneath it all – what truly lies in his heart? A frightened child, perhaps. Or a
yawning appetite for power. I suppose few will ever truly know.

She laid a hand on his pale blue one. It was cold and firm with spare muscle and bone beneath the blue skin. The top of edged lines running along the back of his hand peeked out from underneath the edged black cuffs of his grey jumpsuit. Slightly raised, Mal'myrn knew and, judging by the slight involuntary response – a light shudder which ran down Kol'la's frame – sensitive.

Such a rarity, to find something so precious, so beautiful, she thought with a tender smile which fit her hard-boned face a little oddly. Her lips parted as her longer tongue tasted the air now filled with the faint scent of rising desire. And yet... even here... familiar territory.

"Ca-" Before Kol'la could go any further, Mal'myrn placed a finger on his lips. "We will reach Norad soon," she leaned forward, her long tongue flicking his ear lobe. "Then... there..." She drew back and flashed him an impish grin, baring her sharp even white teeth. "We shall... talk."

With that, she drew back, giving his hand one last squeeze before turning away and striding down the hallway toward the Module.

Behind her, the air seemed to vibrate with tension – with want.

She did not look back.

[...connections...]

[...the threads...]

[...the warp and weft of fate...]

Two shifts later, while Nesta and Loki and their motley crew slept, the Tro'watal lit down on the waiting launch pad of V'slozh'noi.

[...worlds so bound...]

[...collide...]

[...such is Fate...]

[...a slender hand guides the shuttle...]

[...thus Doom is woven...]

Chapter End Notes

I know that some of you haven't been expecting the route I'm taking so far with Loki's time between Thor and the Avengers - but I do have some dark times coming up eventually - it just has to develop adequately and before those times come, there's some other details setting up stuff I need to achieve. I hope it's enjoyable regardless.

Thanks for reading!

Let me know what you think~
Information on Levels of Mage/Magical Abilities

Level 1 – Eno'sa
Level 2 – Eno'tho – Thanos
Level 3 – Eno'frei
Level 4 – Eno'ah – Elven Mages/Odin
Level 5 – Eno'ko – Asgard/Jotun/Any Other Healthy Realm Mage/Prince Loki before Odin caps him
Level 6 – Eno'yul – Sharda'aa/Regular Mage
Level 7 – Eno'kee – Uncollared Kol'la
Level 8 – Eno'mah – Collared Kol'la/Current Prince Loki post-Fall
Level 9 – Eno'lei
Level 10 – Eno'sanai

Numbers (for this quadrant):
0 - nai
1 - sa
2 - tho
3 - frei
4 - ah
5 - ko
6 - yul
7 - vee
8 - mah
9 - lei

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
bollen - boulders/monoliths
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
Eno'Keshi'ko – the system of Eno, a type of magical level measurements
Fen'chi Galaxy – Andromeda Galaxy
gan'ga'war – steel balls
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
Kholathan – Safety Belt/Protected Zone
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
l'gon – storyteller
Morning-star - a mace
myech'myena - shape-shifting
Mye'hyoi Peyt – Milky Way
n'ch'inka – a kind of cow
oma'auzha – mother-refixer
oto’oa - big sister
pu'lotni – plutonium
pye'nee - a kind of bird
Ra'ska'yeh o Phyllo'xia – Tales of Phylloxia
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
Shen'grid – the Protected Zone
So'shah – Earth/Midgard
tro'watal – perseverance
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
whota – wheat
Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 67
Loki: The Low Road III

It is a known fact the universes over, that where life grows, it must also spread. Life mutates, changes, evolves, devolves and returns in any environment it can find able to sustain some kind of being. Thus, the silicon critters which burrow through airless asteroids and ships alike, the kon'bi, the lasu, the sigan and the gan'ko run riot throughout the galaxy, carried by the higher order species who trekked across Time and Space in search of new lands.

The Skrull, the Kree, the Mah'konai and the few varieties of Elves, in search of new land and resources for their growing populations, cast further afield in the galaxies and Realms about them. Some, like the Elves and the Mah'konai, finding what little they needed, halted once content. Yet others, with grand imperial interests, expanded carefully under the paternalistic eye of the older, greater beings – the Celestials and then, as Time and Existence forgot those Ancients, the Asgardians.

The rise and fall of empires has been and has continued to be a subject of interest for those who fear for the future, for those who would wield the power which numbers alone can bring, for those with the intent to conquer. The Skrull, the Kree, the Chitauri and, once upon a time, the Noradians, were so involved.

Noradians populated much of the Realm of Midgard and some of Jotunheim's and Asgard's Realms to boot. Hardy, diligent and given to middling intelligence, the Norad, finding their needs eventually satisfied, laid aside their weapons of conquest and took to more prosaic concerns – trade and farming.

Still, their far-flung colonies thrived independently, long after the final dissolution of the Noradian Empire. Generally respected with the tales of the ancient exploits still recalled in stories, the Noradians were left well enough alone amidst rising tensions between the "Fish-Folk" and the "Lizards".
Turning one's gaze now to the Lesser Realm of Midgard, on the edge of the relatively uninhabited galaxy in which Midgard was located, one can find one such Noradian colony: V'slozh'noi, the home and birthplace of Nesta and now current resting spot for the Tro'watal.

Emerging from the Tro'watal, Loki's first impression, as he descended the short, metal stairs propped up against the foot of the ship's bow Module shaft door, was that V'slozh'noi was a fair world. Sniffing the air experimentally, Loki was pleased to catch underneath the stench of oil and hot metal the whiff of clear, fresh air with the faint scent of rain and green things. Far in the distance, behind the city a good hour or two, he judged, mountains loomed with grey clouds and a blanket of grey which he recognized to be the aforementioned rain.

Yes, he smiled a little then, a living world as Nesta said.

The sky was a pleasing blue which blurred into a familiar steel grey over the mountains and below it, in the foreground, rising buildings – simple looking yet graceful lines of towered apartments and the tops of bright green-leaved trees.

A living world.

Unfortunately, there was the matter of paperwork and form-filling and inspection and scanning and interviewing to be accomplished before assaying out into V'slozh'noi. A most common procedure, Nesta had assured Loki. Tro'watal, although a Noradian ship, was inbound from off-planet and so must undergo the regular inspections all ships had to undergo.

"For drugs and things," the Noradian had chattered on in his usual friendly patter as their work team sat together in the canteen shifting through various forms which the Captain had handed out to the crew to fill in before landing. "Captain always has a stack of these handy, seeing as we go through Noradian security and customs so regularly. Ah! You put your names in those boxes there. Make sure the letters fit inside – whatever you use, since it'll be scanned in, uh, later."

"You are not filling out a form," Loki had pointed out a tad bit enviously. This kind of paperwork, he had always thought dull. Contrary to Thor's opinion, there were some things related to writing which Loki did not enjoy.

"Ah, well," Nesta had smiled happily then. "That'd be because V'slozh'noi is my country of origin. Um, you know, my birthplace – oh – you can put me there as a reference if you wish to apply for a longer term of visitation – temporary work and the like."

"Job?"

"Well," Nesta scratched his nose. "My brothers, my sister and I hold a syem'fyerra, a farm, you know, run by families or close-knit communities. Right, so... you could, um, work there if you wanted."

A pause then had followed as Loki had digested Nesta's offer in mild disbelief. Even knowing how open-hearted the Noradian could be, Loki still found it difficult to accept how hospitable the man was.

"Thank you," the exiled prince said.

"Until you decide where you need to go next," Nesta had continued lightly. "Not much to write home about, but V'slozh'noi is home... a good place to stay and think for a while, I guess."

"And there is information about the Phylloxians?" Loki ticked off some more boxes.

"Yes. That too, if you are really interested in old tales."

"Old tales hold great truths," Loki had said with a shrug and had then focused again on the seemingly interminable forms before him.

"Yeah, well," anyway, inspections are regular. Scanners, drug pollen and particle detection, imported
good claims and all that."

Scanners, drug pollen and particle detection and imported goods claims, Loki thought with a sigh as he and Nesta were separated. The Noradians apparently had their own quicker way of processing locals, while the rest of the Skrull and various alien crew members, along with Loki, were escorted into a large room. Behind them, a line of officials and other jump-suited staff followed by the Captain filed into the ship along with several machines. Then the door closed and Loki could only look forward.

A queue was formed, forms and papers and credentials were examined and scanned. Loki, having next to no background history came under particular scrutiny, but Nesta's references seemed to be enough in the end for Loki's paperwork to pass muster. At some point, Captain Mal'myrn returned from the inspection of ship and cargo. Judging by the bounce in her step, the slight smile on her narrow face, the confident tilt of her shoulders and the glint in her eyes, things had proceeded satisfactorily. With a few additional words of recommendation from her (with a variety of technical language regarding wormholes, inter-Realm travel and magickal accidents), Loki's permit processing passed much more smoothly.

A full body scan followed and a weapons check-in. Also no surprise to Loki thanks to the ever informative Nesta. No diseases, no drugs, no weapons, Nesta had affirmed and at the look of incredulity on Loki's face added, well, that's the plan anyways. So they scan you, type you and you check your weapons in, if you have any – which you don't – and you can take them back, of course, when you leave. Just to lower potential inter-galactic issues...

Loki had nodded neutrally, deciding to say nothing of the niche of weapons, both lesser and mass, which were held in that small dimensional pocket he had first created during his Mage Academy days.

Not that I can access them, Loki thought moodily. So far I have not been able to do much besides form ice and shape-shift... and even those only for a shorter time when under duress. One of the first things Loki had done once safely aboard the Tro'watal had been to ascertain what powers remained to him. Not much, apparently, yet it seems as though the Jotunn heritage is still, to a certain extent, within my grasp and that is enough, Loki thought.

Watching the lithe Captain Mal'myrn unclasped blaster holster and three electroblade sheathes and two other neatly hidden throwing knives as well as a small, palm-sized handgun, Loki found himself hard put to remain unimpressed. Quite a bit of weaponry there, he mused as the various weapons were neatly tagged, catalogued and then locked away in a strong box and slid into a slot of a shelving unit amongst other boxes behind a heavy iron and steel grille. Another reason for her name, I suppose. Then he grinned as he contemplated her promises. She will be quite a handful, I think... but... ah! what kind of fun is there without a little bit of trouble!

The identity card, which the Captain had procured for him on the mining planet and which now held the spare bits of information he felt safe enough to impart (partially based in truth – Jotunn ex-slave turned warrior-mage, security specialist and academic), was then returned to him with his new temporary work permit. At least, the paper one, the clerk had told Loki. In two weeks, the actual plastic card would be forwarded to Nesta's home address.

"So you will stay awhile," the Captain had said quietly in response to Loki's announcement earlier on the Tro'watal. "On V'slozh'noi."
"I hope I can find my way back to Jotunheim somehow – perhaps through the Fenchi Galaxy."
"Hm."

That had been her short reply. Obviously, she was concerned about something, but of what she
would not say.

"And you?" Loki had finally broken the unnerving silence. "Ah, two weeks rest for the Tro'watal and crew," she had swivelled her Com-chair about more fully, the better to look him up and down with amusement.

Loki's return smile had evaporated at the barely contained snort erupting from his ever faithful shadow, Nesta.

_Two weeks_, Nesta had told him later, _was a rare holiday for the ever busy Tro'watal to take. Captain Mal'myrn rarely dallied for anything – or anyone. I suppose she has something planned..._ Loki had just smiled and shrugged.

_Two weeks_, Loki blinked as the officials, rattling off tired phrases of welcome in broken Basic and Skrullian, escorted them further through a hall and up a flight of stairs before leading them to a larger terminal where beings of all shapes and sizes bustled about lifting and pushing luggage, hawking local wares (string-looking beady necklaces and the like), offering various local services (Loki exchanged his few weeks' pay into Noradian credits immediately). In large groups, well-wishers gathered, saying teary goodbyes to travelling kin, and welcomers (some equally teary-eyed) also waited for their returning friends and family.

A shout from the middle of a particularly large group of Noradians revealed Nesta and his comrades, already having been checked through. Nesta's sincere welcome began again, promising soft beds, a hot meal and 'home-styled entertainment', whatever that meant. When Loki caught the shared looks of several crew-mates – complete with raised eyebrows and leery grins – he understood.

_Right. Home-styled entertainment indeed._ For the first time in a long time, Loki felt a rising urge to chuckle, but then the Captain caught his eyes with an equally wide grin and Loki found himself hard put to keep his composure. Suddenly, the warrior-mage turned miner had a feeling that he would not be sampling any of the local 'home-styled entertainment' anytime soon.

_Not that he minded._

---

An hour later, freshly washed and clothed once again in his familiar leathers and coat, Loki found his way down to the main atrium – a wide, clean, simple space with several chairs and a variety of carefully placed potted plants. _A kind of attempt_, he thought, _to bring nature indoors. Comfortingly like Asgard –_

_Don't think of Asgard. Do not..._

Annoyed at how easily his relaxed mood had evaporated at the reminder of his now lost home, Loki made his way out the back entrance, down a broad, shallow flight of stairs to a short walkway which led to what could only be an artificially made pond. A large one, now empty of bathers, with calm, clear waters. Inviting. Removing his boots and socks and rolling up his leathers, the young Jotunn dipped his blue feet into the cold water.

_Ahhh... instant relief._ Loki leaned back on his hands, head tipped back and eyes closed. For awhile he sat there, enjoying the light breeze about him – the wind was soft and gentle, it's voices high and young. _A youthful world_, Loki thought idly. _In the springtime of its years._

There was only its song, the gentle creak of the trees placed about the pond, the rustle of leaves, the faraway laughter and clatter of the evening meal – and nothing much else. In his mind's eye, Loki
imagined Nesta's triumphal much welcomed return home and the exiled Prince's heart ached as he remembered Frigga's tearful gaze and her heartbroken farewell. *Will my return be such a glad day for Asgard? He could not help but wonder. Will there be happiness for the return of one such as I?*

*Loki, the outsider. Vaetki, the unwanted one.*

Just a glimpse then of memory – land falling away and Laufey's hardened face and eyes burning with nameless emotion. Loki shivered.

A soft step. A familiar scent washed over him then – heather and scrub.

"Want to join me?" he murmured and then turned with a half-smile to meet the Captain's gaze, and then froze at the sight of her sleeveless, low-cut, black top and form-fitting pants neatly tucked into her usual boots. The black set off her green skin well – green skin now looking odd without its usual rough texture. She had shifted and, if possible, looked even more lovely than before.

"Ah, it's cold. Look-" He made as if to get up but stopped at the wave of her hand.

"I can make do," she replied easily, unzipped and slipped off her boots and socks, rolled up her pants' bottoms and joined him, her skin rippling to a familiar hue of blue.

"You don't have to-"

"The Jotunn of Jotunheim, they say, feel the beauty of ice and snow and cold winds. This is no hardship for me to experience. All good things in life should be embraced fully."

"Most beings would say to mimic a Frost Giant is..." Loki trailed off meaningfully.

"I am not 'most beings'."

"I am – I am sorry, Capt-"

"Mal," she shifted closer than, her pale blue skin matching his as her fingers slipped along the tops of his own. "You can call me Mal."

"Mal," Loki tested her name. "Mal," he repeated it again as though tasting it like the fine cordials on Alfheim. "A strong name, Mal'myrn, yet beautiful... like its owner."

"My, my," laughed Mal then. "Haven't you got a silvertongue!"

"Ah! You have got me there," Loki raised a hand in mock surrender.

"You must have charmed many with that smile and that tongue of yours."

"I... do my best," Loki replied, lips curving up in a slow, meaningful smile. He drew her closer, shoving down his memories of all those who had not succumbed to his charm but had instead hounded him for it.

"You are quiet today, though."

"I have much to think of," Loki admitted. His red eyes wandered about the dark waters of the pond, the glistening reflections of the waystation's dim lights, the deepening violet sky and the alien stars which were now shining brighter in the dusk. "This place is... quiet. Quiet affords thought. Thoughts I have not recently had time for."

"The waystation is further out of town than most would like," Mal'myrn agreed, "and it is quiet. Quieter. But I would be lying if I said that I didn't need it."

"Hmmm..."

"We all have those moments in our lives when we must spend some time considering our pasts, our present and our futures."

"Yes. I have had those moments quite a bit in recent times... before..."

Before the coronation. Before the fallout. Before his attempt to please. Before his exile. Before his fall.

*My fall...*

"Before what, Kol'la?" Mal prompted the Jotunn quietly.
"Before," was all Loki could say.
"Well, I cannot say what your path will hold nor what way the road you have chosen to tread on will lead you... but I sense that what you desire, if you so will it, you will achieve."
"I hope so," Loki sighed gustily. "The first step is the Fenchi Galaxy from the looks of it."
"Ahhhh, well, have care," Mal said, suddenly very serious. "That part of this Realm is currently undergoing much turmoil."
"War?"
"In some parts, yes," The Skrull woman shivered then, as if remembering some kind of terrible memory. "The Skrull, the Kree and others battle for dominion... and over them all hangs... a... a – a Shadow."
"A shadow?"
"Hm. Some kind of dark will drives some of those races to war, to conquest..."
"Surely there is room enough-"
"The dark is ever hungry, Kol'la," Mal shook her head. "Ever it seeks to devour living things. From the Fenchi Galaxy, you see, one may gain flight from the Skrullian capital to Asgard's or Jotunheim's Realms. Inter-Realm travel has been achieved on some level by various species, such as the Kree-"
"And your people."
"Yes, the Skrull also. Such technologies are jealously guarded – and there are other races who would do anything – anything to attain such abilities, such power. They search for it, even now."
"Who does?"
"Who doesn't is more the question. The Chitauri, for one. They are called thus by many-"
"The Chitauri..."
"You have heard of them?" Mal asked.
"Yes," Loki replied absently, recalling reports of the Marauders and the Chitauri from a long time when he had been a Prince. It seemed so long ago. "But what could they want in Midgard's Realm?"

A pregnant pause followed. Then Loki's red eyes widened.

"Not Midgard, surely?"
"Who knows... rumours say," Mal hesitated. "Rumours say that Asgard's Vaults do not hold all the treasures of Reality. Other places, such as Midgard may have – through design or accident – gained such treasures. If any of the Infinity Gems were found – or the Aether – or the Cosmic cube, then what would happen to the balance of power, I wonder?"

Weighty silence followed her question, then Loki stirred.

"Such things cannot possibly be found on Midgard. Surely not."
"And if they were?"
"Fa – For certain, Asgard would know and come to their rescue."
"Well, that is another possibility," Mal pointed out calmly. "Everyone knows that the sure fire route to Asgard is through Midgard – especially if one wished to gain Asgard's attention... or to distract them."
"When will they go to Midgard?" Loki whispered harshly, his voice tight as he thought of Thor stranded on the planet without his powers.
"Today, tomorrow, hundreds of years in the future... no one knows," Mal shrugged. "And, well, this is all hearsay, but as they say."
"There is no avalanche without snow?"
"Something like that," Mal laughed then, softly. "Kol'la, you should not scowl so. The future cannot be as dour as you fear. Not if you will it so."
"You are quite the optimist," Loki turned and found himself nose to nose with his sultry companion. "Hm. I am more of a believer."
"A believer in what exactly?" Loki breathed, leaning closer.
"In us," Mal smiled then and kissed him on the lips before drawing back and added impishly: "Well,
I should say, in myself, since for all your silver-tongued talk, I have as yet to see any real action from y-

Before she could finish, her final sentence, Loki drew her close, his hand rising to cradle her flowing, black locks as he kissed her soundly, stealing away her words.

[...the warp and weft of fate...]
[...worlds so bound...]

Later on that night, between light brown, crisp, newly laundered sheets smelling of grass and sunlight, Mal said something incoherent about finally finding the practical uses for silver-tongues. Loki found himself, for the first time in a long time, laughing openly without thought to anything but the sharing of joy, respect and pleasure.

Such pleasure.
[...silence fell...]
[...and there was nothing but communion...]
[...as two minds met...]
[...and each in its orbit...]
[...drew close in the eternal dance...]

The planet revolved, sunlight crept slowly over oceans, rivers, mountains and plains, bringing with it the soft light of dawn. Filtering in bars through the half-closed shades, the pale light angled down, gently warming the sprawling limbs lying tangled together on the great bed. Outside, several song-birds took up chorus cheerfully.

Loki groaned, pulled a pillow more securely over his head and turned away, mumbling a muffled, slurred complaint against ‘whoever had turned the lights on’. His partner, more solidly asleep just grunted in response. A pale, blue hand emerged, found the room’s remote and clicked a button, closing the shutters and dowsing the light.

The room fell blessedly silent again.
[...warmth and light...]
[...heartbeat of the world...]
[...as all had begun...]
[...before the thought of Time...]

When Mal next opened her eyes, she found herself confronted with the sight of two neatly placed collar bones rising up and across the slender shoulders and chest of her lover, ends framing the thinly muscled column of the man’s graceful neck. The woman frowned as she recalled the previous night of passion, now a little hazy as morning drowsiness clung to her memory like sticky webs. She couldn't remember paying proper homage to those – nor to the arching neck.

*I'll have to rectify that immediately,* she told herself.
Shifting a little, she lifted her head and then paused as she realized that a pair of red eyes were watching her like a sniper, like a hawk.

"Awake for long?" she asked, tongue a little heavy and voice gravelly as her dry throat worked in an unwieldy kind of way.
"Not long."
"Hmm..."

He twisted about, leaned over to the small night table by the head of the bed on his side and rummaged about in one of the drawers before pulling out a clear glass canteen of water.

A splendid view, she thought with an appreciative smirk as she watched the muscles of Kol'la's back stretch taut under his smooth blue skin. Darker lines ran down his back with curves and matching geometrical corners paralleling the neat march of bone down his spine. She reached forward, laid a hand on the cool solid flesh which tightened in response, and considered the light, faded thin, black strips which ran across the blue skin – horizontal layered scars, some thin and some thick, speaking of a dark history.

Kol'la does not speak of his past, she thought sadly. Perhaps it will never be something he can share. Perhaps it is so old, it is irrevocably buried... What is buried, let it there remain, that the ghosts of the past may not be raised... Or maybe not. For in the purging, there is healing and release.

"Here," his husky voice broke into her thoughts, offering the now open canteen.
"Thanks."
"Mhm."

Pause.

"Better?"
"Yeah."

Another pause. Then he said, "You seem thoughtful."
"Same could be said for you."
"Hm."
"Credit for your thoughts."
"Ha," Kol'la huffed then, a grin spreading across his face. "You cannot guess?"
"Ah," Mal returned with a cheeky grin. "Right."
"You?"

"I was thinking," Mal said slowly, setting aside the water canteen onto her night table before trailing a hard nail down his neck over his smooth chest to stop playfully over his dark nipple. "I was thinking... that you, sir, came out of last night's activities rather unscathed-"
"Relatively unscathed," Kol'la corrected her, an indulgent mocking smile formed on his lips then. "You have no idea what you did to my heart. I think it needs some mending-"
"Ha," Mal snorted. "We are speaking of hearts already? I think there is something far more important to attend to, don't you think?"

She drew him down for a kiss which lasted for quite some time, leaving them both a little breathless at the end. When they came up for air, Mal discovered that somehow she had ended up halfway underneath him. Propping himself up on his elbows, Kol'la looked down at her and quirked an eyebrow at her, clearly amused.

"Well," he drawled then. "It seems we have a quandary here-"
"We do?" was her impish response. "Funny... I don't see much of a problem here. In fact," here, her hands ran lightly down his back scraping against his skin and lines lightly, enjoying the responsive flush now rising on his cheeks. "If there is a problem... or quandary... I am sure there is a fairly
"simple solution."
"You are so certain of your problem-solving capabilities?" Ko'ila asked with a smirk. "Well, fine. I take it that this is a 'no' to breakfast?"
"I think I have enough on my plate as it is," she replied, eyes lit with matching amounts of mischief. "An insatiable appetite. I can only hope to satisfy, my lady," Ko'ila leaned forward to kiss her again, lightly. "I say we start now, hm?"
"Now you're talking," Mal replied, drawing him back down.

They did not emerge from their room until lunchtime.

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The next week and a half passed lazily like a slow-moving river, warm and golden under the rays of a summer sun. Time passed – slowly, quickly – and each second was treasured for the gift it was. Under any other circumstance, Loki supposed, this would be a prelude for something more certain, more permanent... but I am not Ko'ila. I am Loki. And she is Captain Mal'myrn. Two worlds for a short time, sharing a single space, but nothing more...

Still the chase, such as it was, was pleasing and for that short time, defined by the space of a month's acquaintanceship, there was a mutual openness. No shadow of lies hung over them, nor were there any usual burdens of expectation. Nothing was touched upon relating to the past, and the future of their relationship, it seemed, was mutually considered to be fairly obvious.

Mal was, after all, a practical creature and primarily defined by her work. Loki could respect that and, considering his own uncertain future, asked nothing more of her. They took and gave – forming something neither could quite name as they lounged about the waystation, strolled across meadows, hiked through the nearby forests and lower foothills of the mountain range.

Loki and Mal discovered much in those short hours. Mal was rather forthright, stern, pragmatic and cool to the core. Upon getting lost on their initial foray into the wood, she had no compunction about accessing the local satellites, ascertaining their position and orienteering the two lost hikers immediately. Neither did she have much time for theoretics, what ifs or possibilities, Loki discovered when discussing Inter-Realm politicks and historical theories on social change. Her interest lay in the now, in the here. In Loki, which he could hardly object to, all things considering. Still, the intensity of her measured looks at times still unnerved the exiled Prince who was used to the stares of Odin's Court and the Mage's Academy.

When Nesta called on the fourteenth day (partway through the second week), Loki answered the Noradian's call languidly, still worn out from Mal's athletic attentions just ten minutes previously.

"Nesta," Loki said huskily, punching the answer call button of the local com-pad which Nesta had supplied him with on the third day of arrival. Rolling away from Mal who watched him now with Skrullian red eyes, a shocking contrast to her now smooth green skin, Loki focused on the near wall, trying to ignore her amused stare and wandering hands.

"Ko'ila," Nesta's voice vibrated loudly and cheerfully with his customary enthusiasm and good will. "Great news!"
"Great news?" Loki turned to quirk an eyebrow at Mal who had slid over onto 'his side of the bed' and was now plastering herself against his back, nuzzling his shoulder in a rather distracting manner.

The whole scenario brought to mind an age old question of his. Loki abstractly wondered yet again why the males of most species thought they could enjoy and adequately please a group of females. The dreams of harems and private brothels had always puzzled and amused the warrior mage. One woman, he thought, is difficult enough to handle, let alone two... or five.
Often, Thor had boasted of his exploits and given unwanted details on the 'art of wenching', encouraged by Fandral who was reknown for his 'skills'. I suppose he ought to be allowed more character than your garden variety narcissist, Loki admitted. Although the title of womanizer is barely an improvement, if any.

At any rate, such tales had only earned snorts from Volstagg and eye-rolling from Sif. Hogun had often just smirked. And Loki... Loki had always wondered, a gnawing feeling of inadequacy rising within him.

"So she will be here tomorrow-"

Nesta's voice blurred into Loki's thoughts and the Jotunn came crashing down with the realization that he had completely missed out on Nesta's explanation.

"Pardon," Loki finally interrupted his friend. "Who?"
"The l'gon," Nesta said, bewildered. "Are you..."
"I am fine, fine," Loki repeated answering Nesta's unspoken question, rubbing his eyes as he pried himself up out of Mal's embrace and sat on the edge of the bed. "Sorry. So she is coming on the morrow."
"Yes. We will meet at dusk at the chosen place as I just said. I will pick you up at the seventeenth hour and will bring you to her place. You will be free, right, Kol'la?"
"Of course," Loki reassured the Noradian. "I would not miss it for the world."
"Good, good," Nesta said. "So... I will see you, ah, tomorrow?"
"Yes."
"Oh... and... uh, well, if, ah... if the, er, Captain wishes to join, she is more than welcome."

Loki stiffened and Mal laughed then.

"Thanks, Nesta!" she called out now, leaning over Loki's shoulder. "See you tomorrow!" Nesta repeated, clearly amused and vindicated, and clicked off.

Mal continued to laugh.

"You – you should – should see yourself-" she snorted.

Loki blushed, his expression turning from one of chagrin to mortification as embarrassment set in.

"It is just-" he sputtered.
"Ahhh... but of course he would know," Mal rolled her eyes. "He may be Noradian, but he wasn't born yesterday! Come. I am hungry. Let's wash up and go out... unless you need to rest your weary, aged bones and hide in your room out of embarrassment."
"No, no," Loki said with mock hauteur, relaxing as he realized that here, here there was no mockery. "I think my wounded pride can manage."
"Good to hear," Mal chuckled. "Pride is overrated anyways. Space it, I always say."

Loki watched her disappear into the washroom and, tossing the com-pad back onto the rumpled sheets, smiled briefly.

Space it.

Wise words from a wise woman...

With that thought, Loki rose slowly, stretched lazily and ambled after Mal, joining her in the lukewarm shower.
Flames, orange and red blending downward into the hotter embers which flared blue and green, danced and swayed in the light breeze sweeping off the mountains. The world was now shaped by shadows, flickering in and out, a picture of the eternal chase between light and dark. Now was that perfect time when That Which Is Seen blended with That Which Is Not.

This was the witching hour.

Overhead, starlight filtered down with the light of two small moons now fully risen over the distant northern range. Cool and calm, the white light blurred and dowsed the brighter energy of the campfire around which the group of Noradians and aliens alike gathered. No other light – artificial or natural lit up the surrounding environs. There was only the fire, the starlight, the moonlight, and the shadows cast by trees and the nearby mountains rising over the heads to the north and the east.

This was the witching hour.

No one spoke. Only the l'gon's voice filtered through the cool, fresh night air, accompanied by the crackle of dry wood devoured by flame and the patter of a light drum. Two drums. One played by the l'gon herself, the other by one of her apprentices. None spoke – but an inarticulate mutter indecipherable even to the All-Speak. It blended eerily with the atmospheric surroundings – the creak and rustle of the trees, the light wind, the fire and the drums.

[...the drums...]

[...call...]

[...it is the witching hour...]

Loki understood. This was, in a way, his domain. Ever he had stood in this twilight world, and so, instinctively, the warrior mage relaxed himself, closed his eyes and, when the second and third apprentices finished their preparations, breathed in the mixture of burning embers and bitter herbs and incense passed solemnly in a rough-hewn wooden bowl about the circle.

Inhale.

-now-

Exhale.

Inhale.

The mutterings began to form words and as he listened, Loki allowed it to tug upon his consciousness, following the song willingly. Around him, the Voices of the World sang hauntingly. A seemingly young Heimsrsal, full of hope despite its long history. Perhaps not so young, but brimming with life nevertheless, thus it is-

The thought escaped Loki like a silver fish darting through a river and he let it go, welcoming the next thought.

Silver fish. He was gazing down at a river now, watching the fish – wearing his blue skin and an odd garb of canvass, furs and leathers. In his hand, a bone staff curved upward wickedly sharp and cunning. From its handle dangled bits of beadwork, leather, feathers and delicately carved bones.

Inhale.
Exhale.

He looked up. A broad plain stretched before him – green grasses and bright flower heads meeting the sky and distant forests and mountains, faintly familiar. *V'slozh'noi?* Loki turned about sharply. The spear-staff's beads rattled and at the sound the apartments and tall buildings of the northern city disappeared, leaving only a vast plain and three conjoined rivers. *V'slozh'noi, perhaps, long ago-

Inhale.

*Now, let us hear _ the twice-told tale,*
*how Hratha _ city-builder brought*
magnificent Myrok _ up on firm foundations
settled the green grass seas _ and brought low great mountains.
So lived the sky-skinned people _ so they came from nothing
and to nothing they departed _ and the Citadel of Snow
of the Great White North _ remains in rest, in wait
for the One Who will Remake it.*

Exhale.

The words, forming in Loki's mind twisted then away like a snake – a snake writhing in his hands, falling into icy black waters and growing into something. He had seen it before, him before. *Iormungand?* The great serpent spoke then, words at first muddled than becoming clearer...

Inhale.

*Let he who has ears, let him hear,*
*Let him understand, let him know,*
*Let him experience, let him live,*
*Let him see-*

Suddenly, he was whirling past the stars – starlight stretching into eternal streaks of light, straight as arrows and endless. When they finally resolved into pinpricks, Loki found himself in an entirely new system, floating above a planet and looking down on broken world, spouting jets of smoke and ash and water into the atmosphere, slowly torn apart over time by the nearby suns which hung a little too close for the system's comfort. There were other planets as well and as various spacecraft buzzed to and fro, in and out of the unfamiliar system, Loki was reminded of a carcass surrounded by flies. *The last vestiges,* he thought, *of a wealthy trading route.*

Then, he was pulled back again to some mountains, in the mountains, looking down into great chasms. Rocks rose upward in the air, lifted, it seemed by nothing, swivelled, molded and honed into things of great beauty before they were set down again. A new home, Loki realized, was being made.

"Again," said a voice from behind him. "Made anew."

Loki whirled about but the image twisted and he now stood on another world – or was it another part of *V'slozh'noi?* Great cities raised in earth and stone, until a great wave came towering down, sweeping it all away. *Not all of it away,* Loki shook his head, as he watched the sunken cities gather new denizens of fish and great underwater creatures and eventually curious humanoids clothed in black garb and bearing lights and mechanical things. *Some traces remain – where-*

"Made anew."
Exhale.

Inhale.

Another piece of verse, foreign and odd, rose up out of the dark, cooler depths.

*In Xanadu, did Kubla Khan*
*A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran*
*Through caverns measureless to man*
*Down to a sunless sea.*

Exhale.

Inhale.

Images now crowded thick and fast. *He was walking in the footsteps of one of the Phylloxians? Noradians?* It was not so easy to differentiate – until he looked down and saw cold iron around his wrists and he found himself looking up at a Noradian. Judging by the style of clothing, it was some time past and he, Loki, was shorter. *Much shorter. A youngling?*

A warped memory of Nesta rose then, sounding ominous and dark: *They were hunted for their abilities – their magick. Enslaved out of greed. The children were weaker, you see, and easily caught. Enslaved and pursued out of greed and fear.*

*Enslaved...*

*Ah yes.*

As he was forced into a metal container and fell into the dark, fell deeper into the dream, Loki wondered what would happen to him, what had happened to him. Not him. The one in whose shoes he now walked, the owner of the spear-staff.

Exhale.

Inhale.

*fire-wielders, light-bringers, ice-breakers, shape-shifters, star-seekers, ghost-callers, Fate's-fighters, Doom-sayers-*

The halls were empty – great grey, blue and black rock-hewn structures – colonnades, statues, columns, flying buttresses and graceful arches. Silver and white ran through some of the rock, glistening with the starry streaks of gems. A world which had been carved with loving care, with purpose.

*lines draw us together
between past and future
on canvases of winter skin-

The mountains receded and all vision turned to shadows and then complete dark as the Abyss swallowed him.

He was falling. Falling back, looking upward – and all he could see was the underside of Jotunheim, blanketed in slippery ice, whooshing past. Unstoppable. Inevitable.
Falling.

[...silence fell...]

-they travelled _ the Nameless Ones
with skol-fish skin _ and eyes of roobyn-red stone
through the Spaces _ through the Void
through the Abyss _ on paths dark, unseen
born by Will, by Fate _ on magick's wings.
Before Time was counted _ their people rose to face the stars
and, remembering such Ages, _ the Dawn of the Time
held such wisdom now forgotten-

-over the bent
World broods with warm breast and ah! Bright wings-

-They heard the songs of stars-
the voice of the deep, the dark shadow.
They spoke the tales of time-
the battles of twin heroes, the black betrayal.

Now they wander empty halls-
the ghosts of Myrok speak for those who hear.
Yes, they warn the wise
the tombs of the Kings foretell the Great Coming-

-in the eye of the storm you'll see a lonely dove
the experience of survival is the Key
to the gravity of Love-

-So, Tolska spoke _ wise, star-seer,
Fate's fortune-seeker _ many-wintered and hale:
Thus, have we foreseen _ and thus we wait
world-weary, hearts heavy _ for the Great Return
of the King foretold, _ for the time of rebirth
when the hope-filled children _ of snow, the Ice Kindred,
will once again look _ upon the Kingdom of Frost.
Thus it is spoken: _ let he who seeks knowledge
take heed, therefore _ that he may parse the meanings
understand the Truth _ and reveal it accordingly-

-Let he who seeks knowledge-

-Let he who seeks-

-Let he-

The echo taunted him with its familiarity. Round about him, the walls morphed, the sweeping lines of forest captured in stone coming to life. He was, once again, standing on Jotunheim as it was, as it had been, long ago. Loki looked about him. It was as it had been before in his dreams – a great forest, filled with life. Branches and leaves shivered in the wind and with the movement of great wolves and smaller animals passing swiftly through the underbrush and in his hand remained the curved, wicked spear – beads and bones rattling against his hand.
"Oi," a voice called to him from the shelter of the great jarnvithr branches spreading overhead.

He looked upward and met familiar eyes. Miot'vithr of Meerauk sitting beside another, equally youthful runt. Lesser Kindred, Loki corrected himself. Runt would be a disgraceful word to them. It was then he realized that it was not Miot'vithr who had spoken. The stranger smiled – and his eyes, meeting Loki's, seemed full of starlight, magick and the emptiness of space.

"You have something of mine."

Exhale.

Loki jerked upward with a sharp cry and found himself steadied by the familiar hands of Mal and Nesta. For a moment, he could see nothing but the now empty forest of Jotunheim, until the red fire burned through the image as though it were paper. His eyes moved restlessly about as he desperately tried to reorient himself.

"Kol'la," Mal was saying, smoothing his hair back away from his forehead, fingers dry and firm and reassuring.

"You all right there?" Nesta asked, dark eyes wide and glinting yellow and orange in the fire's light.

_The eyes of a demon_, Loki thought for a moment in panic, before remembering who it was that he was looking at.

"He dreamed deep and far," the I'gon said, hands still on her leather-hide drum. "Some who fall to the sway of the Shadow-World of the Unseen never return to sunlit lands. His return will take time." The I'gon breathed out, leaning forward to trace a mark in red paste on Loki's brow with her tanned, wrinkled finger. "Rest."

_many fall into the shadowed land of the Sunken City but few return to the Realm of the Cold Suns-

"Foolishness," Mal shook her head, lips thinning a sure sign of her disquiet and disapproval.

For a moment, Loi was left alone. The others quietly murmuring to each other, sharing what they had seen with each other and the attentive I'gon. Working his mouth a little, Loki took the proffered drink from Mal's hand. A mug of sweet ale, he discovered. Watching the ancient crone, the I'gon, finally take her seat and set her drum away, Loki leaned back and began to relax again as he realized they were not going to be expected to leave so quickly. Instead, he slowly inhaled and exhaled, releasing the magicks which the I'gon had infused inside him during her song. _A craft, a working I have done myself time and time again in the shows of Poison Paradise and the halls of Asgard...

However, she was unlike anything he had ever seen before, more similar to the aged fish-wives who spun tall tales in the market to the young Asgardians who would stop in their play to listen. Tanned heavily and wrinkled with the years, the I'gon was unassuming. Her clothing, homespun, her shoulders stooped, her gait slow and her hair an iron grey – white and black strands mixing together in a mass of wiry hair held none of the usual marks common among the great mages of Asgard's court. Yet her eyes were clear and strong and her song deep and wise and her magicks pure and powerful.

_I can only hope to be such a one when I reach the years of wintered maturity_, Loki thought. He turned to look at Mal who gazed thoughtfully into the now much smaller fire before them. The flames were now dying out, although the embers flared blue and green with fierce warmth.

"You..." Loki hesitated. "You did not see anything?"

"I did not partake," was her short reply. "Never have, never will."
"Only the foolhardy dive so deep," agreed the l'gon, turning to look at the pair of them. "The foolhardy and those naturally drawn to the Arts. As you are, my blue-skinned friend."
"So he is Phylloxian?" asked Nesta eagerly.
"Who can say?" our Memory-Dream walks have never shown the faces of those who carry us back. Never clearly at least, for our Sight is formed by the restraints of our Peoples. What did you see, young magician?"
"I saw my people," Loki allowed. "Also blue-skinned and... lined – as I am."
"There you go," nodded the l'gon laconically. "That is not to say that his people are not the Phylloxians, but it is not certain. Yet..." and here she eyed Loki closely. "Perhaps they are not gone. Not entirely at any rate. They shape-shift after all – and may walk among us to this day."

A weighty pause ensued at the thought.

"And now, they may walk more openly." The l'gon nodded slowly. "I can feel it in my bones, in the wind, in the earth, in the star-songs... Their time is coming. The Ruins of the Great White North's wastelands await."
"So there are ruins to visit..." Loki said quietly, sitting up and leaning forward, red eyes glittering with rising excitement. "I can seek the answers there."
"Indeed. If you have the heart for it and the will... the will to return."
"Of course he will return," Mal said, voice a little tight.

She was obviously perturbed by the way the conversation was going. Loki squeezed her hand in comfort, but the l'gon just gave the Captain an unimpressed gimlet stare.

"Some who fall to the sway of the Shadow-World of the Unseen never return to sunlit lands."
"What did you see?" Mal asked Loki then. "Are you certain-?"

"Many things... Incomprehensible things... things I cannot find words for... and things I do not know I can speak of..." Loki closed his eyes momentarily.
"Hm."
"Many pardons, Mal," Loki said apologetically, turning to her then, opening his eyes and giving her a small, rueful smile. "This was a poor way to spend your time."
"Well," Mal allowed reluctantly, giving into the silent plea in his red eyes. "It is important to you."
"Yes. It will help me, I think, to achieve my quest."
"Or only cause more trouble." Mal leaned back.
"That too," sighed Loki with a half-laugh. "Most things of import cause trouble... for someone."
"But don't let it land you in the wrong places," she insisted. "If you do need help, you know you can ask me for help. For anything."
"Anything?" Loki quirked an eyebrow at her roguishly. "Well... that is rather... comprehensive."
"Well, at least we now know that we speak the same language," Mal retorted with a flush, hitting Loki on his bicep rather hard. "How about I first help you get to bed, my feeble young man?"

But he took her extended hand and held it all the way back to their waystation's rooms. The journey was taken in relative silence and when Mal and Loki finally drew apart later on that evening (or rather, in the early morning hours), as was her habit, Mal drew Loki's arms about her and fell asleep promptly.

Loki lay under the blanket of darkness and stared sightlessly before him, replaying in his mind's eyes what he had seen. History, he wondered, turning backwards, moving backward in time to some beginning? Or was it nothing but unrelated madness? Or things brought to mind because I wished or expected to see them? Or will the Ruins hold the key, hold a clue to the identity of those who built there?
By the morning when the songbirds woke to welcome the rising sun, Loki was sleep, mind now firmly decided on the next course of action.

The ruins. A trip to the Great White North was in order.

[...lives connect...]

[...thin threads part...]

[...lives disconnect...]

Three days later, three days of fun both indoors and out, Mal woke to find Loki's side of the bed cool and empty. She sat up sharply and then paused and sagged in relief as she caught sight of his silhouette before the far window, his now familiar slender outline. Her eyes adjusted after a few seconds, noticing not for the first time those small details which made him seem so much more dear to her than ever. How straight he stood. How angular he seemed. How his black hair had lengthened a little, now curling at the edges along the nape of this neck. How tight his black leathers fit him, setting off his firm thighs and long legs admirably. How his long, delicate feet, now bared, spoke of some kind of high breeding in his family line.

Loki stood there, back to her, as if frozen in a strong spell. Deep in thought. Watching. Or rather, on the cusp, on the edge. Poised. Always poised, it seems. Power barely leashed. Her heart beat a little faster at the thought of it.

"Kol'la."

No response.

"Kol'la." Now worried, she rose, wrapping the thin under-sheet about her, and joined him, carefully and slowly running her hand along his waist and leaning against his shoulder.

Small for a typical Frost Giant, she had thought the first time she had seen him, if he is in fact one. Frost Giants on Jotunheim are surely much more... giant. If the tales are to be believed.

Now, she held onto the moment, enjoying tucking her head into his shoulder. He is still tall enough compared to the other races. In some ways, as beautiful and mysterious as the first day I laid eyes on him. Mal said nothing of this, but followed his gaze out to the mountains beyond the edges of the green plains and farm fields.

"Mal." He did not meet her eyes, but a pale blue hand slid over her warmer green one, capturing it at his hipbone and allowing her to go no further. "Sorry."

"No need for apologies," she said softly. Then added: "It is time, isn't it."

"Time?" He asked, huskily, eyes looking distantly perhaps to nowhere. "Time to say goodbye."

"Yes," he looked down then at their entwined hands. Slowly, his agonized red eyes met hers. "I must go."

"I understand," she smiled reassuringly. "Soon, you will go. As will I."

"In a day or two-"

"Soon, she repeated softly," but not now."

"Yes." Loki smiled then, a quick painful smile. "I am sure Nesta would have a saying for this occasion."

"You cannot think of one, Silvertongue?" she teased lightly.

"Words fail," he said, absently. "Sometimes."

"Hmm... 'Let us treasure these short golden hours and mine such pleasure as will be hoarded through
all of Time's memory'," quoted Mal airily. "Who needs Nesta?"
"I do not know why I mentioned him," Loki said idly, pulling away the now very crumpled under-
sheet and drawing her closer. "You are a very... distracting..."

He never finished that sentence.

Two days later, Mal and her weapons and her old and new crew members rose upward in the
Module to their positions aboard the Tro'watal. After double-checking the cargo, the remains of
refined transparisteel sheets and heavier metals as well as the live produce they would carry onward
from V'slozh'noi, the Captain to her seat in the black Com chair. She sat there deep in thought,
refusing to give the order until the final minute. Remembering the two long weeks Kol'la and she had
spent which now felt so fleeting. I will never forget, Mal told herself, the gifts I received and what I
gave... I will remember for all time, even if we were never to meet again.

As Tro'watal cleared the atmosphere, before jumping into light speed, Mal gazed down at the slowly
revolving planet below her. The vast white expanse of the North – white and grey and blue and dark
with wastelands and mountains – and glimmering, she thought, with all the colours of magick.

[...the drums of war are calling...]
[...lines of Fate intertwine...]
[...woven in the warp and weft of Life...]
[...and those who seek...]
[...to understand the mystery...]
[...walk far...]
[...listen closely...]

One day by the speediest hover-shuttle, four hours highspeed in his rented hovercar and three hours
of slower going finally brought Loki to the far edges of the northern mountains, the range so called
Tyen Po'sfyera. The Haunted Under Realm, Nesta had said, the Ghost Kingdom Below.

It was a vast wasteland of scrub and bracken and dense forests in the foothills of the mountains,
blanketing the lower reaches. Eventually, the treeline melted away as cliffs and crags rose upward
ward toward the clouds. Inhabited with wild animals, Nesta had told Loki helpfully, offering the warrior-
mage several chips of information concerning the general area including predators and what food and
water resources were available. Truth be told, the exiled Prince was not so impressed. It was a dull,
cold place - a grey world under lowering thick clouds, promising snow and fog and the usual
inclement weather of most polar regions the universe over.

The map, with which he had been supplied by the l'gon, was old, but after running a few scans and a
tracking program (following Mal's instructions which he had practised with her earlier), Loki quickly
managed to reorient himself. Within three hours of slow driving, he discovered a broad paved road
leading into a particularly closely grouped set of mountains.

Paving stones stretched into the distance, leading westward, further into the centre of the mountain
range. Hoping he would not get too lost, Loki followed the road carefully. The paving stones were
for the most part flat and Loki's hovercar easily coasted down the road. Still, he kept his pace careful,
keeping an eye out for any potential wild beasts or holes; the latter, in particular, he watched for as he
crossed the occasional bridge.
At times, the road, as a bridge spanned deep chasms. *This highway speaks obviously of a master builder race with either high levels of technology or great abilities in the art of magick. Or both, Loki thought as leaned over the edge of one particularly low wall on a bridge to contemplate a half-frozen waterfall spouting out of a carved passageway. Fall is coming to the mountains, Loki shivered and returned to his waiting hovercar. Still, he could not get the picture out of his mind. Artificial sets of falls dropping from the height equal to Odin's palace. Glorious and mind-boggling to say the least.*

Eventually the road met an end, as it led into a mountain. On either side of the road now, grand columns rose and the door leading inward was giant and majestic, edged and framed with flowering sculptures in black and blue stone. Beckoning inward to unfathomable depths, it seemed ominous. Yet, Loki ventured forward.

Parking his hovercar just inside, Loki jumped out and pulled on his pack, complete with food, bedding, a couple hunting knives, a medical kit, a jumpsuit (his extra set of clothes) and an electric lamp. The lamp's light seemed thin and weak, but Loki pressed onward through the atrium and the far door into another less dark room. Loki's footsteps sounded loud and echoing as he crunched his way over ice past arching, vaulted ceilings and detailed sculptures of flowers and constellations. Windows, tall and thin, let in spare lines of light which barely penetrated the gloom.

Loki shivered.

The quiet was eerie. The atmosphere was eerie. The architecture was eerie as well – *eerily familiar.*

When he walked over a short, obsidian bridge to a small hall, Loki paused at the first glimpse of language carved starkly above the doorway. Language he knew and understood, All-Speech or no. Anciently styled, yet familiar.

*Encompass the Truth, _ bear the Burden.*
*Return our People, _ ye, who art the Will of Jotunheim, _ look with mercy*
*upon your children _ who await and then*
*on triumphant wings _ bear us home.*

Loki stood there, now more certain than ever.

*Meerauk,* he breathed.

[...connections...]
[...the threads...]
[...the warp and weft of fate...]
[...worlds so bound...]
[...collide...]
[...such is Fate...]
[...the drums of war...]
[...are calling...]
So they stand there, who bridged the darkness, 
crossed the distances as fearsome stars, 
rising and setting, journeying in freedom. 
Where do they go, where shall they rest?

Chapter End Notes

Well, I hope you guys enjoyed that. That's a huge amount of writing there that I did. Most of it by hand... which I then had to type into my lappie... T_T

Mal, I just wanna add, is an OC which I made and will be regulated to the place of all OCs in my most of my fics. However, she has gained some significance, which I hope you can forgive. I hope you guys can enjoy her character when/if (no spoilers!) she shows up again. Hopefully her relationship with Loki is also believable!

Again if you see any issues, please let me know.

Excepting three pieces, all the poetry was written by me. Snippets of "Kublai Khan" by Samuel Coleridge (the famous dream he had while tripping on opium), "God's Grandeur" by Gerard Manley Hopkings (a gorgeous consonance/kennings poem which is a must read) and a few lines of the lyrics from "Gravity of Love" done by Michael Cretu, known as Enigma.

Let me know what you guys thought!
-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
bollen - boulders/monoliths
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
Eno'Keshi'ko – the system of Eno, a type of magical level measurements
Fen'chi Galaxy – Andromeda Galaxy
gan'ga'war – steel balls
gan'ko – ganka'jya chon, a steel beetle
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
Kholathan – Safety Belt/Protected Zone
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
kon'bi – short for konji'bifu, space bat
lasu – space rat
l'gon – storyteller
Morning-star - a mace
myech'myena - shape-shifting
Mye'hyoi Peyt – Milky Way
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
pu'lotni – plutonium
pye'nee - a kind of bird
Ra'ska'yeh o Phyllo'xia – Tales of Phylloxia
roobyn – a red stone
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
Shen'grid – the Protected Zone, the zone in which habitable planets orbit around a sun
sigan – short for yan'sigan, rock-worm
So'shah – Earth/Midgard
syem'fyerma – family/community farm
tro'watal – perseverance
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
whota – wheat
Thank you guys! You guys are really encouraging! Thanks to: lenomina, Sassiebone, Kai_Maciel, halszka, MistyDawn, beanie, iBlameGlobalWarming, YellowWomanonthBrink, Petreska, Dragonanzar, Sun.

First off... SOOOOOOORRRRRYYYY! Life and writer's block and work have sucked out my energies... T_T But this is another Thor Chapter and we all know how I feel about them! . So I have ambivalent feelings about it, but I hope it makes sense. This Thor is different because time hanging around Earth is catching up with him and Jane is different b/c she's not going to be tooo tooo moony. She'll love Thor but people gotta do what people gotta do.

Second, some may have asked questions without logging in, so some answers to questions or repeated questions are as follows:

Re dream/trip: If you don't know what's going on, don't worry. You will. The vague history will come clearer with the next Loki chapter. Whenever that happens. Later on, you can go back and re-read it and go OOOOHHHHH! So satisfying... right?

For Rogue and her question on Loki and his psyche: Please go to my Tumblr - kakashidiot and read my reply there.

For those who want to see pictures of my sis with Hiddles, please also go to my kakashidiot Tumblr.

THANK YOU GUYS SO MUCH! I'M SO SORRY FOR THE LATENESS!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 68
Thor: The High Road II

The Cosmos is a vast place, immeasurable and far beyond the grasp of the minds which live and grow and teem within it. Filled with Realms each with their own universe, Reality spreads its branches outward, rooted firmly on the unseen flow of Life and Death, as a great tree would on the bank of a river. Yggdrasil, it is called by some, by others, Reality. To the waterfolk of Terindyr, it is The Ka'autha'ndarna. The Skrull and their neighbouring species call it Shi'nuwu.

In between the Spaces That Are, there is the Realm That Is Not – the Tai'shu. It is empty they say. Empty and as immeasurable as That Which Is. It is the Realm of Nothing. It is the Void. Some believe, some Sages aver, that the Void is an existence more empty than Death itself. Others, scientists and curious mages, ever seek to harness the paths which cross through the Dark in attempt to achieve inter-galactic and inter-Realm flight. Others worship it as the ultimate end, as the necessary juxtaposition to Existence. Others fear it, ignore it and fill the silences with such noises of
life so as to avoid the fact that it is waiting.

It is always waiting.

[…even here…]

[…Can you hear it?…]

For the first time in his life, Thor found himself inescapably confronted with the silences, with the grind of life, with the mundane and the ever growing burden of unanswered questions and self-doubt.

For the first time in his life, Thor wondered.

-0-0-0-

Grit caked his untrimmed, two week old beard. It ground between his teeth and dried out his mouth in an really uncomfortable way. Blowing about, it caught in the corners of his eyes, irritating his already sensitive eyelids currently twitching from fatigue.

Everything was irritated. His feet, still tender in their newly broken leather boots. His thighs, still achy from too long hours in the saddle. His back, now 'less godly', as Selvig had muttered, also joined the chorus of painful protest. And his neck – now painfully red from a new layer of burn… and his head, aching from the too bright, unrelenting glare of the sun. And –

Everything was irritated. Everything was irritating. The smell of sweat and cow and shat and dirt. The unimpressive vista of gorse bush and sand and weedy-looking grass. The seemingly millions of sway-backed cattle jostling for space as they were herded from the smaller field in which they had just been double-checked for heath (and other reasons Thor could hardly fathom) to a larger one. The incessant yapping of dogs. The tinny whine of someone's portable radio.

Thor grimaced, his expression even more disgruntled than ever. By the Norns, he cursed mentally. I hate Midgard.

I hate Midgard.

Yes, he hated Midgard. Thor hated Midgard. He hated the too bright sun, the cloudless blue skies which barely yielded rain, the prickly trees and bushes which grew intermittently on the harsh plains. He hated the poky tired horses they called mounts. He hated the mean tempered steers (or cows or whatever) they herded from pasture to pasture. There was one particular bull who seemed to target him whenever Thor rode out with his 'senior partner'.

Thor hated that cow.

He hated the cows and the entire ranch in which he now lived and worked. He hated the early mornings, the dull endless grind of work which lasted until sundown and the equally boring repetitive entertainments which followed. He hated the odd clothing - the 'blue jeans' and light 't-shirts' and thicker 'plaid' which he now donned everyday. He hated the insular, ignorant culture and ideas fostered by his 'bunkmates'. He hated their laughter and easy-going attitudes as if nothing could destroy their happiness and current good fortune. Especially the young, cocky 'ranchhands' who thought the world lay at their feet and strutted with the pride of it.

Thor snorted. World? Ha! This backwater planet is the least of what I have seen. I have seen more power spent on Svartalfheim and even dying Realms or Realms straddling the borders of Life and Death itself hold more-
"Thor! Hey! Dude! You're fallin' behind."

Thor's left eye twitched again and, jerking at the reins of his mount which was incongruously called Hard-Head (thanks to his hard mouth, stubborn nature and perseverance), he called his strong-willed mount to attention as he turned at the call of his 'senior partner', Jakesson. Jake, Thor reminded himself. Just Jake. First names are a better, more familiar way to connect here on Midgard. Different from Asgard. It is all different from Asgard.

Just the thought of Asgard soured Thor's mood even further, for he was undeniably trapped on Midgard for the unforeseeable future and Loki and Frigga and his Father were up on Asgard waging war against those dread beasts, the Jotunn. Just remembering the dark-blue skinned, craggy featured beings, Thor shuddered, growled a short curse, and, forcing his attention back to the present, turned his thoughts away from his family, from Asgard, from the Jotunn… from…

…I was a fool…

He imagined Asgard falling in flames. No. No. He told himself yet again. For the millionth time. That would not happen. Not with Father there or Mother and Tyr and the Court and the Council… and Loki. Loki would protect Mother to the very end.

But would he succeed? Thor couldn't help but wonder. No. No. They would win. The Jotunn would be defeated. Even better, they would be erased along with their Realm for all time. No. Asgard would remain safe, would remain as it was. It has to.

…I was a fool. I was a fool to think you were ready for the throne of Asgard. That you were worthy of that title…

Thor missed it so much. His heart and body ached for the clear skies, the clement weather, the rising mountains, the chilly babbling brooks running down from Skythur, the great falls, the vast ocean. He missed the familiar language, the familiar faces of his people and friends. His family. Wise Odin.

…I was a fool. I was a fool to think you were ready for the throne of Asgard. That you were worthy of that title. For many years, we prepared you. For this day, we all worked – in vain, I see now. In vain…

Gentle-hearted Frigga who's blue eyes could see through your very soul to your Fate, it was said. And his brother – green-eyed, sharp, witty and clever in his own way. Loki who had struggled and fought for his place within Asgard.

Thor sighed. If only Loki were here… it would not be such a trial.

Which is not the point, another part of him pointed out. A quiet voice which sounded sometimes like Loki, sometimes like Frigga. A voice which he had not heard so often but now, in the silences, it spoke to him.

It spoke to him when he worked alone in the cooler hours of the morning shoveling shat or forking hay or measuring out meal; when the occasional afternoon was filled with nothing but the buzzing of flies and nameless insects and the sun pressed down heavily upon the body as he lay back in the shared hammock below two warped trees; when the night hung low and heavy over the cabin which he now called home and far off he could hear a wild dog's howl.

He heard it then. And other things.

…you are unworthy of these realms; you are unworthy of your title. You are unworthy - of the loved ones you have betrayed…
Following Jake, Thor silently turned away from the herd to head out to the further pastures, one of which they were preparing for the newer group of cattle expected in two weeks time. Jake, one of the senior ranch hands and second son of the 'boss', was Thor's newest 'coach' or 'trainer' despite Thor's repeated (and increasingly annoyed) assurances that he was well-versed in handling horses. Apparently, experience riding horses was not enough for the regular ranch hand. Even after riding on the ranch for a good two months, Thor found himself paired with senior ranch hands. Seniority. He could understand it to some extent. It was some kind of law here on Midgard – and no visitor, not even the son of Odin, could avoid the regulations and expectations regarding all new ranch hands and their position within the community there. Thor had never felt so belittled but necessity had kept him silent.

_Necessity. That is a new experience to contend with,_ Thor mused bitterly as the smelly, noisy herd of animals and men were left behind and the silence between the laconic Jake and he lengthened.

_Necessity has become my companion. Necessity and bitter defeat and the endless grind of life. This is what Loki felt, perhaps, as Kol'la of the stables, as a slave – restricted, powerless…

…I now take from you your power - in the name of my father and his father before…

Thor sighed.

"Penny for your thoughts," Jake's quiet voice broke the growing silence as the two men continued onward into the empty spaces of the New Mexican desert.
"Penny?" Thor blinked.
"Whatcha thinking about?"
"Oh." Thor frowned and pulled his tan hat more firmly down on his brow. The brim of the hat curled up oddly on the sides, a kind of fashion Thor could barely understand much less appreciate at the moment. He lifted up the light collar of the blue and white emblazoned 't-shirt' he had bought with Jane at a large market a month ago in a vain attempt to let the heat escape from his sweat drenched body. "Perhaps." A pause. Then he added: "I am merely remembering – trying not to remember…"
"A smart cowboy rides with his eyes on the road before him – not looking back at the trail he's leaving behind," Jake said.

Thor turned over the young man's words carefully and the nodded slowly as the meaning came a little clearer to him.

"I used to think that as well," he said. "I used to rush about and look forward to the horizon only, never having any care for what could happen, what would happen – or the mistakes of my past."
"I see."
"Now, I am to think on them, I suppose. Think on them and regret."
"Well, that's fine and dandy, I reckon, for a time, but then at some point in time, you gotta get back up on the horse. Am I right or am I right?"

Thor was not quite sure how to respond to that. Then he said:

"I suppose there is a time to... let the past remain in the past." Thor sighed. "In the end, I suppose I will never fully understand why these things happened to me. What my father meant when he sent me here."
"You were sent here? For what?"

Remembering Jane's warning, Thor followed Jake's lead down a particularly steep section of hill, taking the time to formulate a suitable answer.
You have to keep to your cover story, Jane had said, her dainty eyebrows furrowed with worry. God help us, we all have to. She had glared at the agents about them. For now, she had promised. I'll keep looking for a way.

With those words, she had promised him his world – and in doing so had, in some way, placed some distance between them. Yet another puzzle, another obstacle for Thor to overcome. Their talk recently had become stilted, but at the sound of her voice, his heart ached with love and he knew that she felt the same.

"My father told me that I had made a mistake... He took away what was most precious to me-"

*Mjolnir.*

"-sent me from my home-"

*Mother. Loki.*

"-and told me that I must prove myself a better... man." Thor ended lamely. "Although I must confess, I do not entirely understand what I had done wrong and so cannot know my way through this... mission... quest... task..."

"Tough," Jake said, succinctly.

"Tough?"

"Sounds like your dad wants you to go through the mill, as my grandaddy would say."

"Go through the..."

"Learn things the hard way."

"Ah. Yes. Perhaps. Sometimes," Thor admitted, "I did not understand my father."

"That's every son's burden to bear," Jake nodded. "Welcome to life, partner."

There was another long period of silence broken only by the wind, the creak of withered trees and rustling gorse. Thor focused on the steady clop clop clop clop clop of his mount, thought of Tim's instructions early that morning. *A survey of the land is in order*, Tim had said. *Jake, I want you to take Thor out and show him the ropes. Not that he's a greenhorn, mind, but he's not been out in the far pastures yet.*

Jake had returned from some 'big city' with *a ton of business head knowledge and soft hands*, Thor's fellow ranch hands had told him. *Second son of the boss and and ready to work at the family business again.*

Sure enough, after only one week, Jake was put back to work with the rest of the boys and was now bound for the far pasture with Thor in tow. Thor did not mind, for Jake was an amenable enough fellow although not the most talkative. *Perhaps Boss Krezky had plans of his own,* Thor mulled over the thought for a moment, *knowing that lately he too had been less talkative of late."

Overhead, the clear blue sky of the morning gave way to the hard heat of the mid-day sun. Jake said nothing until just half an hour after the usual time for the mid-day meal when the two ranch hands approached a small wooden house.

"An outpost," Jake said, dismounting and leading his horse, Shady, around to a small lean-to stable. Securing the rains to a thick iron ring in the wall, forking some hay into the horse's feeding rack and checking the water trough, Thor followed Jay's lead to ensure Hard-Head had his own share of food and drink.

Nothing was said again until Jake had 'rustled up' something for the two of them, setting Thor to work on counting the stockpile of tins and other dry goods stashed in the 'pantry'. Writing was never
interesting to Thor, but nonetheless he found himself once again faced with a task he did not much care for and no choice but to do it. Peering at labels and writing numbers as carefully as he could in the small boxes on the paper beside the names, Thor worked patiently down the list. It was not a long list, but it felt like forever until he was done and Jake's voice called him over for their lunch.

After lunch, 'siesta' was instituted by Jake and Thor was able to doze for a short nap in the sweltering heat of the cabin while Jake dropped off to sleep in the bunk bed above him. When Jake's hour long nap ended, the tall, lanky cowboy unrolled a map and got Thor acquainted with the surroundings, pointing out their final destination further north along the trail. A second cabin. A second list of stores to sort out, Thor supposed.

"We'll move out in an hour," Jake said, leaving Thor to stare out over the vast vista of brown and grey and dirty green from the front overhang of the cabin's southern-facing door. A bare place – dusty yet fairly neat and orderly. The beds' mattresses had been comfortable and the amenities were modern for the most part. When the two men took to horse again, Thor found himself reluctant to leave the small place, until he remembered there was no doubt a similar cabin up ahead.

That night, with the stars hanging low overhead – so clear and bright it seemed one could reach up and touch them, they reached the second cabin, tended to their now rather tired mounts, stumbled inside and rolled into bed, more or less.

When Thor woke the following morning to the smell of eggs and bacon, he sleepily forced himself to sit up and properly opened his eyes. Jake at the stove calmly frying up breakfast, eyes distant, obviously deep in thought. What he was thinking of however was not touched upon and Thor said nothing of it.

_Loki_, he thought, _always became annoyed if I pressed him too hard on whatever he was considering. Jake may very well be the same._

Thinking of Tim Krezky and his younger brother and sister, Jake and Em, Thor wondered if they too struggled with the responsibilities inherent to those of children born to ranchers such as their father. _Particularly as Tim is wont to complain about the markets and prices and dwindling resources_. He wondered if Tim ever wished to leave the small confines of his ranch and roam about the planet to seek his fortune and experience life as a man who had reached his prime. _Perhaps not_, Thor thought, bringing to mind the equally tall, muscled older brother of the Kresky family. Perpetually chewing some kind of blackish substance and often lapsing into the local dialect which Thor found difficult to decipher at the best of times, Tim seemed to have embraced his fate whole-heartedly.

_**His fate**..._

That traitorous thought pulled Thor up rather suddenly.

_**His fate. Tim has come into his own, Thor thought. He prepares even now to bear the responsibilities of his ageing father and mother... Why did that word then taste so bitter in my mouth? Surely...**_

Thor thought of his own long years of preparation beneath the tutors and warriors and mage-clerics and statesmen and court officials and the older nobles and his own father. As the day had come closer, as his coronation had drawn closer, Thor had embraced his destiny with joy, had looked forward to proving himself to be a greater king, _greater even than my father_. And _yet, and yet..._ Thor shivered. _**Perhaps. Perhaps deep down, deep down, I was not certain?**_

_Surely not._
Surely not.

Surely...

[...in the silences...]

[...the silences...]

[...speak to you...]

The two men sat out back close by their horses, a small fire crackling away in a carefully dug pit surrounded by a hoop of corrugated, rippled metal. There was nothing but the starlight, the moonlight and the soft cool night wind. Jake stirred after a moment and sighed.

"Father told me that you were a quiet one."

"I was not always quiet," Thor said, pushing back his 'Stetson' and shifting one jean-clad leg to prop it up on a spare bit of wood handily pushed by his feet. He shifted in the rickety plastic and metal chair provided and sighed. "As I said, I have much to think on."

"A girl?"

"Among other things."

"Ah." Pause. "There always is one."

"One?"

"A girl," Jake explained. "What's she like?"

"Beautiful," Thor said simply. "Beautiful and smart and… strong although she is rather small – and she would not wish me to say such a thing of her. She is rather fierce and reminds me of my mother in some ways. Although I have only known her for some months now, I know that she is someone I wish to protect, but as I am now… that seems impossible."

"Oh, I don't know about 'impossible'. You look at yourself in the mirror lately? Thor, you look like you could deal with anything that comes your way. I just kinda imagine bear wrestling and whatnot in my head every time I look at your biceps. I'm sure you can deal with… whatever it is."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. There are some things in this world that fists cannot overcome," Thor shrugged. "At any rate, I wish to bring her happiness and hope, as she did for me."

"What's her name?"

"Jane. Jane Foster. A scientist – that is what you would call her. One who studies the stars and other realms."

"Multi-dimensions?"

"I believe so," Thor shrugged. "I am not one for those kinds of things, but Jane was – is – she is so patient and kind-hearted and very stubborn." He laughed. "We got each other into a lot of trouble – all on my account of course, although she said it was for her benefit too. She wished for more information, that's what she said – although she was not so pleased with my second attempt, which made things worse."

"Second attempt?"

"I wished to retrieve… something from a group of people… and failed. Again. And then again, a second time."

"Well," Jake smiled. "Perhaps third time is the charm."

"Perhaps not," Thor said gloomily. "Have you ever lost an arm and discovered you could heal it anew only to discover your own arm had rejected your body?"

"Nooooo..." Jake drawled slowly, easing back a bit to look at Thor speculatively. "That sounds… a bit off, if you ask me."

"I cannot explain it any better, yet that is the truth."

"OK."

"Things are not well," Thor disagreed with a sigh. "They have not been so for a long time. A long long time. Longer perhaps than I wish to admit to myself. Thus I worry. Thus I wait."
"And Jane?"
"She helps as best she may – but she is only a scientist and has no skill or abilities to actually aid me
in my task. I can hope, but that is all... and she is a comfort. Your father allows me to travel to town
once a week to call her... on the, ah, the-
"Phone? Skype?"
"Phone. We talk now. We can only talk."
"That's a pity."
"Indeed. She must go out and work and raise funds and do research where she must. With her intern.
Darcy. A fiery girl and a great boon to Jane's endeavours. There was also Selvig – but I fear that he
has joined..." Thor ended awkwardly not sure what to say to Jake. "Scholars must ever rely on others
for their food and board."
"I'd say people must rely on others for their food and board, dude, not just scholars," Jake smiled
then a little. "You're talking to a man of 'book larnin' as my granddaddy would say. I can tell you that
we all rely on each other and if you think differently... well, you're just lying to yourself."

Thor frowned.

"Your father – your older brother -"
"Rely on us to be there for them, you know. Dad is a grand old man and Tim is Cow-wonder-boy,
but that doesn't mean they can run a ranch on their lonesome. Can you imagine just one of them
trying to herd up all the steers on their own? This isn't some dog-herding sheep challenge. This is
life. Life is tough. Life is harsh. Life demands we stick together. Rely on each other – and in reality –
if we are honest, at least to my way of thinking, the man up on top – the big boss – the head honcho
– he relies the most on others, on all the others who stand below him."
"So, you are saying your father is weak?" Thor frowned, eyebrows now furrowing together in
tension.
"Nah. All nine but one, dude. That's what my granddaddy would say. Not dude though. Haha. Well,
no. I mean," Jake rolled his eyes, leaned forward and pinned Thor with a clear-eyed gaze. "Think
about what I just said. No man can rely on himself alone. We are all of us interconnected. No person
is weaker than another."
"So...
"So, my Dad, Tim, hell, my granddaddy most of all – they are the epitome of strength. They are the
West personified. When they were two, they probably climbed up on their own horses and started
riding! We often joke that Tim was born in a saddle – and there's probably some truth to it too. Those
d kinds of folk who ride under the searing blue skies through the great plains of America, they
represent all kinds of strength... but in reality, there's no true lone cowboy. There's always Tonto or a
horse or a posse or someone. People to rely on, to support us, to keep us on the straight and narrow
and call us on our bullshit. The more the better. It's true of me – and it's true of my Dad. That was
what my dad first taught Tim and I – no man rides out alone."

A pause.

"That kind of trail leads to stupidity and eventual death. Death not only to you – but to those around
you. A good man recognizes those who support him and listens to them, thinks twice, heeds advice
and considers the ramifications of his actions. This is doubly true of whoever has been given
responsibility."
"Jane once told me that the greatest thing about humans is their ability to unite – for good or ill.
Together, she said, the people may achieve greatness, one way or another," Thor repeated slowly.
"Together. Moving thus, in the end, they give power to the ones put in charge – not the other way
around."
"Yes. Yes," Jake nodded. "If you consider things such as the ranch, it becomes rather clear due to
the dangers of the cowboy life. How many times I have seen a stampede get out of control because
someone thought they could keep things in line by themselves – or because they did not work with
the focus needed by the entire group. My dad cannot stop nature’s force or a bunch of stampeding steers by himself any more than I can – but together, together, that is something we can achieve. I have seen my dad birth a calf with his own hands, shoot down a bunch of rabid coyotes a fair distance away, survive the wilderness for long stretches of time – you name it, he’s seen it – but even then, he’s not idiot enough to think he’s got all the answers."
"My father..." Thor said slowly, "seems to always- He ever appears to know all, see all-"
"That's bullshit and you know it."
"Perhaps..."
"No," Jake shook his head. "Maybe he's not in a position to admit weakness or fear or whatever, but the rules apply."

You have not yet met Odin, Thor thought blackly, but then he remembered the officials and General Tyr and the Mage Agaeti. He remembered Odin's constant references to a time when he would be king and Loki would be there to help Thor, give Thor advice, to be Thor's voice within the diplomatic arena. I do not need aid to be king, Thor had sniffed, brushing off his father's words with annoyance. Loki's place is at my side, certainly, but half of his advice- Thor had never finished thanks to Odin's angry response and the two had dropped the conversation. Now, thinking back on it, Thor thought he had a glimmer of understanding.

That day.

That day.

...That is pride and vanity talking not leadership! Have you forgotten everything I taught you - about a warrior's patience, a warrior's ability to strategize and plan?...

His father's disappointment.

...I was a fool. I was a fool to think you were ready for the throne of Asgard. That you were worthy of that title. For many years, we prepared you. For this day, we all worked – in vain, I see now. In vain...

His father's judgement.

...You are unworthy of these realms; you are unworthy of your title. You are unworthy - of the loved ones you have betrayed...

Thor thought about his arrival on Earth. His headlong struggle. His thoughtless rush. Jane's remonstrances. Selvig's warnings. None of which he had heeded. He had hastened to Mjolnir and harmed innocents along the way. Thor remembered the dark-suited men loading up white vans with Jane's machines and research. Not entirely innocent... yet they had no quarrel with him and he had brought war to their camp.

Coulson had attempted to speak with him, but Thor's anguish and desperation, his denial and onset of depression, had stunned the ex-Asgardian into silence. Even Selvig's arrival could not cheer Thor up, ultimately. The devastation gnawed away at him like a hungry wolf chewing on the bones of its prey. True, Selvig's rescue had enabled Thor to find Jane again, but it ended with Thor's discovery that life at the side of a scholar was no life for him. Not yet at any rate, Thor had decided.

Jane was busy, legitimately busy and wanted and sought after in her own field of research. Like Loki, Thor thought, remembering all the times his younger brother had been brought to a halt on their way out somewhere thanks to some supplicant wishing Loki's advice – magical or otherwise – on some matter or another. As with Loki, Thor found it hard to sustain interest or ability within that world and often drifted off to other activities. In the end, Jane had been no different, especially when it was
discovered that she had need of travelling abroad to other observatories to watch the night sky.

Thor could not follow.

For the first time in his life, it seemed as if he were some debilitated elder or fish-wife, watching at the gates of Asgard or on the wharf edging the sea, looking out and waiting for the return of some space or sea faring loved one or family. His place was now constricted. Constricted by necessity, Thor realized, corralled by need. A need to show my strength, a need for independence and now, as I gain the coin of this land for my sustenance and lodging, a necessary reliance on support.

Life is hard. Life is hateful. Yet, Jane was right. There is hope too – as long as we remember the important things in life. In the end, the things you most wish for is not Asgard's great halls or mounds of gold or its plenteous riches, nor the sessions of council meetings, nor even the war. In the end, you miss those faces whom you loved the most.


In the end, it is the people. The people whom you endangered. Thor rubbed his eyes, forcing back stinging tears of dismay and humiliation. I risked it all in a fit of pride and passion. I risked it all and lost it all.

Mjolnir was the least of it.

Thor sighed again – this time a long rattling sigh filled with suppressed tears. He stared up at the stars and for the first time found himself appreciating their ethereal beauty. From a distance, he could almost hear Loki's familiar drone about some constellation's movement or Frigga's off-hand comment about solstices or farming. He could hear his father's increasingly rare laughter.

[...drifting...]

[...the wind carries it onward...]

[...the silences hold the secrets...]

[...and the truths...]

After two months of living in Midgard, Thor had begun to find the place unbearable as though its very soil and sky were bars of an invisible prison. His spirit, ever charged with wanderlust from the day of his birth, had ached for escape, had desired war, had sought for honour once again. Thus seeds of discontent took hold and grew rapidly as the days passed onward, fed by the eternal rains of disappointment and sadness.

Thor hated Midgard. He hated the overly hot sun and blinding glare of sand, the rarity of water, the weakness inherent to mortal beasts, the incomprehensible words of the older ranch hands, the odd traditions common in that area and the new life he had no choice but to embrace. Thor hated the uncertainty, the weakness, the inability now bestowed upon him. He hated the uncomfortable tension between him and the organization called SHIELD, now exacerbated by his second 'visit' (which had ended with Coulson telling him that they would be 'keeping an eye on him'). He hated spinach and the odd creatures called shrimp and the weak piss they called 'light beer'.

He hated the cow. That one bull.

Yet...
and yet...

There were other things. There was starlight and warm winds and variable seasons. There was coffee and Pop-tarts and 'phones'. There was the waitress, Shauna, who knew his order every time he went into town. There was Jake and Tim and Mr. Kresky and Mr. Coulson and Selvig and Darcy and... Jane.

There was life. There was hope.

*Perhaps, perhaps, the future is not as grim as I feared.*

Chapter End Notes

So there you go. Thor has made A LITTLE BIT OF A JOURNEY. He's obviously not figured out the importance of responsibility over personal glory and he's still a racist (when it comes to the Jotunn), but he's taken a first important step. I hope this was believable... the setting and the whole talking and the character growth. Let me know if there are any errors - spelling wise or plot wise! Thanks again!

Let me know what you guys thought!

-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
bollen - boulders/monoliths
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
Eno'Keshi'ko – the system of Eno, a type of magical level measurements
Fen'chi Galaxy – Andromeda Galaxy
gan'ga'war – steel balls
gan'ko – ganka'jya chon, a steel beetle
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
Ka'autha'ndarna - Reality
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
Kholathan – Safety Belt/Protected Zone
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
kon'bi – short for konji'bifu, space bat
lasu – space rat
l'gon – storyteller
Morning-star - a mace
myech'myena - shape-shifting
Mye'hyoip Peyt – Milky Way
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
oma'auzha – mother-eff'er
oto'oa - big sister
pu'lotni – plutonium
pye'nee - a kind of bird
Ra'ska’yeh o Phyllo’xia – Tales of Phylloxia
roobyn – a red stone
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
Shen'grid – the Protected Zone, the zone in which habitable planets orbit around a sun
Shi’nuwu – Reality/Yggdrasil
sigan – short for yan'sigan, rock-worm
So'shah – Earth/Midgard
syem'fyerma – family/community farm
Tai'shu – The Void
tro’watal – perseverance
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
whota – wheat
Loki: The Low Road IV

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys for reading - and thanks to those few who were encouraging after the last chapter... Thanks to: halszka, NoxSomnium, Kai_Maciel, lemomina, iBlameGlobalWarming.

I know the Thor chapters are always a different pace from Loki... but, anyways, we're on better turf now with our fav character demystifying a bunch of stuff hopefully, but not everything because otherwise, plot would just be dull.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 69
Loki: The Low Road IV

[...ancient glory...]

[...rising from...]

"Meerauk." Loki repeated the word again as though saying it again would make sense of what rose up before his eyes, as though the words above the lintel would rearrange themselves into something more believable, as though all of his suspicions could so easily be laid to rest in the dark and dust along with the dead culture which he now explored. For several moments, he stood there, looking up, his red eyes tracing the familiar sigils of the ancient Jotunn tongue now before him.

I have seen this before, he thought. I have heard this before. In the halls of my... of the Jotunn, in the King's Archives and in Meerauk itself. Miot'vithr. The Voices of the Elder... the dream-vision of the I'gon...

"Meerauk."

The ancient name did not seem to fit the place, however. For this is not Meerauk, Loki reminded himself as he moved onward, now even more careful than ever as he peered through the shadows and the various shafts of light, attempting to gain a better grasp of what lay before him. Not as old, he noted, not as decayed. Not destroyed, nor sunken. No, Loki thought, remembering his dream-vision of a city built within the mountains of Vlozh'noi. Not as ancient, yet still old enough by most standards.

Crunching across bits of gravel and raising small clouds of dust beneath his boots, Loki continued down the long hall, taking note of the various doors which opened up to other hallways or narrow passages now steeped in darkness or other rooms. The doors were iron and wood and creaked open in protest as he peered into a few. His initial explorations revealed nothing, merely a long hall with ten doors on either side.

Yet, another more detailed analysis of the hall brought various facts to Loki's attention. The carvings
and the stonework were intricate and well-balanced with symbols and patterns very similar to that of the Lesser Kindred's work in Meerauk. *This is a homage to the past,* he guessed, *perhaps a picture of what they had lost. If this was not made during some ancient foray into other Realms long ago. No.* His long blue fingers ran over a waist-height band of stone which twisted and angled about in a geometric serpentine kind of way. It ended with the head of a large, familiar carved water-dragon. *Iormungand, no doubt. So, this was after Meerauk. After Meerauk's fall...*

*The Ghost Kingdom Below, Nesta called it. Ghost Kingdom indeed.*

Even more odd was the size of the doors. They were built with the Lesser Kindred in mind – more fitted for Aesir and similarly tall races and less for the Giants usually associated with Jotunheim. In such a grand place with such soaring ceilings, Loki felt as though the doors ought to be bigger, and yet they had been cut for a different folk. *A people I would hardly be able to imagine,* he admitted to himself, *if I was not of their kind myself.*

He continued down the increasingly dark hall and, opening yet another door slowly, peered down and paused at a glimmer of golden yellow further down a narrow dark passage. A flickering light, neither blue-white nor still, which spoke of fire and warmth. *Some being or creature had remained in the ruins?*

Slipping around the door's edge, Loki loosened the small dagger which he had strapped to his belt for additional security and made his way forward, attempting to make as little sound as possible. Passing more arched doorways, Loki forged carefully onward until he drew close to the rectangular shaft of light which shone from the wood and iron door cracked open in a welcoming fashion. Edging it open further, Loki peered in and then froze at the sight. For a second, his heart skipped a beat with the shock of it – and then he frowned and mentally chastised himself for, considering his surroundings, the being within the room belonged in this version of Meerauk quite fittingly.

It was a Jotun. A Lesser Kindred, seated in a intricately carved iron and wood-worked chair before an equally ancient desk, scrawling careful runes into the thick tome which lay before him. A Lesser Kindred with skin as fair blue as Loki's own and with dark lines speaking of a different ancestry yet looking comfortably familiar. Dark hair was pulled back from the ridged forehead with small braids which held back longer tresses falling down the Jotun's back. Dressed in simple black and grey and blue, the Jotun wore a tunic with leather leggings which were tucked neatly into light leather boots. *Familiar clothing as well.* Loki wondered whether the larger Jotunn had considered the Lesser Kindred weaker because of their penchant for wearing layered clothing. Over the back of the chair, Loki noted that the Jotun also had laid down a grey and blackjacket.

An awkward pause ensued as Loki eyed the sight before him. The Jotun and the rows of bookshelves about him and the piles of paper and bristling stacks of quills and other writing implements as well as the grouped ink-pots and stained rags which littered various tables at the corners of the rooms. Only the faint crackle of the fire broke the silence of the scribe's room and *even then,* Loki wondered, *if I drew near – would there be any heat to those flames? Or is this all but a phantom's dream?*

The scribe looked up. Red eyes met and Loki found himself lifting his chin at the silent challenge in other Jotun's eyes.

"Well met, stranger," said the Jotun after a slight pause, his dark lips quirking upward and his eyes softened, releasing Loki from his unrelenting stare. "Many fall to the shadowed lands of Nyr-Meerauklag but few return to the Realm of the Cold Suns."

Loki stilled at the phrase.
Many fall into the shadowed land of the Sunken City but few return to the Realm of the Cold Suns. Miot'vithr had said the same thing in Meerauk. So this is but a ghost?

"I have heard this before," Loki said slowly, edging forward into the room even further. "What place was that, friend?"
"An ancient greeting from a time of darkness. The time of the Mal'a'Hlad and after. A greeting between those hunted for no fault but that of their abilities and their ancestral heritage."
"Miot'vithr spoke of such a time."
"The Miot'vithr?" The Jotun smiled. "You have spoken with the Head Sage of Meerauk, then?"
"Miot'vithr is the title of Sage?"
"Another long forgotten tradition, yes," the scribe nodded. "Indeed, I am surprised to hear you found one. So, the Sages still reside there?"
"If phantasms can be said to reside in any place," Loki replied bitterly remembering the conversation he had had with the not-Elska, "if it was truly the Head Sage himself and not another... thing... wearing his face, then, yes." He frowned again.
"Indeed. Yet I say to you," the scribe leaned back then, "what is life and what is death and what are the spaces between? Perhaps the delineation between such phases of existence are not as clear as you would believe. Perhaps there is truth to be had from such... phantasms."
"He spoke of much – of his ancestors' experiences, of tales passed down from Sage to Sage, of the twins so named Loki and Loka."

Loki moved forward to pull a chair out for himself, removing the ancient brittle scripts piled on top. Several crumbled at his touch and he hastily placed them on the table and watched a few more crackle and fall apart before his eyes. The damage had been done. It was unsettling to watch the disintegration, surrounded as it was by the warmth of the crackling fire, the familiar musty smell of books and the scribe's company. An unquiet juxtaposition, a sharp reminder, yet again, that this could all be yet another dream.

"Loki and Loka." A pause, then the scribe said slowly, "now those are names I have not heard in a long, long time." He glanced over at Loki sharply. "You sought those names? Why?"
"I was named Loki at the time of my adoption," the exiled prince replied evenly, deciding to leave Asgard out of the discussion. Things are complicated enough without Inter-Realm politics added. "My adopted, ah, parents, apparently knew of my... heritage."
"I see." Then: "Why have you then sought out Nyr-Meer?"
"This is Nyr-Meer?"
"Yes," nodded the scribe. "The Meerauk rebuilt after the destruction." A pause ensued and then he added, voice harsh. "And the Mal'a'Hlad, the Purge."
"The purges are barely mentioned in the Archives," Loki mused. "I assume during that time the Lesser Kindred of Jotunheim were cast out of the Realm?"
"Indeed. Many forcefully thrown off the Eybjarg itself and any 'runtlings' as they were called afterwards were also cast off until the development of such abilities for verifying one's children were adequate by the Greater Kindred's standards - while still in the womb."
"And if they did not meet the expectation of growth, then–"
"Yes, then they were removed. It was considered kinder and more merciful, as tales were forgotten and the reasons for such traditions were lost to time itself. Perhaps, in a way, they were right. Many of the Lesser Kindred struggled to survive the harsh world of early Jotunheim and many lacked the intelligence or physical abilities to achieve even the most basic functions necessary for independent living."
"Physical and mental disabilities," Loki mused.
"Yes. More of than not, that was the case. However, not all of the Lesser Kindred were so cursed. Some were blessed with superior intelligence and greater magickal abilities than most," the scribe
nodded. "Loki and Loka were two such Jotun and lead their people to greatness – and doom. After their deaths, many fell to the Other Realms, to planets such as this, to the planet they so named Nyr'Fjor, for the new life they were promised. It was also called the Blue World, because of the brightness of the sky as compared to the dark ice world of Jotunheim. Phylloxia some called it, and so we were called the Phylloxians. Under this guise, many of our people travelled through the Realm, travelling to the distant galaxies in hopes of blazing a trail to our home world, in hopes of returning to Jotunheim, in hopes of the return of a king who would bring our homeless peoples back to where they truly belonged."

"But your people no longer live on this world – and now it belongs to the Noradians," Loki said slowly. "They hunted the Lesser Kind and enslaved them?"

"Indeed, until we had no recourse but to stand our ground or flee and hide. In the end, many fled and those who remained behind..." The scribe sighed then. "Their ghosts remain restless – trapped here in a world far from the Elder. They need their King to call them home."

"And the others who fled?"

"They have hidden, I suppose, even to this day." the scribe shrugged. "I do not know, but I can guess. The Miot'vithr was a Jotunn who remained at Meerauk to the end, I was a Jotunn who remained here until its end... and those who live, walk within the skin of others, I would guess. Hidden in plain sight. Everywhere, perhaps. Or, perhaps, nowhere."

Loki leaned forward to stare into the fire, sharp chin propped up on his knuckles and mused on the revelation so calmly declared by the stranger. *Those who live... Those who live...*

*There are others.*

"I notice your refer to our Kind as being not of your own."

The exiled Prince blinked and smiled then, sharply, showing his white teeth wolfishly, revealing the hard bitterness behind his eyes for a moment.

"I grew up amongst the hatred of our kind. I grew up as nothing, treated as nothing and expecting nothing from the Jotunn. I did not grow up as Jotunn – and with time came only an increasing realization that my heritage will only bring doom and ill-fortune to those whom I now call family. To the Realm in which I wish to gain most respect. How can I be expected to call such people – the ghosts of the past, the enemies of the present, and the anonymous people I only learned of today – as my kind?"

"And yet they are," was the infuriatingly calm reply.

"Miot'vithr and the one who called himself Elska said Jotunheim had need of a King who would heal its lands."

"They speak true. I, Sagora, the Chief Scribe of Nyr-Meer's Council, also bear witness to the prophecies which foretell of a King who will sit within Jotunheim's High Seat and, taking the office of King, will heal its land with the power of the Heimsrsal and the Elder and the Casket of Ancient Winters. The lines upon your brow and your hands speak to your position and the promise it holds."

"The lines lie," Loki said, forcing his hands to remain where they were. "There is no promise within these hands nor in this heart. There is only destruction for Jotunheim."

*Finishing what my ancestors started... all those ages ago. I suppose, in the end, I am more like them than even Mother and Father know... the matter and dust disturbed by the energy field moved lazily in a circle. Soon, he thought, the Mouth of the Void, the Muthr'a'Ginnung, it will form. It will devour all, for it is always hungry.*

For a second, he thought he could hear it – the shrieking wails of the Heimsrsal, the rumble of feet running away from the collapsing cliff faces of the Eybjarg, the cry of dying Jotunn – and Loki staggered back, gasping as he shut his eyes to the terror before him. Terror from which he could not
turn away.

[...this is the land which sunk into darkness...]

[...this is the past which was forgotten...]

[...this is the truth now well-hidden...]

[...this is the power which flows unrestrained...]

[...this is the hope which waits for the taking...]

"There was only death for Jotunheim," Loki replied in a whisper. "I attempted to destroy it with my own hands. There was no feud between brothers, no kind of heroism – only a matter of... pragmatics, as it were. I wished to prove myself as an able protector of my home, my family. Yet, in the end, that was not the answer."

Loki glanced sharply over at the scribe who had set aside his quill and now sat, attention fully on Loki. He grinned again and glanced down at the floor, battling with the familiar, rising feelings of shame and self-hatred. *Feelings I promised myself to never feel again... and yet here I am.*

"How could I have thought it was the answer?"

"This is the cause of conflict, this is the burden of those gifted – to see the temptation of What Could Be and not to grasp so hastily, for such a path leads to darkness and in the grasping, they lose it all." Sagora smiled sadly and added, "Sometimes, young Loki, we see only what we wish to see. Perhaps the arm of destruction you aimed at Jotunheim was in truth aimed at your own self."

Setting his jaw and forcing his eyes wide, Loki glared into the fire, half turning away from the discerning eyes of the scribe, of Sagora. He would not cry. He would not cry. By the Norns, he would not shed a tear over his decisions which he had vowed he would never regret. *Yet, here I am,* Loki thought, *regretting them, realizing...* 

"I was sent back to make things right," Loki said, finally. "Odin All-Father sent me back. It has not gone so well – I was tossed off the Eybjarg. Part of me hopes that that was effort enough, and yet part of me knows that it was not. Part of me wishes to let Jotunheim die in the dark, yet another part of me tells me my path must lead there. It seems as though all paths lead to Jotunheim."

"For the one so destined."

"My mother called - called me Loki," the prince's voice quavered a little. "I lived up to the name, would you not say?"

"Loki was not a name of one who walked in shadow," Sagora said softly. "It was a name of knowledge and peace and wisdom. A name that may be renewed, redeemed."

"Perhaps..." Loki said slowly, "perhaps there is a way to redeem my people and my name and my heritage."

"There is always a way," Sagora agreed. "There is always a way for one whose heart holds hope."

"Hope?" Loki smirked a little mockingly, red eyes glittering. "What else do we have if not hope?" asked the scribe.

"Sense? Reason? Pragmatism?"

"Ahhh... Yes. In this way, you remind me of the tales about him. The Tales of Loki. He was more rational, they say, than his younger twin. And more cunning. A trickster, you know," chuckled the other Jotun. "Still, if it is your duty to return, return you must. Perhaps it will not be such a burden to you. Remember that your Kind wait for your return, not only for their own benefit, but also they wait in hopes of supporting you. If you stand above the others and shine brightly, you will be as the Nord-Stjarna and guide them home."
"I hardly think I am material for a King," grunted Loki, "but I will do my best to heal the scar I laid upon the land. At the very least, that is what I must do."
"Hmmm..." Sagora pursed his lips but did not press on the matter any further. His clear red eyes met Loki's again and he smiled. "I have high hopes for you, young Loki. Jotunheim is in safe hands."
"Ha ha ha." Loki deadpanned. "Only a desperate Realm would think that – but I suppose Jotunheim is desperate enough..."
"Desperation?" Sagora mused. "It is true that Jotunheim withers, but there are other darker things stirring which bode ill for all the Realms if it is not stemmed. The Shadows hide a great evil and if all the Realms cannot find some kind of unity, they will fall one by one to the Void and those who inhabit it. Beware, young one, of the Void. Beware of the shadow which lurks within the dark. It seeks to devour all. It is ever hungry."
"I have heard it," Loki shivered, remembering the nightmares he had survived within the small closet in the Gothahus and the dark, sibilant whispers he had heard from that time onward. "I have heard it in Jotunheim – in the dark watches of the night. It calls out. It calls to me..."
"It calls to all who will hear," Sagora corrected the prince. "It calls to those burdened with ability, with destiny, with responsibility. Some may attempt to hide from it, to bury the silence and the shadow within noise and light, but it is there, ever lurking."
"Even more important then, I suppose, to at least have Jotunheim standing on two legs firmly if there is a war to come," Loki sighed grimly, recognizing that, yet again, Sagora had made another point. "Indeed."

For a while, the two said nothing. At some point, the fire blurred and faded into dark as Loki's eyelids drooped and the lone explorer fell asleep. When he woke, the room was dim and pale light shone through three tall, thin windows on the far end of the room, showing that somewhere, the sun was up. Loki, checking his datapad, discovered it was already morning on the following day. Stretching he rose to his feet and looked about.

The grey and shadowed room was empty. There was no fire in the grate and, peering in, there was no sign of fire having been there recently. The piles of paper lay as they had before with the exception of the book which sat, closed, on the desk. Everything lay under a thick coat of dust which had not been in evidence the night before.

Loki shivered. *More ghosts.*

Still, as he carefully opened the large tome, his heart felt warmth. As he read the words, he recognized the Jotun whom he had met earlier. *Sagora.* The worn pages opened naturally to his fingers and carefully, touching only the fragile edges of leather and paper, he found himself perusing the careful notes and journals of the scribe, now long faded.

An entry somewhere in the middle gave him pause. *It is,* he realized, *the same entry Sagora had been working on the night previous.* Detailing a hard day's work mining some kind of metal in the northern edges of the mountains, Sagora seemed to be musing on local trading relationships and the effects the influx of Skrull might have on the Noradian empire. Then, there was a break in his train of thought.

*Tonight, a visitor entered my offices. An odd Jotun, bearing the lines of the Kings. However, judging by his equipment, visage, speech and aura of magicks, I suspect this Jotun is neither a new arrival from Jotunheim, nor is he from the further colonies, nor is he from our planet. I do not recognize him – and since the movements of the King of Jotunheim is well documented by those who have remained within that Realm – I gather he is not from this time either. A Lesser Kin born of the King would be news worth mentioning.*
No. This Jotun, this so named Loki, is from a time that is yet to come. He is young and bitter and knows not the way and I know those slight shoulders bear a great burden only a few can imagine. Still, I hold hope and will encourage my brothers to look out and search for and welcome He Who Bears the Lines of Loki's Kin. His destiny is great and his quest is honourable, despite the ambivalence of his heart. What encouragement I wished to give him. How I wished to take him into my arms as a mother would a beloved child. However, that is not my place. That place, I think, is for another.

So, he has fallen asleep. When he wakes, I believe I shall be gone. I consider my words. What could I have said else? What words would ease his way?

_I do not know._

_I do not know._

_I can only hope._

[...this is the land which sunk into darkness...]

[...this is the past which was forgotten...]

[...this is the truth now well-hidden...]

In the end, Loki left everything behind him. The papers and the books and the journals and scrolls. He left it behind, knowing that he would return. It was an unspoken promise. He would return. It was a gamble. _I will return._

_I will return._ One day.

After another day of exploration, Loki returned to his hover-craft and made his slow way back to the closest small town and then on the day after that, the exiled prince travelled back to Nesta's hometown. He now knew what he had to do – earn some money and find passage to the Fen'chi Galaxy, from which he could jump to the Jotunheim Realm if he was lucky. Once there, he would find his way to Jotunheim easily enough.

And once in Jotunheim, Loki sighed, _I can but try again. And again._

With that dread thought, Loki felt unexpectedly relieved. There was something about knowing one was going to one's doom that felt releasing. _Somehow, it feels right, _he thought. _It seems right – and it is, after all, what... Father wishes._

When Loki arrived at Nesta's farm, toting his baggage and feeling more bone-weary than ever, he stopped, paused at the sight of the welcoming golden light within and considered what had happened to him over the weeks past. It seemed unbelievable. He had interfered with his brother's coronation, he had been party to an accidental renewal of war, he had attempted to protect his new homeland – and failed, he had been exiled as a result of his misguided actions and now had a long road ahead of him. A long road which had resulted in the revelation of not only the truth about his kind – but also the truth about himself.

_I regret._

-0-0-0-

Two months of farm work passed on V'slozh'noi for Loki. Two months of planting and watering passed. Two months of ploughing and fertilizing. Two months of weeding and trimming. Two
months of uninterrupted peace. Two months of small town gossip and the usual communal conflicts revolving around land disputes and bad bargaining. Loki found himself enjoying Vlozh'noi in some ways, finding the positive along with the negative as he had learned how to do from an early age.

Every night, he looked up toward the clear night sky and counted the stars and wondered if Thor was still among them, wondered if Heimdall saw what he was up to, wondered if Odin and Frigga were worried at all (most certainly Frigga), wondered if Mal missed him.

Mal did not return. Word arrived that Mal had some business in the Fen'chi Galaxy which she had had to pursue and Loki could not help but remember her words on the unrest between the Skrull and the Chitauri. The Void, maybe? He could not help but wonder and worry over it. Or perhaps it is nothing and you are just jumping at shadows, Loki chastised himself.

Still, he kept his ears and eyes open for any rumours on the Shadow or the Void or any news of war or conflicts between the Chitauri and other beings. When a gruff, older Noradian captain, newly arrived from a nearby mining planet announced he was going onward to the Fen'chi galaxy by way of a few planets and star systems, Loki knew his time had come.

Bidding farewell to Nesta and his family was difficult, but in the end, Loki did not look back. His time had come. V'slozh'noi was behind, the road ahead and with it many lands and Realms – and Jotunheim.

[...Jotunheim is waiting...]

[...it is waiting...]

[...for hope...]

[...the hope which waits for the taking...]

Chapter End Notes

Well, I'm working on the next chapter now. I hope I can get on it - at least one more chapter before "giving of exams" week. I really love writing the Loki chapters, so I'll write 2 more and then do the last Thor chapter. Yep, just to wrap up Thor and prep him for when Loki arrives.... (but how does Loki arrive? dun dun dun) (it's not gonna be like Avengers, I promise you!)

Let me know what you guys thought!

-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
bollen - boulders/monoliths
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
Eno'Keshi'ko – the system of Eno, a type of magical level measurements
Fen'chi Galaxy – Andromeda Galaxy
gan'ga'war – steel balls
gan'ko – ganka'jya chon, a steel beetle
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
Ka'autha'ndarna – Reality
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
Kholathan – Safety Belt/Protected Zone
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
kon'bi – short for konji'bifu, space bat
lasu – space rat
l'gon – storyteller
Morning-star - a mace
myech'myena - shape-shifting
Mye'hyoi Peyt – Milky Way
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
Nord-Stjarna – north star
Nyr'Fjor - Jotunn's original name for V'slozh'noi
oma'auzha – mother-eff'er
oto'oa - big sister
pu'lotni – plutonium
pye'nee - a kind of bird
Ra'ska'yeh o Phyllo'xia – Tales of Phylloxia
roobyn – a red stone
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
Shen'grid – the Protected Zone, the zone in which habitable planets orbit around a sun
Shi'nuwu – Reality/Yggdrasil
sigan – short for yan'sigan, rock-worm
So'shah – Earth/Midgard
syem'fyerma – family/community farm
Tai'shu – The Void
tro'watal – perseverance
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
whota – wheat
Chapter Notes

Thank you guys for reading! You know - I've been noticing a lot of people putting on the kudos and subscribing to this story! I'm so thankful to all you readers and be sure to drop a comment or question if you have those~ Maybe, I'll have to roll up my sleeves and do another side story when I get time. Hmmm...

As for my life. I did almost all of my oral english exams. Just have to collate marks and mark 3 last pairs of students who got misinformed (somehow) as to the date of their exams. (le sigh) Anyways, my mood has been grumpy since 6 students didn't show up for one class and out of the 15 who did show up, I had to fail 3 for just not getting the exam, not speaking well etc. I hate failing students. On the other hand, they didn't attend class hardly and as a result their English comprehension and speaking isn't where it should be at. (le tear) So yeah...

On the other hand, this means that this summer will begin in earnest next week. I'll be working on Distortions In Time, four/five of my original fics (one of which I hope to publish this year) and also get back into studying Chinese a bit more seriously. Also tutor and do some other side jobs to gain some extra moolah. (I wanna get a new laptop OR a new smartphone...)

So yeah. DISTORTIONS IN TIME... I really wanna finish it this summer. And just post once a week into the fall. That would be great. I hope to make some hard copies for folks who are interested. Non-profit of course... and if I do build an original fiction series out of the first part, I'll let you guys know.

Thanks to: Kai_Maciei, lemomina, halszka, llfrozensunll, cbc2v, officiumdefunctorum, iBlameGlobalWarming, alwaysaprincessa, MistyDawn, Skywinder, SourPatchKidz230.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Every space-faring species has constructed their own system of measurement; yet, the simplistic style of the academic, grey-skinned humanoids of Troax was most often used when trade and politics brought multiple races and species together. The Troaxian ratings and designations included the size of the planet (ranging from Category Er to Category Djah), the planet's habitability (ranked from habitable to rapidly destabilizing) and the Shengrid Count (usually measuring on the scale of -5 to +5 with zero being the optimum neutral zone).

So much for the planets. The moons also came under similar, well-regulated and standardized measurements, the better to equip any captain and crew with the reliable data so necessary for space travel.

Gyxa, Loki read, scrolling through the computer's databank entry, was a moon, Category Kul, uninhabitable with a Shengrid Count of +2. Closer to the sun, Loki frowned, and without much of an atmosphere. That will mean donning the heavy duty suits if we are to go out. Although it should be cooler than Muspelheim... If it is as low-budget a colony as the Captain makes it out to be, oxygen tanks will have to be tooted about as well.

Seven shifts later, the Spash'ta and her jolly crew set down in Gyxa much to Loki’s relief. By the end of the seven long shifts, the exiled Prince knew exactly what kind of company in which he had found himself – not the good kind. Talking with the crew of the Tro'watal and Nesta and, later, Mal, Loki had come to understand exactly what set Captain Mal'myrn apart from other captains and their crews.

She is a rare jewel in these forsaken corners of the universe, Nesta had once imparted with great wisdom, having a sense of justice and fairness. Severity mixed with good faith makes for a great captain and the Tro'watal is blessed with one such as Captain "Steel Balls". All levity aside, she is what gets the Tro'watal up and running properly every day. You'll be lucky, Kol'la, to get another such as Captain Mal and the Tro'watal.

And he's right, 'Kol'la' sighed as he watched several of his crew members retrieve their precious stores of contraband (black market goods, drugs, rare weapons and other sorts of illegal items) and discuss market prices. This does not bode well for us. For me.

When the Spash'ta settled down on the launch pad beside the rounded domes which marked the underground settlement of Gyxa, Loki could hardly wait to disembark, get the job done, return to the ship and continue on his way.

It was not to be.

Captain Lavyr, an older, grizzled Skrull, did not seem to be in any hurry and his crew followed his example accordingly. As soon as the Captain disappeared into the main headquarters of the small colony, no doubt to sample some of the local's distilled drinks, the rest of the crew's busy routine faltered. Crew members chatted with other locals who had climbed out from the various tunnel access points. Loki and two of his more serious partners did their duty, patrolling the edges of the oxygen bubble provided by the ship, the colony's generators and the moon's thin atmosphere.

Watching the others lounging about and leaning against containers which should be making their way down the ramp and into the servicing station, Loki felt a familiar sense of irritation and frustration rise within him. A familiar feeling, he knew, most often linked to those times that Thor would yet again escape his much needed tutoring and preparation for the throne. Yet here, Loki could do nothing, being a junior crew member. All he could do was stand and fume under the sun's devastatingly crisp rays and check and double-check and triple-check the system's ratings for the various perimeter monitors.
For a few seconds, Loki considered hooking on his oxygen tank's mask and let his portion of the oxygen field vent. *How panicked they would be!* He sighed. *This is no time for tricks, Loki,* he told himself. *This is your only chance to get to the Fen'chi Galaxy and then back to Jotunheim and then back home to Odin and Frigga – and maybe Thor.*

*I have to warn them.* Loki thought of the devastated edges of Jotunheim's now widened Eybjarg. *I have to warn them all.* If Sagora and Mal speak true, *something is coming and it threatens all that lives and holds breath.*

Finally, finally, his shift came to an end. Finally, Loki could return to the Spashta, shuck off his sweat-stained suit, smudged goggles and clammy anti-rad gloves. Finally, he could reach his cool quarters and lie in the dark, far from the glare of the too bright sun.

Loki considered his options as his crew mate, Lif, took his position, allowing him to step away from the delicate instrumentation of the atmospheric particle shield converter. Turning away, oxygen canister snugly slung over one shoulder, Loki made his way around the edges of the sphere until he reached the far side, where the nose of the small carrier pointed outward toward the orange-red, bare landscape of rubble and gravel, hills and mountains – and dust. Above it all hung the gigantic planet about which Gyxa revolved. It was also silent and still, a murky yellow-gold which glowed like a small sun in and of itself down on its lesser satellites.

Dust lay over everything – a fine layer of dirt which poofed upwards in small clouds with every step he took. Behind him, the tread of his boots sprang up, clearly imprinted on the lifeless soil. The only sign of life which would remain on that part of the planet after he had long gone. Loki shivered at the thought.

Lifting the oxygen canister's mask to his mouth and thumbing the valve open, Loki stepped forward, breaching the invisible wall of molecules. Now he was fully in the world of the dead. A dead moon baked by the sun as it revolved about its super-heated planet. Behind him, the sound of cheerful chatter, yelling and cursing fell into an oddly murky dimness – coming low and slow through the incredibly thin atmosphere of Gyxa.

*Why anyone would wish to live here,* Loki thought with a grimace as he looked about the empty moon's landscape, *is beyond me.* People with no hope, perhaps, with no alternatives. *Or the opposite.* People who see something here none can see... potential.

The twice-exiled Prince could not help but think of the terrible glory of icy Jotunheim and the golden majesty of Asgard. *How often do we take our blessings for granted,* he mused. *If we see our Realms for what they are – can we feel anything but thankfulness?*

*Well, not Jotunheim,* the darker side of him piped up. *Not for long at any rate.* Soon...

...SOON...

Soon, it will join in death all those other so-called great Realms and become lost to time and memory.

...IT WILL BE MINE...

Loki shivered, spun abruptly about and returned to the relative safety of the sphere. Still, the dark, oily presence followed him and insinuated itself within the warrior mage's belly, curling about uncomfortably in his mind.

...YOU ALL SHALL BE MINE...
It took everything within Loki not to break out into a run. Keeping his pace quick yet steady, the Jotun made his way up the ramp and further in – towards his quarters. When he reached his room, currently empty of his stim-chatterer's bunk-mate, Gil, Loki turned on the cooler, stripped in the dark and lay on his bed, back firmly flush against the gently vibrating steel of the ship. Focusing his mind on the steady drone of the ship's sub-light engines and the buzz of the other electronics and the whirr of the cooler's broken second fan-blade, Loki closed his eyes to the dark and shored up the barriers within his mind as he had learned how to do instinctively so long ago.

It was louder.
It was closer.

[...the shadows hold great mysteries...]
[...and beyond the shifting dark and light...]
[...the dark and light, which play at the game of life and death...]
[...there is...]

*Sleen, a Category Byo Planet, is found within the neutral zone of the system designated TahSol-783955-i3. With a Shengrid Count of +0.5, it is a habitable water planet which boasts of a variegated atmosphere and adequate protection against the sun's rays, which has fostered a diverse ocean ecosystem consisting of vegetative, non-sentient and sentient life forms.*

Tuning out the low drown of the narrator, Loki switched the holoscreen's page and focused on the slowly rotating picture of Sleen – a blue-green planet specked with various groups of brown, black and grey. *Islands,* Loki recognized them instantly. *Some islands at least.*

Flicking his blue fingers idly, Loki zoomed further into the planet, bringing up realistic photographs of dark choppy waters and the shallows surrounding various underwater mountains, islands, island and submerged volcanoes and reefs. More pictures popped up on the screen, showing various plants, flying and swimming creatures and two-toned partial humanoids.

*Sleen's sentient population consists of two races, known as the Chasm-Folk and the Shallow Dwellers. The Chasm-Folk, also named the Trenchers, live in the Abyss, the lower regions of the ocean. Little is known of...* Loki fast-forwarded the narrator, stopped and started again. *...known as the Sunners live in the Shallows, the upper regions of the ocean of Sleen. Congregating about reefs and islands, the Shallow Dwellers have constructed a complex civilization and achieved a level eight tech-mark for technological progress, complex tunnelling systems, mining and commercial fish farms and space-faring vehicles specifically modified for their kind...* 

A red star signal popped up in the lower left hand corner, which Loki quickly tabbed, pulling the small dialogue box bigger, the better to read the small print. Once again, the monotone of the female speaker droned on, accompanied by pictures.
Currently, Sleen is in a partial state of conflict as the supposedly oppressed, less technologically advanced 'Trenchers' fight for access to inter-galactic traders. Hoping to bypass the 'Sunners' and their debilitating tariffs, the 'Trenchers' have stated they wish to advance their culture several generations and ensure the survival of their kind in the face of fierce competition from the 'Sunners', who hold monopoly of the surface waters. Citing 'oppression' and 'exploitation', the Chasm-Folk have begun to strike back recently in a more physical manner, particularly in response to the Shallow Dweller corporations responsible for 'contaminating water' and 'stealing resources'. Visitors to Sleen, commercial or otherwise, are advised against submerging in order to keep out of the mid-level waters currently under debate. Any interference by outside parties may not be welcomed by the warring factions on Sleen.

So, Loki grimaced, turning off the databank with a peremptory flick of his long, blue fingers, so we are about to set foot in a zone of conflict. Led by our fearless and equally brainless Captain who has no sense for the delicacy of such political issues. Loki laid back down on his bunk and sighed.

This is going to be... interesting. To say the least.

-0-0-0-

"Don't get involved in the local politics," Captain Lavyr had said in between sniffs of space dust to his crew just before disembarking. "Don't get involved."

With those words, Loki had felt as though the Noradian had doomed the entire trip and crew. It was, at best, tempting the Norns if one believed that kind of thing. Watching Fyri, a Skrull crew mate, and two other Half-breeds, Kar and Nurx, brawl with three Shallow Dwellers and roll across the sand dusted deck of the pier-side pub at which they had been sampling the local fare and drinks, Loki experienced another pang of unease. Unlike the usual conflicts brought on by cultural misunderstandings or similar gaffes, the intensity of the Sunners spoke of something a bit more serious.

Do I want to know? Loki sighed to himself. No doubt some sordid affair or something similar, most common with those of low taste and etiquette... Turning to his remaining, much more calm crew mate, a female Noradian called Asta, Loki quirked a dark eyebrow.

"What should we do?" He pursed his lips. "I have no real interest in getting entangled, yet if it gets out of control-"

"Hm." Asta tipped her head, eyes narrowing in disgust at the sight of her fellow crewmen rolling about like animals in the dirt. "Looks sandy down on the floor. By Gyla, I hate sand."

"It does get everywhere."

"Yeah."

The two stood there, looking down the from second landing of the pier's backside balcony and contemplated their options.

Karo's Fin. That was the pub's name. Famous for its seafood, the Karo's Fin offered a variety of food and drink aimed to please the variety of palates as presented by the occasional trader who deigned to stop by. Sleen was not considered, after all, worth a stop by many merchants and traders, and thus, Karo's Fin, like other similar establishments dotted all over the planet's few islands, attempted to promote a paradise, a haven for any who would stop by. Offering clear air, fresh unpolluted waters and skies, tasty local seafood dishes and rich alcohol, such establishments combined environmental beauty, culinary delights and high class entertainment (in the form of gorgeous young ladies and boys) to draw in the few space-faring folk who stopped by for quick trading.

Shallow Dwellers, as the databank had named them, were the only ones which Loki had so far seen.
Lithe, if spindly, blue-green-skinned humanoids, the Shallow Dwellers offered a different kind of exotic flavour against the seaside backdrop of their world. With glittering grey eyes (often covered with a thin film of a transparent eyelids common in aquatic species), long thin necks and torsos and slender hands and feet, the Sunners definitely looked as though their ancestors had just recently risen out of the oceans. Loki couldn't help but notice the small flaps of skin along their necks, the now vestigial remnants of gills once used by their evolutionary ancestors, he supposed. According to one of the more friendly porters, many wealthy young Sunners opted for operations to remove them.

Loki had smiled bitterly then, remembering all those years of hiding his blue skin, hating his own flesh for what destruction it could hold, what savagery it symbolized. Beauty, he mused, is relative, in the end... His face softened as he remembered Mal's awe and the delicate touch of her light fingers as she traced his lines down his arms, down his ribs to his hips. In the end, it all depends on the individual... or the society. Gills. No gills. Blue skin. White skin.

On Sleen, for certain, there was beauty. The Sunners offered great service in the form of scantily clad, long-haired (another Sunner trait) beauties who waited on the hungry and thirsty travellers. Karo's Fin and Karo's Tower (the hosteltry next door) had been the crew's final stop after the simple immigration procedure usual to backwater planets.

Karo's Island. That was the name of the small spit of land upon which Spashta had landed. A very short drive in a small cart, no more than ten minutes by standard time, had brought them to Karo's Fin and Karo's Tower. The following two days had been spent on a neighbouring island called Gori's Market, where the Captain had begun to enter negotiations for his cargo. A period of waiting followed, filled with the usual under the table negotiations for some of the more enterprising crew members and mindless entertainment mixed with alcohol for the rest.

Apparently something – some romance or negotiations have turned sour, Loki glanced over at Asta again. Asta, who still stood there looking down at the six combatants rolling about the lower deck of the pub, knocking against chairs and tables, upsetting drinks, bumping into the long-suffering wait staff and generally making a nuisance of themselves. Loki felt for the Karo's waiters and waitresses. Long years of serving tables at the Poison Paradise rose up in his mind. He would have been cursing the trouble-makers to Helheim by this point if he were the Sunners.

"What do you think happened?" Loki wondered, looking back at other crew members who were now gathering about to chant their friends' names and egg on the fighters.
"Drugs," Asta said sourly. "No doubt. Or some such foolishness. More trouble than its worth, I always say."
"Indeed."
"Some Sunners don't like it," Asta continued coolly. "I know. I've been through here a few times now. They never like that kind of illegal stuff circulating. Weapons and drugs always cause trouble on a planet like this one... Or the idiots sold something to a Trencher. Let's hope that didn't actually happen."
"The Chasm-Folk?"
"Yeah."
"They would have to submerge..." Loki trailed off.
"Last night." Another less drunk crew member muttered, coming to stand by Asta and shaking his head while contemplating his half-full pint of local ale. "Apparently."
"Oma'auzha."
"Yeah," nodded the weathered Skrull, whom Loki recognized as Shift Two's engineer. "Went down and got some trading done with the Trenchers. I told them it was more trouble than it's worth, but do they listen to me? Nooo..."
"What did the Captain say?" asked Loki curiously.
"Well," laughed the old engineer. "He'll know... now."
"So we are close to a Trench then?"
"They are everywhere," Asta pointed out. The engineer nodded. "One lies between Kora's Island and Gori's Market."
"Ah," Loki slumped against the metal railing and sighed then. "Of course, it being so handily close by, they had to go-"
"Money calls." Asta said succinctly.
"But is it worth it?" Loki asked skeptically.
"Ahhh..." The Skrull engineer laughed then."The Trenchers will pay anything for a way to advance their cause," he explained. Then repeated again: "Anything."

With that enigmatic revelation, the older crew mate moved off. Asta cursed. Loki rubbed his eyes tiredly. This is... He had no idea what to think, what to do. Below and up the stairway, guests, locals and staff crowded about now, many pushing forward as various onlookers jumped into the fray. Wait staff and one of the managers were also attempting to bring order to the mob – to no avail. Items went flying, tables tipped over, chairs were wielded as shields and weapons alike, bottles crashed against heads and furniture. Like thick flowing syrup, the increasingly disordered crowd spilled out of the lower balcony and down onto the beach proper as folk tussled half in and half out of the water.

Loki was just about to suggest calling the captain when a mechanical siren blared out overhead, voices cast by giant speakers began to order everyone to cease fighting, lie down and put their hands on their heads. Shots were fired into the air as warning, bringing almost everyone to attention immediately. Following Asta's lead, Loki knelt, allowed himself to be cuffed and led off to a floating prisoners' barge. Seated between Asta and a copiously bleeding Sunner, Loki sat silently, fuming inwardly as the entire group were subdued with stun guns and clubs, rounded up, restrained and carted over to a holding cell on a third island further away.

It was a hellish time. Thanks to his nonresistance, Loki's hands had been cuffed before him, but that did little to alleviate the heat which overwhelmed him in the metallic barge now slowly baking under the noon day sun. The short-tempered native beside him had thankfully fainted, yet blood still oozed out of the cut on his arm, smearing Loki's blue skin with dark red. Two prisoners emptied their stomachs onto the floor and six more got in a shouting match before guards entered and began hustling them out in pairs.

As he was led out, Loki could not help but notice that the Sunners were being weeded out of the lines. No doubt they will pay lightly for their freedom, Loki thought sourly. Then it was his turn to sit before an annoyed and tired law enforcement officer dressed in standard black spacer military fatigues. Officer Loi took down Loki's account with a stoic face and little apparent interest.

"When will we be released?" Loki asked as his paperwork was shuffled about in a resigned kind of way.
"Depending on your involvement in the fight this morning or the submergence at last night," the Sunner shrugged his shoulders indifferently, "as early as tomorrow morning."
"I see."
"We will will look into the affair as soon as may be. The culprits will be duly punished and the fines levied."
"And if I was merely an unfortunate bystander?" Loki's voice rose a little, but he forced himself to keep calm in the face of suspect bias.
"Then you will be free soon enough. Those innocent of any interference or wrong-doing will be freed in good time."

With that, Loki was pulled to his feet and hustled past more metal desks and chairs (adorned ominously with electro-restraints) and down two hallways before finally arriving at a heavy metal
door, behind which waited a cell already occupied by three of his crew mates. Loki eyed the damp, sandy, disgruntled and bruised group with disfavour.

"I can't believe-" One of them spoke, his voice raised in a disbelieving sort of whine – and then broke off as one of Loki's dark eyebrows sardonically rose, his red eyes flashed and a finger rose, cutting him off.

"I have no interest in your complaints, dou'ma," said Loki, his voice and body language the appearance of calm and little else. "Sit down in the corner, do not contaminate the beds with your dirt and I may consider forgiving you your indiscretions which have apparently and unfortunately embroiled the rest of the crew."

"It wasn't me who started it!"

"Not me either-"

"I just kinda-"

"Some auzha pushed-"

"Silence!" Loki's voice cracked like a whip around the small grey room. Everyone fell silent. "I will take the upper bunk. I will lie down. I will be left alone. This room will be silent until they come back for me." Giving each of his companions a warning glare, Loki strode over, tested the lumpy mattresses and chose the best one before clambering up, lying down and staring up at the ceiling.

Less than two weeks, he thought, and I am in trouble already. Shutting his eyes and grimacing and trying to ignore the whispers of the others who were trying to sort out in almost silence who would be getting the other three beds, Loki tried not to think of Mal and the Tro'watal. Tried not to think of his faraway home which seemed so out of reach at present. Tried not to think of his family. Of Thor.

-0-0-0-

A day later, Loki was released alongside a small band of subdued crew members who had not taken part in the altercation and as a result could now return to their ship. The Captain, apparently, was still in the middle of negotiating the release of his crew. Upon arrival at the Spashta's loading dock, the group realized that things were worse than they had imagined – the ramp had been left lowered the day before and remained so the entire night, allowing access to the entire cargo bay and its precious cargo.

Cursing loudly and fluently in several languages, two of the Skrull engineers and Asta jumped forward, pulling open containers and shoving crates aside. One of the more violent tempered half-breeds kicked aside several empty boxes and promised retribution on "the dou'ma who had dared spit in their faces". Although, Loki mentally pointed out, it was we who first to begin this with those fools who thought that trading with Trenchers was a great idea, particularly within an already politically unstable area.

"Nothing," Latho sighed, leaning back on an empty cart. "They left nothing."

"No use weeping over it now," Asta said after a long moment. "It'll be long gone now."

"There is no chance of us getting it back?" Loki asked and added. "You think it was the Sunners who did this?"

"Absolutely," someone said. "Unless there are daredevil Trenchers in the neighbourhood. Rare for those kinds though – they'd have to have the water-oxy casks." Then they added in further explanation, noticing the blank look of one of the younger crew members. "You should've read it in the file the Cap sent around – Trenchers can't live outside of the water, not like the Sunners, anyways. They need to carry about headgear designed to hold water, for them to breath through, see." A pause. A moment of silence followed, broken only by the occasional rustle as a few other optimists rustled through the ship's further deck's shelving units. "No. It has to be the Sunners. When we were all in the clank."

"Think they set it all up-"
"Oh! You mean-"
"Janah! That whole fight-"
"I hardly think-" Loki's quiet remonstrance was overruled by louder voices.
"Makes total sense-"
"-just like them-"
"-should never have trusted them the oma'auzha-"
"Or they are merely opportunistic," Loki pointed out.
"That they are," agreed Asta. "Malicious, no. Opportunistic, yes. More than likely, a few seized the chance to take what they wanted-"
"Everything," interjected Loki.
"-and now, with no chance of recovering it, the Captain will order a return to base."
"Base?" asked one Noradian.
"Kolm."

Kolm, Loki knew, was Vlozh'noi's sister planet with similar farms and populated with a similar mix of Noradians and Half-Breeds.

"I suppose I see the logic," Loki sighed, rubbing the back of his neck tiredly as he turned away from careful perusal of a higher-set shelving unit also emptied. His shoulder length dark hair, now bound up in a tie, hung down like a pony's tail (if pony's tail ends usually curled) and left his neck free from his now longer hair's smothering heat. "How inconvenient."
"Well, you could stay here," another crew member pointed out. "Our shift can run without you."
"Nice," Asta snorted at Loki's scowl. "Such love." She cocked her head and then shot Loki an unrepentant grin and shrugged her trademark shrug again. "But Ollie's right. You could stay and hitch a ride further on. You won't be able to be choosy – but you could probably hitch a ride on some old boat. They do come around more often than they used to."
"Hm." Loki frowned and gazed out the door to the black metal ramp and the white sand beyond. "I will think on it."
"You'll have to think fast," Asta added. "The Captain will be here soon, I should imagine."

With that, Ollie and Asta took charge, setting up a shift for guards, setting up three cleaning crew shifts and two inventory-checking shifts. After three turns of the clock, Loki managed to rest his cramped fingers, now tired from endless writing in his inventory shift, and took his six hour guard duty. At some point in time, the Captain had arrived, Tamal told him, swearing and cursing like a spacked out spacer. He had gotten the rest of the crew free with a stiff fine – but with the cargo gone, the whole venture was a real loss. Insurance would cover some, Loki was told, but overall, the return home to Kolm with the Captain in a mood such as this will be hellish.

Inventory and guard duty done, Loki initially felt no interest in how the Captain felt about his financial losses nor did he feel sympathetic about the uncomfortable fate of the rest of the crew as yet incarcerated until just before lift off. Stripping out of his light-grey space-suit (which Asta once told him never had looked better until he had donned it), Loki rolled in his bunk and enjoyed the dark and the chill fan yet again. Tomorrow, he thought, I will make a decision.

-0-0-0-

He woke in the early morning hours to a quiet world. The crew, excepting the night guard shift, were asleep and the ship lay silent for the most part. Far away, he could hear the light shuffle of a pair of boots. The guards, no doubt. Loki went back to sleep, dozing fitfully, until he heard the first grumbling of his belly. Finding his way to the as yet empty canteen where most mornings a small hubbub was usually rising, Loki scrounged in unusual silence as two Skrull crew from the second night shift sat quietly. Slacking off, Loki supposed, but he said nothing, instead deciding to expend his energy in a more fruitful way than getting into senseless arguments.
Gathering up several brown and black buns, a bunch of boiled eggs and a small container of sweet gruel which the dispensing machine splattered out in its usual ominous way, Loki exited the large, brown and orange decorated room with the barest of nods. Winding his way down various corridors and passageways, up and down various levels and stairs, the exiled Prince and new, unhappy member of the Spashta, made his way below to the now sorted and neatly ordered empty hold of the Spashta, down the ramp and out to the beach beyond.

Sand drifted across the stone and metal landing pad upon which the Spashta rested. The white granules, as soft as and even more minute than snow, drifted across the flat, grey concrete, getting caught in the cracks. Loki looked about, located the grove of bright green and purple trees he had seen earlier, left the shade of the ship and settled himself on the flat, more packed, darker sand closer to the water which was now quietly lapping up against the shore.

A fresh stiff breeze blew off the vast blue-green ocean before him. Blue-green in the shallows before him. Blue-green which melted away to darker blues and teals and then finally into the dark water of the great deep. Sunlight blessed the water with endlessly variegated glittering diamonds of light as the waves slowly rippled under the gentle caress of the wind. Above, gigantic, white clouds drifted serenely across the azure sky, carrying their burden of rain to other climes.

Paradise, Loki thought as he slowly finished his small, unappetizing breakfast. *A paradise from a certain point of view, as we learned last night.* When he set aside the last container, Loki pulled his space boots off and allowed the so hated sand to push up between his light blue toes. Light blue toes lined with the marks of his ancestors. The marks of Laufey. Absent-mindedly, his dark nail traced the one line which curved up and around his ankle, up to his calf and the back of his knees.

As a young man, he had hidden his form in disgust. As a Prince, he had hidden his form in fear. Yet, here he was, forced everyday to confront what he had been running away from for the larger part of his life. Forced to acknowledge it in his quarter's small mirror placed inconveniently and inescapably in the back of his door while on the Tro'watal, forced to acknowledge it in the eyes of the others and here as well – within the distorted waters of Sleen's clear ocean.

Yet, somehow, the horror was fading. *Perhaps I am tired,* Loki thought. *One can only hold onto the emotions of hate for so long before fatigue sets in. There is only despair and miserable acceptance.*

He could not help but think of Mal again then. *Mal. Mal.* She had taken him to her bosom in a way he had not experienced before. *There was Glo-Glo. A little like that. There was Frigga. And Elska. That was another kind of love,* Loki supposed. *A maternal thing. Familial. Wanted and necessary. And now there was Mal.* Mal who had, like Frigga, encouraged him to pursue what path his heart led him on. *Mal who had looked for a brighter day.*

Loki sat there for several turns of the clock in quiet, listening to the distant call of birds, the quiet clatter of the Spashta waking up, the gentle lap of the water against the shore – regular as a heart beat. The shadows shifted as the sun climbed a little higher in the sky.

When Asta called his name from the ramp, Loki was standing under the slowly compacting shadows of the trees, ankle deep in blue-green glass, red eyes focused far away on the horizon. He knew what he had to do.
Loki wandering over the wrong side of the tracks. Loki taking a bus accidentally into the wrong neighbourhood. Hope you guys are enjoying this!

Let me know what you guys thought!
-KI

Alien Glossary:
'auzha – fucker
bollen - boulders/monoliths
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
Eno'Kesh'ko – the system of Eno, a type of magical level measurements
Fen'chi Galaxy – Andromeda Galaxy
gan'ga'war – steel balls
gan'ko – ganka'jya chon, a steel beetle
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
Janah – similar to dammit
Ka'autha'ndarna - Reality
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
Kholathan – Safety Belt/Protected Zone
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
kon'bi – short for konji'bifu, space bat
lasu – space rat
l'gon – storyteller
Morning-star - a mace
myech'myena - shape-shifting
Mye'hyoi Peyt – Milky Way
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
Nord-Stjarna – north star
Nyr'Fjor - Jotunn's original name for V'slozh'noi
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
pu'lotni – plutonium
pye'nee - a kind of bird
Ra'ska'yeh o Phyllo'xia – Tales of Phylloxia
roobyn – a red stone
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
Shen'grid – the Protected Zone, the zone in which habitable planets orbit around a sun
Shi'nuwu – Reality/Yggdrasil
sigan – short for yan'sigan, rock-worm
So'shah – Earth/Midgard
syem'fyerma – family/community farm
Tai'shu – The Void
tro'watal – perseverance
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
whota – wheat
Chapter Notes

What happens when you are tutoring a kid and reading "Hatchet" by Gary Paulsen with him as well as marathoning Stargate SG-1...

I'm finding that writing this stuff is so hard because I wanna go in detail and show how Loki did stuff on Sleen, and yet I also wanna move forward the plot a little and get him closer to really fun stuff I've got planned. ARRRGHHH! So yeah. There's a lot of side stories that I could write to flesh out this epic. Which is great, right? When it's over, there's stuff I can add, which you guys can enjoy. But... meanwhile, I need to be careful I'm not rushing things – but I'm not killing your interest or the pace of the plot. :

I hope you guys enjoy this chappie regardless.

PULSARS! (no, not really. But gosh, I love pulsars...)

Anyways, thank you so much for your thoughts and shoutouts and encouragements!
Thanks to: halszka, lemomina, iBlameGlobalWarming, Kai Maciel, cbc2v!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 71
Loki: The Low Road VI

Drip, drip, drip, drip... drip... drip... drip...

Thick beads of pearlescent water fell in slow monotonous rhythm as rain, falling from unseen grey skies, fell with unrelenting beat onto the broad flat leaves of the canopy and then slid downward, bending the slick green foliage, releasing a slower shower of rain on the unhappy creatures below. It was a wet world, hot and humid and sticky and damp, and inhabited by a variety of insects and birds and animals, all of them colourful and exotic and dangerous in their own right: small black bugs dotted with the colours of the rainbow, large flying things with thick, long black bodies and six legs which buzzed and hovered above foul-smelling flowers, whining gnat-like flies, and the long-tongued ant-eating goose-like birds which waddled about slowly from mound to mound. Far off the wail of cats and other more vicious animals, the rising and falling snarls and yelps offered little comfort for the stranded traveller.

A dark forest, brilliant yet gloomy with occasional shafts of grey light which filtered down through the canopy of broad green leaves overhead, the jungle planet's forest floor was nothing but a wilderness as far as the eye could see. Fronds and flowers, great trunks and slender saplings, tender shoots and thick grasses, spreading moss and climbing ivy obscured the loamy soil, making passage slow and difficult. The trees were vast, vast and old, climbing up as it were to the stars, and their trunks, at times so wide one could carve a house into its interior quite easily, spoke of a long life of peace and growth. If one could climb such a specimen and push one's way beyond the insect-populated understory, one would be able to look across a sea of broad leaves interspersed with giant
pollen trees, towering above the forest canopy.

One would see a blue sky, bright sunlight, a sunlit land, and below, another world, a dark, dim, wet realm.

This is the Planet of the Jungle-Sea. This is the Prison Planet of the Karona’as Judges.

This is Jela.

[...across the spaces...]

[...and time...]

[...which passes with each...]

[...counted by the stars...]

[...silent sentinels of time...]

Back to the slick-smooth bark of a grand pollen-tree, Loki sat, head resting upon his now soil-stained blue forearms crossed over equally the equally muddy knees of his orange and blue prison garb. Above him, a leaf shifted and quivered, releasing its small burden of rainwater as it tipped downward, splashing and sprinkling down on the lower plant-life – and Loki’s unresponsive head. Hunching forward further, the Jotunn attempted to ignore the deluge which soaked his white undershirt, plastering it to his thin frame.

He needed to think. He needed to think like he had never done before.

_How..._ The exiled Prince wondered, not for the first time in his life. _How did it come to this?_

[...such light reminds those who would look...]

[...we are not...]

[...we are not...]

[...are not...]

Loki’s decision to remain on Sleen had not upset the Captain as much as he had first anticipated. Standing before the grizzled old spacer and noting how the Captain was clearly imbibing while on duty yet again, Loki felt even more resolved than ever to remain on Sleen and take his chances with another crew. _Half of the crew is spacked out on spacer's dust or some other Hel-forsaken drug, Loki shivered, led by an incompetent fool with an expensive taste for wine and women. Captain Lavyr deserves his crew in a way... a fair punishment for criminal leniency and a lack of competence._

With a blank face revealing none of his distaste, Loki watched the old Captain carefully. Lavyr shuffled a few data-flimsies before him in an absent-minded kind of way and grunted noncommittally.

"I know this will leave you short-handed."

"Hmph. I have two crew members in the brig, ten of a mind to gut the other two and now you want off the boat..." Captain Lavyr shook his head. "I should have guessed."

Yes, Loki agreed caustically. _You should have been able to foretell your own doom, judging by the_
"Two members in the brig?" Loki asked instead, politely and with an added note of genuine concern the better to ease his exit. Ha. "The ones who submerged?"
"Ilo'or? Konya? No, no... no. That would be Shova and Zeni."
"Shova and Zeni." Loki repeated, bringing to mind a slight Half-Breed and a shifty-eyed Skrull. "Huh. They were on guard duty, weren't they?" Captain Lavyr snorted in disgust. "Who do you think got a nice fat payment from the Sunners for turning a blind eye while they raided the ship?"
"They probably gave in – for self-defense," Loki pointed out, while wondering why he was suddenly mediating for two fellow crew mates for whom he had no real care. "After all, two could hardly stand up to a group of Sunners, however ill-equipped they must have been-"
"Sunners have their own tech weaponry-"
"Then it makes more sense that those two would just give in to save their skins."
"Well, they were careless. Lounging about with the ramp down and all. Criminally careless," the Captain spat, his wrinkled frown even more deeply engrained into his hard face. "No. They were paid off. We found their stash – which will go toward our losses somewhat."

Loki did not have much to say in reply to the seemingly overwhelming evidence. With diplomatic adroitness, he carefully returned to his initial topic. Three papers were signed, his traveller's booklet and card updated by the Captain and with that, Loki left to pack and say farewell to the few whom he had come to tolerate. Quite a few enquired after Loki's intentions, to which he had replied with appropriate vagueness. The Fen'chi Galaxy, he said, was his original destination and remained so. Perhaps another ship headed there would pass by Sleen.

Perhaps, they had agreed with indifferent shrugs. Asta gave Loki a hard look before parting with a few words of advice. Be warned. Few ships which visit Sleen hold the legality of the Spashta – and many pirate or smuggler crews wander the far reaches of the wilds of the Mye'Hyoi Peyt, out of the jurisdiction of Skrull or Chitauri or Kree law. Loki nodded and reassured her that he would take care.

And what will you do around a backwater planet such as this? She asked, looking down the ramp at the gently swaying trees, the white sand and the blue-green crystal-clear waters break against the store underneath a brisk ocean breeze. Loki had shrugged and smiled crookedly. He would find something to do.

What I will do, he mused, is anyone's guess, but returning to Kolm will solve nothing and only delay me further, perhaps. Jotunheim, Asgard... Moving forward is the only option.

Moving forward.

Forward.

...such light...

...reminds those who would look...

The night of Sleen, on clear days, was filled a vista of soft light as the uncountable fields of stars spread before the lone traveller as he lay on a thin mat upon the flat sand close by the gently lapping waves of Sleen's great ocean. The ocean seemed as unending as the galaxy displayed before him. Observation over the months stay had allowed the quiet visitor to Sleen to map out the portion of the sky as seen by his bit of beach.

What a star-filled sky it was! Filled with thin pin-pricks of light and the larger glowing moons and planets which revolved with Sleen about its own sun, the night brought back to the observer the
overwhelming nature of life, of the universe – and the underwhelming power of himself. Out there, among the stars swarmed armies and city-planets and empires and other natural phenomena which he had studied for so long within the Mage's Academy. The life cycles of the suns, the muthra'ginnung (here known as the taishu), the spinning arms of the dancing, dying stars and the deadly paths of light from other collapsing celestial entities. All of them gifted with life and for those who would hear, with a song.

Here, in the stillness of the Sleenian nights, he could hear them calling out across the voids of space. He could hear their singing, beginning and ending – a comforting thing, in its own way.

And in the day, when the stars disappeared into the blaze of the overhead sun, Loki worked alongside the Sunners. It was a small thing, he thought, to aid them undo the damage which the crew of the Spashta had wrought. Drugs, he learned, could easily be introduced into the Sunner's breeding ground and into the youngling's pools in which they first grew. Drugs such as one's supplied to the Trenchers.

The newcomer knew that his poor attempts at mediation between the Sunners and Trenchers within that region would probably not last beyond his stay. Still, he spoke with both parties under the careful watch of the local Sunner lord and offered what advice he could, pushing aside the debilitating regret which rose even now at times such as these. What could have been, let it come to fruit here, he hoped as the two species learned the meaning of treaty and parley. Perhaps, one day, some kind of peace will be brokered.

After such days, he would awake, feeling even more reinvigorated than usual. The colour of his skin, he discovered, could hold the pale white and green eyes of his Asgardian colouration for longer periods of time if he wished, unless otherwise taxed.

Breathing in and out, taking in the fresh sea air and facing each day with renewed optimism, he waited. He waited – and he watched.

 [...such light reminds those who would look...]

 [...we are not...]

 [...we are not alone...]

Time was relative on Sleen, but by his own time, Loki spent three months on the water planet before finding a suitable ship headed toward the Fen'chi Galaxy. It was called the Kyl'la, after some kind of horned beast on Troax, according to the hard-eyed, crafty looking Skrull who captained her. She was fast and she was expected to make a few stops beforehand, but the Fen'chi Galaxy was laid in on the chart-books this time around.

Loki, offering his services, was reluctantly accepted (with a caveat or two, such as the fact that he would have to bunk in the hold) and before long, after two weeks rest, the Kyl'la returned to the skies with little to no incident thanks to the tyrannical rule of its Captain, Nalor. As warned, the Kyl'la stopped by an agricultural farm world, emptying its hold of its merchandise – fish and other seafood and fauna and medicines from Kolm and metals from some other mining planets. What will the next cargo be? Loki had wondered as the ship ascended and darted off on its hyper-drive engines to it's next destination.

When he gazed out of the view screen from his guard position by the left stern windows, Loki had a feeling he knew.

The world before him was falling apart. Just watching the jets of steam and ash and atmosphere vent
outward to space, drifting away and then spiralling toward a circle of nothingness, the grand blackness of a Muthr'a'Ginnung, Loki twitched. Images of Jotunheim, the remnants of his nightmares and the evidence of his own handiwork which he had seen firsthand rose in his mind. Several small pods were drifting toward the Kyl'la and attaching one by one to its side-hatches. We are taking on refugees, Loki thought. Refugees of such a world would pay anything for a ride to salvation, to safety.

After his off-duty shift, which was spent mostly sleeping and eating, Loki took his next job, that of patrolling the lower decks where the new passengers were being kept in the same manner as he. The newest crew member of the Kylla was to keep an eye on them and ensure that they were taken care of. Loki had nodded, swivelled about and marched off on his new assignment. However, once faced with the folk within the hold, Loki felt a wave of uncertainty sweep over him.

The hold which had once been silent, a perfect spot for him to bunk down was now occupied by a sweaty, foul-mouthed uncouth lot of beings. Barely sentient if one goes by their education and culture. Judging by the haphazard fashions, the colourful dialects (and the variety thereof), the stories being swapped between the two other guards and the passengers, and the various suspect packages and bags, Loki realized that he was more or less faced with the criminal element most often found in the corners of Realms and galaxies.

Desperate folk, he reminded himself, desperate measures to survive. You are one to judge, Loki.

Still, it left him uneasy. With thoughts of revolt dancing about in his head, Loki rescued his things from a particularly light-fingered Half-Breed, kept careful watch of his bedding and sleeping area, bandied easy words with those who shouted out to him and ensured that any malcontents were swiftly seen to. Much of the night was spent in a fitful sleep with the sick feeling that he was being watched for any sign of weakness. It was unnerving and exhausting to say the least. Loki hoped that the journey would be brief.

It was.

It ended on his fourth watch, yet again amongst the raucous passengers. It ended with a short ascent to an unnamed world. A brief stop, the Captain reassured them. They would not even land.

Everyone had complained a little, but then attentions shifted back to the various gambling games currently in progress and conversations and rumour-mongering among more politically savvy individuals who had interest in the movements of the Skrull and the Kree. An alarming recurrence of the Chitauri cropped up in the conversations as well. The Kyl'la bucked as it hit the atmosphere and the turbulence. More grumbling rose and then the ship stabilized as its grav generators shifted to make compensation for the new tilt of the ship.

Then there was silence.

A brief stop, the Captain had reassured them. They would not even land.

The captain kept his promise. Without even touching down, the bottom flooring of hold gave way, releasing its cargo of passengers, including Loki onto a swathe of green grass and loamy muddy soil. Bruised and aching and winded from the short yet sudden fall, Loki and the now angry beings about him struggled to their feet cursing and yelling and attempting to jump and latch onto the slowly closing doors of the hold. Loki stood unmoved in the midst of them, gazing upward, with a mind filled with all of the curse words he had learned through the long years of servitude.

Cold and unmoving, the Kyl'la moved onward and upward inevitably. Unstoppable. Standing there, heads all raised in shock and disbelief, the entire group stared upward watching as the dark black and
green hull of the ship disappeared behind lowering grey clouds. Shock gave way to anger and shouts, curses and clenched fists and hoarse voices rose to the skies with no response. After a short while, fatigue set in and their shouts abated. They waited for a few minutes more and when it became readily apparent that this was in fact no joke, everyone looked about numbly, sizing each other up and then slowly shuffling to the belongings now scattered about amongst them on the wet ground.

Loki recovered his three grey blanket-bed roll, his small black foam pillow and his pack and then looked about, realizing that none of them had far to go, for the hillock upon which they had fallen was, at the base, surrounded by an impossibly high black fence, laced about with ominous looking wiring. Judging by the hum and crackle in the air, the entire fence was electrified.

"A prison," he finally managed to get out.
"Yuh think?" spat a particularly angry-looking Centaurion, its blue fists quivering with barely controlled anger. "The oma'auzha left us on an auzha prison planet. Probably got a nice bonus for bringing us all in."
"But... I did not do anything-"
"Hey. Folks will pay for anything," a Skrull sighed. "The jailors get a commission dependent on how many heads they got. Such kind of a system works well enough on some worlds with smaller prisons, but for prison planets – with such resources for large amounts of folk... who cares if one or two aren't really there for the right reasons. Am I right – or am I right?"
"This is a mistake," Loki repeated in shock and rising anger. "I cannot be-
"They are coming," someone else said, started forward and, approaching a phalanx of Stone People, began to harangue the guards angrily.

Loki caught something about laws and rights, but the tirade was ended with a swift shock from the electro-stave of the commanding officer. Or who Loki thought was the commanding officer, judging by the neater clothing and glinting, shining badge. In the face of such a callous response on the part of the guards, everyone fell silent, hanging back warily and eyeing their captors with renewed respect. At a sharp shout, the riff-raff shuffled sullenly into a line, the slower or recalcitrant ones brutally shoved, jabbed or electrified into submission.

Mouth shut in a hard line, Loki followed the orders, red eyes glinting, and more than ever prepared to speak on his defence if such a moment was allowed him. No such opportunity arose as each of them were slowly let into a door, one by one. Loki, on his turn, found himself led down a long grey passageway carved out of heavy rock and then to a small room where he was forced to strip before three heavily armed guards who stared down at him, unmoved by his complaints and demands.

When the metal tip of the electro-stave rose to his chin and forced it upward in silent threat, Loki fell silent again and with jerky movement removed his clothing and his few weapons and watched as all of his belongings were packed away into a non-descript metal container which was billeted and scanned with a card now bearing his name and face.

With more grunts and short curses, Loki was lead into another room where two Troaxian scientists waited, mechanical devices trailing thin wires in hand. A databank was accessed and data input swiftly as a yellow beam of light trailed up and down his body, cataloguing, no doubt, his size, height and other important information. There, his ear lobe was clipped and forced down unceremoniously onto a cold metal table another tracking device (he supposed) was injected into his right buttock. Biting back a yelp, Loki dug his dark fingernails into his blue palm and cursed his captors' ancestors and Captain Nalor. Pulled upward and jerked to his feet, he was forced forward without further comment. As he left the room, he caught sight of the prisoner detail form now filled out with only a number attached for identification. No one, apparently, wished to know his name.

The anonymity of the petty criminal, he supposed.
The electrostave then, once again, poked him at the base of his spine, nudging him forward through the far door and down yet another long undecorated passage. Along his back, up and down his spine and about his neck, tension, born of anger and humiliation, coiled. Gritting his teeth and willing himself fiercely to keep his chin up, his eyes straightforward, Loki endured a brief stop in an incredibly uncomfortable decontamination chamber before moving onward to yet another blank, spartan jail-like room filled with benches, pale-faced, bored-looking Half-Breed who handed him another container within which he found a white undershirt which fit him fairly well, although the accompanying full-body orange and sky-blue prisoner's suit did not. It fit him a little too loosely for his liking and pulled at the ankles a little. He looked down at his new attire distastefully, but said nothing, knowing all too well that prudence was the better part of valour.

Inside the container given him as another pack, which he was given no time to look through. Instead, he was once again shoved forward through another door, another hallway and then outside to the edge of what looked like a thick forest the like of which Loki had never seen before except in a few books on Asgard and Vanahelm. A kind of jungle, an endless wilderness, he thought with a shiver.

Loki looked about. He was at the final stop, apparently. The metallic gate opened and he stepped through. It clanged shut behind him with finality. He sighed and looked about. A few of the others lurked about the edges of the forest. Obviously waiting for some friend to join them, Loki mused. For a few seconds, he contemplated following suit but then, remembering the choices he had within that group, Loki decided to move onward.

Surely, he thought, there are others on the planet such as I. Or at the very least, smarter folk who could figure out some way to escape. Somewhere, somewhere. Surely...

With that thought, Loki quickly checked the survival kit pack had given him (liquified plaster, a high-tech superfine metalloid rope, a hand-held beacon-lamp, a few bottles of some sort of spray, a blanket, a small rolled hammock, a spare set of clothing, another smaller metal lighter, an intricate looking multifunction tool and several ration bars) and then made his way down the path and disappeared into the forest. He did not look back.

-0-0-0-

The jungle was a dim, muffled place. After a short space of time, the bright sunlight at the edges of the thick jungle-forest faded and eventually disappeared, dowsed by the thick foliage overhead, creating a dim underworld lit only by occasional shafts of light which filtered down thinly and weakly from far above. The only clue the sun still sailed through the sky. What night-time would bring, Loki could only imagine, but he kept his feet going, hoping to put some distance between his unwelcome compatriots and himself.

At some point, he thought, gazing up at the branch-less giants of trees rising above his head, I will have to make for myself a camp, properly safe so I may gain some kind of rest. Loki swatted at a buzzing black and orange insect which looked rather similar to an Asgardian fly. It buzzed irritatingly about his head and neck as he made his way further down the slowly disappearing trail into the brush. Looking out for any branches he could reach with the small coil of superfine metallic rope, Loki continued through the undergrowth, eyes trained upward. A tickling on his neck distracted him. He clapped his hand absently against his neck and, drawing his away his fingers, glanced down to see the body of the orange-speckled black fly smeared on his hand. With a short curse, he wiped his hand off on the thigh pocket of his suit and continued onward.

Eventually, the lone traveller reached the edge of a ridge. By that time, he was not only tired and hungry, but also very aware of the setting sun. Standing on the edge of a rocky escarpment and looking down across a seemingly endless expanse of dense jungle-forest, Loki felt only weariness
and hopelessness.

Where to start? What to do? There was a thundering, constant rumble drifting from the east and a hint of freshness and water spray. At the thought of fresh water and some relief from the heat, Loki made his way along the edge with the sun on his back. He trudged forward until tiny rivulets and streams began to trickle past his boots, making his path even more treacherously slippery than before. Keeping well to firmer ground, Loki forced his way past until he reached a small river running with clear, sparkling water over the edge of the escarpment and down in a thin spray of waterfall. Bending forward, Loki slipped off the pack's straps and, cupping the water in his hands, took a careful sip. It was fresh and cold and before he knew it, he was dowsing himself in the water, letting the refreshing flow drift over his hands, his arms up to the elbows and his face.

After a few moments of drinking, revelling in the cold and washing away the sweat and dirt which had no doubt accumulated on his face, hands and neck, Loki sat back on his heels and considered his options. A few younger pollen trees grew on the edge of the escarpment, but even if he did manage to climb one, the branches which lifted upwards to the sky on flimsy looking stalks did not seem strong enough to bear his weight. Other trees hung with thick fruit and did not look any safer.

The third kind of tree grew relatively lower to the ground, spreading three or four main boughs outward before curling gently upward into a variety of other branches. More accessible, Loki thought, following the river inward a little until he rediscovered another of the black and purple trees in question. It had five boughs, two set together quite nicely for him to rig his hammock securely. Placing his kit and pack underneath his head and wrapping his blanket about him, Loki ate half of one of the nutritional ration bar and then fell into uneasy sleep.

In his dreams, he was running through the forest. Branches and brambles reached out and snagged against his arms and legs and face, seemingly attempting to restrain him in his headlong rush into the dark. Yet, he could not stop running. He could never stop running. He could hear them. He could hear them behind him - the howl of the wolves. The wolves, he chastised himself, are your friends. They are your family. When he came to a shuddering stop before a slowly widening Eybjarg, the dark side of him sneered.

They were your friends, Loki.

They were.

-0-0-0-

Morning dawned only a little cool yet still dewy, promising the heat and humidity Loki had been forced to endure the day previous. After finishing the rest of the nutrient bar he had started the night before, Loki repacked his meagre, yet precious possessions and contemplated his options. After a moments thought, Loki decided to continue with his first course of action – finding a river and following it to a fair site where he would make a base and dig in until he was retrieved or released. This meant carefully climbing down the escarpment, easier thought of than done.

Walking along the edge carefully, Loki eyed the rough crags and the sharp edges with misgivings. Eventually, he reached a deep crevice, wide enough for a man to sit in, more or less, and travelling straight down the face of the cliff. An old waterfall now diverted, he wondered. Or the rock here became weak, being more liable to disintegrate due to its sedimentary nature... Peering down into its murky depths, Loki considered his options and then, after giving a half huff of annoyance, he slipped in, feet first. Planting the black prison boots given to him against the far wall, Loki forced his legs to straighten which allowed him to prop himself up quite nicely against the opposite cliff face. Shifting his left foot downward experimentally and then his right, Loki paused before also allowing his back to squirm slowly down the rough cliff. It was slow going with his pack clasped before him, but
eventually, the bright sunlight disappeared once again into a soft green light before slowly sinking into the darker green and finally very dim light more common on the forest floors of jungles.

Watching the slick surfaces of the pollen trees continue past him and the boughs of the other jewel-fruit bearing giant grass-like trees, Loki kept a weather eye out for the ground. When the lowest understory gave way to the warm darkness of the underbrush, Loki heaved a sigh. He could see the familiar bunches of shrubbery, mosses, flowers and the bark-covered trees in the distance. There too was also the familiar swarm of insects and slithering things and scaly reptiles and other shy creatures which darted about in the brush and overhead in the boughs of the trees.

Finally, the exiled Prince found solid ground and straightening his now stiff back with a groan, Loki stretched, slung his pack onto his back and made his way down a gentle slope populated with tall slender trees (of the jewel-fruit variety) and over toward the sound of the rumble of the waterfalls. Once he located the white foam and light mist spray of the falls, Loki sighed with relief, set his pack carefully in a covered place, folded his uniform, boots and underclothing on top of his pack and then made his way over to the rocks and slipped into the cool water.

Sighing with relief from the heat oppressive to his native body temperature, Loki allowed the clear river's waters to flow over his head as he dove down deep, red eyes wide open at the sight of the busy world underneath the foaming white waves. About him, a cloud of fish parted, darting away from the foreign blue form making its way long the bottom. As Loki rose for air, he relaxed at the sensation of the water running through his long black hair, slicking it back and trickling off his shoulders and back. He was, for the moment, a creature of the sea.

Below the glittering surface, against his legs, the fish brushed unaware of his more predatory interests. *Fish for breakfast*, he thought, remembering Elska and Hluti. *Raw fish for breakfast. The first time in a long time...*

With those memories welling up within him, Loki dove underwater again allowing the sadness and regret to roll off of him like water off a duck's back. *That is the past*, he clenched his teeth and focused his attention on the fish before him. *This is the now. There is only the now.*

After the half-breakfast, half-luncheon of fish, Loki caught two more, gutted them and laid them on top of a small fire he built, the better to roast them. While waiting for the cooking to finish, after getting dressed again, this time with his suit only pulled on half-way, leaving the torso and arms wrapped and knotted about his waist, Loki whittled out a primitive spear out of a spare bit of wood which he had pulled off a sapling tree. The multifunctional tool which had a short knife on it was a useful tool – but the greenness of the wood did not inspire Loki with much confidence as to the viability of his spear. However, hardening the wood carefully in the embers of his fire did appear to work.

*Later*, he thought, *I will make a sharp hatchet and get some older wood and furnish myself with better weapons. Perhaps*, he grinned to himself, *I will even manage some throwing knives – or a bow and arrow. That would be more useful for hunting or self-defence.*

Once his spear was finished, looking rather unfinished and unrefined, the fish well-cooked, his pack re-organized and everything readied, Loki followed the river which spilled out of the small lake by the waterfall's bottom. Making his way along, the exiled Prince thought of what he would need for another safe night's rest. Despite the fact that he had managed to refresh himself and find a steady source of food, Loki found it difficult to remain optimistic, faced as he was with a grim future of life on a largely uncivilized, undeveloped prison planet.

*How will I escape? How long will I be detained here? What will they have written up about me? What lies have they invented? Who would stand for my case even I did demand legal action? Do Fa-
Does Odin and Mother know? Can Heimdall see me? If he were to see me, would he even tell Odin, thinking I am nothing but a lowly Jotun now? Would he tell the Court and the Academy the truth?

As the sky overhead clouded and deepened into a smudgy purple-grey, so did Loki’s mood sour. Fat drops of rain began to fall and instinctively Loki moved into the relatively dry coverage further into the forest. His mood began to sour further as he found himself getting more damp and sticky, his white undershirt clinging to his back like a second skin. When a leaf from above shuddered without warning and released a bucketful of water upon him and his pack, Loki swore long and fluently into the silent forest, scaring away the small creatures hunting and foraging in the greenery.

Carefully looking inside, Loki discovered that most of his possessions had remained dry thanks to the waterproofed nature of the rucksack. However, this did not entirely change the discomfort he felt, now more or less soaked from head to toe. With a sigh, he sank back down onto the great roots of a tree, wedged his pack carefully into a lower nook and sat in despondency as he contemplated his options.

He slumped there, head resting upon his now soil-stained blue forearms crossed over equally the equally muddy knees of his space suit. Above him, a leaf shifted and quivered, releasing its small burden of rainwater as it tipped downward, splashing and sprinkling down on the lower plant-life – and Loki’s unresponsive head. Hunching forward further, the Jotunn attempted to ignore the deluge. It was difficult.

He needed to think. He needed to think like he had never done before.

Loki asked himself how it had come to this, how he had ended up on such a Norn-forsaken planet. What paths have led me here? Why am I here? How could I have ended up here?

Casting his mind back to a seemingly long-forgotten time of comfort and peace within the courts of Asgard, Loki considered all of the trials and tribulations he had endured. This is not as terrible as Jotunheim, he reminded himself. Cold comfort, Loki, but comfort none the less. To think that the life within Asgard had seemed so difficult...

Loki smiled sadly at the memories of his first days upon arriving Asgard. The heat, the sun, the discomfort, the differentness of life. He had found happiness of a kind and as he gathered experience and power within the realm of the Mage’s Academy, Loki had thought himself home. My adoption seemed like the height of what any being could want, what any unwanted creature would dream of... yet, Loki mused, in the end, there were other heights to conquer, it seemed. As if my heart is ever hungry, ever wanting...

So hungry, whispered that dark side of him. You will never find happiness anywhere, because you know the truth and you hide it and you hide from it and you never wish to face it. The fact... the truth...

No, no, Loki shook his head and gripped his forearms harder, almost to the point of drawing blood.

You cannot have unthinking acceptance, Loki. You crave more than that, you crave admiration and respect. You fear the loss of what little you have and in the fear of it, what happened then?

"I lost it all," Loki’s admission, a broken whisper, hung in the thick air of the jungle.

I lost it all.

-0-0-0-

How long he sat there, Loki was not certain, but when the air cooled and the rain eventually lessened...
to a light patter, the exiled Prince stirred a little, lifting his head as a faint, odd sound drifted through the trees. An unfamiliar echo which he had not expected to hear so soon – the sound of two beings tramping through the jungle and conversing loudly. Quickly grabbing his pack, Loki ducked into the midst of a large stand of frond-like shrubbery and, peering past the feathery leaves, he watched as two Half-Breeds lounged past, stopped and looked about as though looking for a mark in the trail. They too appeared to be coming from the direction of the waterfall.

"I swear I saw a footprint back there-"
"You see footprints everywhere," snorted the shorter Half-Breed. "I swear, Fo-Fo, you could imagine food out of."
"I am not imagining things!"
"Yeah-huh, and what about that time two years past when we were going down the Lorast River and you thought there was wild cat stalking us? The Boss tickled your ear and-"
"My ears are sensitive!" snapped the taller Half-Breed, brushing a hand anxiously along his tufted, cat-like ears.
"You screamed. Admit it. Like a-" laughed the other.
"Listen. That was the one time, Toza!"
"Fo-Fo. You know you won't live it down – now... I think we're still in the same region..."
"The marker is there-" Fo-Fo pointed upward.
"Ah... why would he put it up that high?" sighed the shorter Toza.
"It is not my fault you can only get to the height of a chil- Oof!"

Toza apparently had hit the idiotic Fo-Fo in the mid-section.

"At any rate, if we hurry, we can get there by nightfall."
"Hurry?" whined Fo-Fo. "Let's take it easy, hey?"
"Take it easy? Sleep on the ground again?" asked Toza, voice rising. "Think of it. A nice cozy bed in a dry cave. With good food and better company than wild cats and pesky insects."
"I suppose," Fo-Fo sighed. "But then we'll have to tell the boss the bad news."
"Whatever. It's not our fault."
"You know what he's like... Been a while since anyone's passed by. Been a while since we've turned out someone. Traffic has been slow."
"Well," Toza shrugged. "If Samon isn't lying to us, noobs might be passing by... that'll cheer him up."
"Let's hope so..." Fo-Fo shook his head and then sighed again. "I pity them."
"You always do. That's why you do what I say - shoot first and sack them later."
"If Samon and the others find out..." Fo-Fo continued dismally. "Then where will you be? Huh?"
"I think you worry too much, Fo-Fo," Toza snorted and turned away, pushing a path through some bracken. "You'll see. We'll be taken off this planet by the recruiters in no time flat."

Good food. A dry cave. Samon. Recruiters. The mysterious words weighed heavily on Loki's mind. Slipping his pack on more securely, Loki followed the two creatures further down the river, taking care to keep downwind. Toza and Fo-Fo, from the continuing conversation, appeared to be two criminals of a very simple nature – thieves or con artists perhaps, now unfortunately landed on a rather rough planet. However, the "Boss" apparently provided them protection and they went on scrounging missions for him, one from which they were just returning. Judging by their talk and insinuations, Loki gathered the group was entirely made up of rather desperate characters not above killing to gain their goals.

The mage-warrior shivered. He could approach them in peace, but without his magick and without any companions, he would be an easy target for the predatory "Boss". As for attempting an assault on their den... Facing them in a frontal assault would be suicide, Loki mused, but perhaps a nighttime targeted attack would work. Slipping in and slaying them as they rested. It would depend upon
the strategy of their guards...

Carefully keeping his distance, Loki followed undetected. The jungle floor, he noticed began to rise and fall in small hills and mounds and the soil beneath his feet thinned a little as grey rock began to poke through. Meanwhile, the river, always to his right, widened. Small mounds of rock broke the trees canopy a little, allowing for light and forcing the Jotun to keep to the darker shadows as he followed the bright conversation of Fo-Fo and Toza. Hanging back, he watched as they began to climb past larger monoliths, mounting a peculiar grouped pile of rock which joined together into what appeared to be the lower slopes of a small bit of mountain. He had seen the small mountain range from his perch on the escarpment easily enough, but had not thought that others would also be drawn it. As he moved closer to the river, Loki could see why, for it split in two, allowing for greater passage through the wide valley.

What I had been aiming for, Loki's heart sank. And it has already been claimed.

Or not, a soft voice suggested. It could be yours for the taking if your heart has the courage and your will remains strong.

What- Loki backed away, uncertain as to where that thought had come from. Looking about and feeling more in tune with Fo-Fo's suspicions, Loki wondered if someone had spoken. Perhaps not. I am merely jumping at shadows. It is the fatigue.

For the second time that day, Loki found a large root system not far away which he could hide under, leaning against his pack and contemplating his options. Time and time again, the mage-warrior found himself returning to the obvious conclusion. Either he gave up and moved onward or he stood his ground here and took control of the cave.

It will result in death, Loki thought, flicking the blade of his multifunction tool open and shut in a steady rhythm. It comforted him, the click-click of the blade.

Flick-click. Flick-click.

It spoke of something like trust. It was the only thing upon which he could depend in this forest.

Flick-click. Flick-click.

His blade and himself. His abilities, his strengths and his weaknesses. That was all he could depend on for the foreseeable future.

Flick-click. Flick-click.

Loki sighed.

It is the only way.

-0-0-0-

By the time the two moons rose in the smothering darkness, lighting the forest in ghostly shadows and shifting slivers of grey and silver, Loki's tension had risen tenfold faced as he was with the prospect of what lay before him.

They killed others, Loki reminded himself. They are predators who should be brought to justice...

...and you are no better, another part of him whispered, lowering yourself to their level – and with such little chance for success. You are entering a place of which you have no knowledge to attack.
numbers of opponents which you as yet do not know. This entire attempt has had little forethought and reeks of the reckless impulses you denounced in Thor.

I have no choice. I have no choice. There is only one way, but forward, Loki's breath came in hard and fast as desperation mounted within him. There is only one way.

With that last thought, Loki crept about, found the first of the two guards standing out by the trees, smoking what looked like a hand-rolled tube of dried grass. Loki blinked at the sight of it, recalling the billows of smoke which had emanated from pipes and other arcane devices on Sharda'aa. Even here, he smirked, addictions drive those reliant on its strengths to find a cure.

The guard was a tall, hefty Skrull, yet Loki had the element of surprise, as well as the native strength gifted to his kind and the experienced born of the battle house and the variety of missions which he had accomplished over the years at the side of Thor or on his own.

The lit end of the dried grass tube blazed bright for an instant and a sweet scent drifted away on the wind. Some kind of drug, no doubt. A drug, Loki discovered, which appeared to have slowed the guard's reflexes. That or the lizard-man was fatigued. Yanking his head to the left with his left arm, Loki drew his knife expertly along the guard's throat, slitting it quickly and silently. A gargling rose, stifled by Loki's left hand now clenched bruisingly over the lizard's face. Somewhere the dried grass roll fell among the damp grass, flickered and then died out. Lying the body slowly back down on the ground and rolling it quickly into the underbrush, Loki kept a sharp eye out for anyone else coming before swiftly stripping the corpse of its long knife. Rolling the long haft in his palm, eyeing lovingly wrapped thin leather strips, Loki nodded appreciatively.

It is well-made. Sheathing it in his cloth belt, Loki pushed past the bracken.

Moving onward, barely shifting the blades of grass as he passed, Loki crept around the edge of the small clearing back to the rocks which met the strong river where he saw a shadow shift within the shadows. Letting his eyes accustom to the new level of light, Loki realized he was looking at a slender silhouette sitting on a rock, lounging back and contemplating the glimmer of moonlight on the dark rough waters.

The long, pale, sloping skull turned, revealing a calm face with large dark eyes which glittered in their deep sockets. A thin, angular yet rounded kind of face, alien in the extreme thanks to the bronze-gold colour and the lack of nose. Aedian, Loki realized. An Aedian or at least a Half-Breed one. No Aedian would usually end up in such a place as this. For a moment, the two looked at each other and then the half-breeder stranger, sighed and turned back to look at the water.

"I heard you back there."

Pause. Loki tensed as he realized that the guard was speaking to him. For a moment, his mouth worked, yet no sound could come out. Then, the light voice repeated the incomprehensible, inconceivable words.

"I heard you back there."
"What?" Loki finally managed inarticulately, voice tight.
"I heard you first at the waterfall. Your voice..." A pause. Then the Aedian turned and smiled enigmatically. "It cried out. Loud and clear as the songs of stars." He added with a whisper. "Can you hear it?"

Loki did not know what to say in response, but his gaze involuntarily drifted upward, to where the clouds rolled past a vision of a night sky which seemed to cold and foreign to him. A world, a Realm with which he was not, never would be, perhaps, familiar.
"I could not help but listen... You seemed to hear me as well." The half-breed Aedian tilted his head and added, voice hushed, "You did hear me, did you not?"

"You were-

"Perhaps you thought I was just another voice in your head... A common problem for you, I gather."

"You read my thoughts, my mind."

"You do not seem surprised."

"I have heard of some who are gifted with such abilities. The Aedians and others use such mind magicks naturally, while others may learn through study."

"You have not?"

"Not as yet," Loki admitted reluctantly, shifting a little as he realized that the half-breed guard was not in any hurry to attack him. "Although I am able to charm or influence those of weaker minds."

"Ah. Yes."

"Yet, you are Aedian, if I am not mistaken. Or at least, your ancestry held some such blood."

"Indeed."

"As such, you hold this ability – and you could hear me, even from afar off." Loki glanced down at his feet and then away into the forest. "I suppose you must think me pitiful."

"Pitiful? No. Indeed, we all have doubts. Doubts are given voices. Those are natural enough. Yet..."

"Yet, I heard echoes within you of something entirely different. Yes, echoes of a darker shadow, for there are other things which call from the deep."

"The Voice of the Void," Loki said flatly, fists clenching as he once again revisited the dreams of his childhood and the ever haunting sense that something was looming. Something, perhaps, inside.

"It is not something inside you, traveller," the Aedian broke into Loki's thoughts suddenly, his quiet intonation brought Loki to the relative safety of the present. "Fear not. There are other things which prey upon those gifted, those sensitive to the shifts of power. There are other things which prey on the broken heart and the weary mind."

"I am not."

"Are you not?" The half-breed rose then to look down at Loki, uncommonly tall and lanky and with the natural grace of a scholar, not a fighter. "I heard your battle, even as you raised your hand against one of my tribe. Fear and anger ride all who roam Jela and you are no different, I think. Did you not just kill So'sha? Did you not just come to kill me?"

"I – I – It – It is not something that I wish," Loki hissed. "It is something that I must do. Perhaps if I remove your leader, I can-"

"That is a plan bound to fail," the half-breed smiled then, "and yet unexpectedly, perhaps, your doom is not yet at hand."

"What?"

"So'sha, who I just mentioned, is our leader."

"He – He was?" Loki shifted about, dazedly staring off into the dark, mind squirrelling with confusion.

"He takes the first watch, the better to have a longer, uninterrupted night's sleep – and you killed him."

"Oh. Oh... I see."

Loki felt an incomprehensible rush of relief and courage. *It is possible. The den is securable. I continue the plan-* The half-breed guard stepped forward, catching Loki's attention and he bowed his head, hand on his heart, spear held out flat before him.

"Excepting for me," the Aedian went on, head bent and voice hushed and words rapid, "there remain only three, now sleeping. A lazy, cowardly lot, I am afraid. I rue the day I cast my lot with them and have until this night have feared that I would forever remain with reckless fools and selfish marauders. For the many years I have been unjustly trapped upon this planet, I have looked forward to one who would lead a band with cunning and foresight, justice and mercy. One with a heart such
as you."
"Divided as it is?" Loki asked softly, shifting his newest dagger to his right hand and clasping his shorter knife in his left. "How do you know that I will be any different?"

The Half-Aedian raised his head, hefted his spear and even white fanged teeth flashed within the pale moonlight.

"I heard you – back at the waterfall – and I knew."

-0-0-0-

Thus, the band of Loki was begun. Thus, his adventures on the prison planet, Jela, commenced. Thus, he gained a name for himself as being both fair yet fierce, disarming yet cunning, and charming yet severe. Thus, he gathered to himself those capable and disciplined who, upon entering his service, worked to keep their domain free of the more dangerous creatures who roamed the planet as well as unwanted inmates.

Across that hemisphere of Jela, Loki's band became known for its efficiency and diplomacy, taking care to neither cross the borders which it maintained nor to over-reach itself by attempting domination of those willing to live within its vicinity. Whether hunting, scouting, fighting would-be encroachers or accomplishing day to day tasks, the group maintained a high level of care and self-respect with standards far above the regular ill-kept, haggard and ever hungry bands of criminals which roamed the large continent.

Containing Aeto, the Half-Breed Aedian, L'oh, the Half-Breed Cat-Humanoid, Skrann, the Skrull, J'zai, the Spartoi, and Ag'to, the Ergon, the Band of the Eastern Rocks, as they came to be known, remained as always a small group, weeded from various passers-by whom Loki tested before making a final decision as to keep them or no. He chose with care and the resulting band brought a sense of vitality and flexibility upon which Loki felt confident to depend.

In such a manner, time went on and Loki eked out some kind of a living on Jela. A good half of a year passed, the days trickling by slowly, one after another, as though a drying up river, until even Loki began to forget to look upward to the hope of the stars.

[...counted by the stars...]

[...silent sentinels of time...]

Stars and pulsars and black holes and the multitudinous, uncountable celestial bodies of the Realms have watched time pass onward in the endless dance, the endless game between Life and Death. Time and memory held within the single rays of stars reach forward and backward through time, reminding any who would gaze upward and know the truth of such matters that although one eventually fades away, in the end, no one is entirely lost to Time's grip. Memory and Time work hand in hand, held in hope in the quiet rays of the celestial spheres – and some who may tap into such magicks, gaze far and deep and in the gazing, know the Truth.

Heimdall, Gatekeeper of the Bifrost and of Asgard and its Realm, looked outward from the edge of the as yet unfinished Bifrost bridge. No sooner had the damage been done than Odin ordered repair commence immediately. The Court and the Mage's Academy, cowed by Odin's wrath and sobered by the realization what their bickering had cost the Realm, agreed instantly and all those citizens gifted in the arts of magicks and construction were enlisted for the reconstruction. The Mages, Agaeti and Flarathir in particular, took lead on the project, allowing the others to focus on more pressing problems – the war with the Jotun (which although momentarily stalled seemed to be continuing on more or less unabated) and the now rather hampered protection of allied Realms.
Standing on the edge of the broken Bridge, watching the stars and the galaxies and the worlds and the scenes revolve before his golden eyes, Heimdall stood stolidly, waiting for the bi-weekly visit from his King. Soon enough, the sharp-eared and sharp-eyed Heimdall could hear the distant beat of Odin's horse's hooves followed by the distant clatter of the King dismounting and the the steady stride as Odin reached his side.

As usual, the two stared out into the Abyss, into the Realms, together in silence. Then, Odin stirred.

"Thor is doing well."
"Indeed," Heimdall agreed.
"He is learning to be patient, to be still, to think. Something I hoped he would learn from Loki... and at first I thought I could see some change, yet it was not as quick as I had planned. However, Thor's exile upon Midgard seems achieve this just as well."
"Hm."
"A satisfactory conclusion to a very difficult problem," Odin continued on, his voice softening as his thoughts wandered. "Yes, indeed. I had thought that perhaps Thor's pride and his vanity had gotten away with him, yet it is so difficult to see the difference between the natural cockiness of youth and the reckless pride of a man."
"Midgard is the perfect place for him, then," Heimdall agreed. "His care towards the mortals speaks, as ever, of a good heart."
"His care, yes. Thor always had a leaning toward aiding the helpless." Odin shook his head.
"Something from his mother, I should imagine."
"The Crown Prince also appears to cherish one particular mortal-" Heimdall added carefully, keeping his golden eyes trained on a far point in space, refusing to meet the sharp glance sent his way.
"Eh? Ah. The silly mortal girl. He will be done with her soon enough and return home. They are as the gnats that swarm, short-lived and short-sighted, seeing only what their small lives have placed before their limited visions and dreams. Thor is my son, a son of Asgard. He knows his place."
"Hmmm..." Heimdall then cocked his head, switching the subject diplomatically. "You have seen Loki's path as well, my Lord?"
"Agaeti helped me with some scrying, for he has fallen far, far into Midgard's Realm. A shadowed place from which emanates whispers of an ancient evil."
"Then you saw as well-"
"Saw?" Odin raised an eyebrow.
"The colour of his skin. His true nature." Heimdall looked down at the King. "You knew?"
"Hm. Yes."
"Who else knows?"
"His mother," Odin said stiffly. "Myself, of course. High-Mage Agaeti. The three of us swore an oath to secrecy. I should have guessed you would have noticed. I had hoped that many would think he merely shape-shifted as is his wont, but you, of course, have noticed the difference."
"Indeed. When Laufey cast him from Jotunheim, I would have thought he would have shifted back to his natural form as Asgardian, yet he has maintained the blue skin and red eyes. I could only surmise that he was, in fact, Jotun." Heimdall frowned and turned to Odin, golden eyes glinting with worry and suspicion. "My King, to hold such a creature so close to one's bosom-"
"Loki," Odin finally said with a sigh. "His name is Loki and he is a Prince of the Realm and the True Heir of another. That is his name, Heimdall, a link to an ancient past and to his prestigious sire, Laufey."
"I see," Heimdall replied simply.

Odin said nothing more, knowing that Heimdall would of course, as he so shortly put it, "see". 

Loki was my attempt to influence my son for the better with the hopes that one day, he would work within my court as ambassador and King's Advisor, much as Mage Agaeti would. Thanks to his careful diplomacy and charm, Loki already has gained the respect of a few Realms.
Odin remembered the day he watched, helpless, as his second son was cast from the brink of Jotunheim's chasm into the Void. Frigga had wept inconsolably for days. Although, he had no luck with Laufey. No doubt Loki has been up to mischief of his own in that land and paid for it – dearly. The aged King sighed. Even if I were to release his punishment, there is little for me to do, captive as I am thanks to the damaged Bifrost. Jotunheim also seems intent on war. Sending him there again would be... unforgivable.

"I had hoped so much for them both," Odin finally broke the silence again. "I often wonder what went wrong, what could I have done differently."
"They were young, not yet men in truth," Heimdall said. "They will learn. In time."
"Time," Odin said darkly, "that is something which we do not have much of. Jotunheim has fallen silent again, but it is only a matter of time for them to rally against the destruction of their land. The Marauders, according to a few traders, have begun to take advantage of our absence, doing as they please, even going so far as to raid and loot in Vanaheim and Alfheim."
"Aided, no doubt, by the Svartalfheim Dark Elves," Heimdall shook his head with sadness. "That race has ever wished ill on those whom they perceived to be more blessed than they."
"A travesty. Malekith is no doubt interfering again with the Dark Elf courts again. No doubt the tribes are up in arms as we speak, to say nothing of the Skrull and the Kree."
"Or the Chitauri," Heimdall frowned then. "They gather their forces and they spread outward as an infestation grows within a man. With many ships and improved technology, their grip of the lower Realms has become much tighter, driven it seems by an insatiable hunger for power."
"A shadow lies on Midgard's Realm," agreed Odin. Straightening his shoulders, the white-haired King clapped Heimdall on the shoulder before turning away. "Look out for my sons and send me word if any new development arises. I worry for them -- the both of them and would have them at my side, yet..." Odin paused and nodded slowly, "Perhaps... Frigga is right. Perhaps, Midgard has greater need of them than I."

With that, Odin returned to his horse, mounted and departed, back to the stars, home ahead.

[...counted by the stars...]
[...silent sentinels of time...]
[...such light reminds those who would look...]
[...we are not...]
[...we are not alone...]

Chapter End Notes

So, there we go. Next up is the last (?) Thor chapter. Sigh. And then we can focus on Loki and other fun stuffs. I hope this chapter made sense for you guys and answers some questions for those who were wondering about a few things from the last chapter. Also, I would like to apologize for the wait for this chappie. It's been long and I hope that I can shorten the times a bit this summer. (crosses fingers)

ON THE OTHER HAND... 10,000 WORDS!!!

Right. Now we are on the terrible cusp of the nasty slippery slope into angst. Let's see
what a good part of a year does to Loki's psyche and how does he get off planet....
HMMMM.... (chuckles madly at the next few chapters now planned)

Author's Note: Why did bullets bounce off Loki – and Captain America's shield? It's because his body is made of a higher density (we see the same in Thor's fight against Skurge) and cannot be harmed so easily. Thor was able to receive IV treatment and got tranq-ed in Thor the Movie only because he was 'human'. So, in this fic, Loki can't be bitten by mosquitoes. He's not lost his humanity as Thor has. This is the reason why folks who write Loki as being a god but getting caught by SHIELD and injected with poison get a raised eyebrow from me. I can suspend my disbelief, but it's definitely not canon, I think.

Let me know what you guys thought!
-KI

Alien Glossary:
'auzha – fucker
bollen - boulders/monoliths
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
Eno'Keshi'ko – the system of Eno, a type of magical level measurements
Fen'chi Galaxy – Andromeda Galaxy
gan'ga'war – steel balls
gan'ko – ganka'jya chon, a steel beetle
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
Janah – similar to dammit
Ka'autha'ndarna - Reality
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
Kholathan – Safety Belt/Protected Zone
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
kon'bi – short for konji'bifu, space bat
lasu – space rat
l'gon – storyteller
Morning-star - a mace
myech'myena - shape-shifting
Mye'hoyo Peyt – Milky Way
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
Nord-Stjarna – north star
Nyr'Fjor - Jotunn's original name for V'slozh'noi
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
pu'lotni – plutonium
pye'nee - a kind of bird
Ra'ska'yeh o Phyllo'xia – Tales of Phylloxia
roobyn – a red stone
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
Shen'grid – the Protected Zone, the zone in which habitable planets orbit around a sun
Shi'nuwu – Reality/Yggdrasil
sigan – short for yan'sigan, rock-worm
So'shah – Earth/Midgard
syem'fyerma – family/community farm
Tai'shu – The Void
tro'watal – perseverance
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
whota – wheat
Another super long chapter, guys~! Yay! Sorry for the wait though! I had to get a decaying wisdom tooth removed. In China. Well, it was a fairly awesome hospital (if crazy busy with people) and I felt over all safe with the dentists. But now it's fairly achy and I'm a bit miserable. Eh.

Here's the last Thor chapter. I hope it ties up any loose ends for Thor. He's not quite there yet! (Who is?) And he's obviously still struggling with stuff.

Thanks to: lemomina, Kai_Maciel, halszka, iBlameGlobalWarming, cbc2v, MistyDawn, and Elle!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
[Bitter Desolation, Incandescent Harmony]

Chapter 72
Thor: The High Road III

[…even here…]

[…Can you hear it?…]

In the far corner of the universe of the wildest, most unpopulated, and most uncivilized Realm, slowly turns an innocuous spiral galaxy so called the "Milky Way" by its least technologically advanced citizens on one of its smaller, yet infamous planets known to many as Midgard. Unbeknownst to its supposed uncivilized inhabitants, Asgard has watched over it as it has done many other planets which have allied with the Golden Realm.

Known as gods to many, Asgard have kept care of those less able to protect themselves since time immemorial and other Realms, in the past, have followed suit. Jotunheim, among others, had attempted to gain ground and increase their imperial hold, only to be stopped by Asgard and its protective interests.

However, many years have passed since Midgard's borders have been breached. Now, only tales remain of the "gods" who once visited and made Midgard and other planets their homes. Thus, to the innocent mortals of Midgard, the planet was home, it was Earth and until a year ago, when a blond-haired stranger landed outside one of its smaller hamlets in one of its less civilized deserts, it was alone in the universe.

With the arrival of the alien man, telescopes and satellites and radars and long-distance sonars and all other kinds of primitive gadgetry pointed outward, even more intent on finding glimpses of what the rumours whispered – intelligent life of an alien, celestial kind. Fears and hopes bred within the hearts of soldiers and scientists alike. Yet, there was no response. Whatever brooded within the dark corners of space, whatever species spread across the galaxies, they were not interested in communication of any kind with Midgard, it seemed.
And so, the Midgardians, the humans, waited.

[...Can you hear it?...]

In a small town in the southern state of New Mexico, in a cozy corner diner beside the newly wiped glass window, staring down the dusty street and contemplating his slowly diminishing mug of coffee, Thor sat and waited. Before him, his plate, once filled with ten golden-brown pancakes doused in syrup, was now empty. The pot of coffee beside him was now half finished as well. Thor sighed, glanced down at the small flat tablet before him and then sighed again.

He was waiting. He was trying to be patient.

*Some days,* he thought, *it takes all one can...* No longer could Thor depend upon his status and the name of his father to do as he pleased. He knew now that anger could bring him nothing but annoyance and discomfort within a jail cell. No longer could Thor escape, riding the Bifrost to another world to vent his frustration. Vigilante behaviour within this country was out of the question, even for exiled royalty, and the face of evil no longer so easily discovered. It was more often than not hidden behind the courts of the foreign powers and the identical offices of the powerful merchants. No longer could Thor spend the night with his friends drinking and wenching to ease his despair and uncertainty. Jane would not be pleased and the life of a cowboy demanded an early rising. Unless Thor wished to live on the streets as a homeless man, he had responsibilities to uphold.

*So I must wait. I must wait, Jane says. Wait and see and learn. Wait and learn. I must be patient and follow orders, Fury says. Listen well and think twice. For a moment, Thor thought of his time in the Battlehouse of Shax. Another time and place in which he had had to live by another being's rules. Yet, here, I am allowed to make choices – but this time there are consequences which I must accept... Loki... All of his life, he has lived underneath the yoke of another man. Here, on Midgard, he would perhaps do quite well. Or not...*

For the first time, Thor found himself considering an angle of his brother's life he had never really took note of before. *Would Loki be now willing, having found his freedom, to work within the rules of another society? I would say yes, considering how well he adapted to Asgard... although not without much complaint and on some occasions, I am certain I heard him mumbling about how things could be done differently. We always expected Loki to be different, to be foreign, even though he worked so hard to be one of us, to fit in and to be accepted... Now, I must attempt the same, in some measure.*

*When I see him next,* Thor mused. *When I see him next, I will-*

His tablet vibrated gently and quickly. His fingers unlocked the screen and answered the video conferencing call now running off of the diner's Wi-Fi. Thor smiled broadly as Jane's face came into sharp focus. Behind her, he could see the grey wall of her current apartment in the far island country called 'England' where she was guest lecturing as well as doing some specialized research for a patron. That was what Thor called them mentally. *Patrons. Those who gave money to fund the process of scientific research and progress. As a Mage, Loki has always spoken of patrons with equal parts annoyance, frustrations and gratitude. Jane also has need of them, otherwise she would no longer be able to continue studying the effects of the Bifrost and other such similar wormhole activity.*

Filtering through the tinny speakers, Thor could hear other greetings from an off-screen Darcy, no doubt being shooed away by Jane for privacy's sake. Darcy had remained as Jane's assistant, despite the removal of their equipment and the seconding of Selvig to SHIELD's mysterious internal departments. *It is best not to speak of such things with Jane. Or think of it, Thor smiled to himself then.*
"Hey – THOR!"
"Jane!" Thor's attention was drawn down to the table instantly at the sharp tone of his beloved. "I've just been – never mind, did you hear anything I just said?"
"Ahhh..." Thor scratched his long scruffy blond head sheepishly. "Many pardons, Jane. I was thinking."
"Well, thinking is good." Jane leaned forward a little, until her chin and mouth filled up the screen and then she pulled back, cradling something hot and liquid in a large red and green mug. "What's up?"

He said nothing of his recent mission with a few of SHIELD's men in some mountain range to the North. The last time he had spoken of SHIELD with Jane, the brown-haired scientist had fallen quiet, obviously upset. Of course, Thor would not let the matter go (one of his greater failings, Loki had had told him on many occasions) and the entire conversation had ended with their third argument. If they had been sharing an abode, Thor no doubt would have ended up sleeping on the couch or the floor.

The first argument, Thor remembered, had been over his first 'date' with Jane. Understanding such a foreign concept as a 'date' was difficult to begin with, much less the intricacies of what it apparently entailed. Men, Jake told him, are expected to have supernatural abilities to ascertain what the women prefer, despite the fact they have only met for a few times previously. That's the worst case scenario. Best case, they were friends previously, so it's kinda like riding an old horse... but then if you goof it up, then you're gonna ruin the best thing in your life – a great friendship. 'Cause there's no going back, you know. Thor had taken Jake's advice and had considered his options carefully, so when the time came for the 'first date', the exiled Prince arranged for the two of them to leave for a 'big city weekend trip' which included coffee shops, malls, bookstores and a 'demolition derby', which had sounded exciting to Thor. The car demolition show was a complete and utter failure and the entire trip ended on a rather sour note with a long awkward drive back to town. Worse, Thor had not initially noticed a problem, taken as he was with the excitement of the show and thus, the prince had not realized that his partner had not enjoyed it as much as he.

Words had followed. Jake called it 'being in the doghouse'. Thor did not quite get the euphemism, but he did come to understand that he never wished to be 'in the doghouse' again.

"THOR?!!"
"Oh... Ah... Sorry... Jane." Thor smiled then, reassuringly as Jane leaned forward, looking even more worried than ever. "Are you OK over there? Seriously? I've not seen you this quite since... well..." Jane paused. "A long time."
"I am merely remembering the long year which I have survived."
"Over a year now," Jane corrected him, flipping a calender thoughtfully. "It's funny how time flies by, even when you're not having all that much fun."
"Time flies by when you have fun? Hm. I suppose so."
"Or not so much fun. I don't know about you, but I wish we had more time together than the odd holiday."
"I enjoyed your Christmas," Thor smiled then. "The tree was lovely and so was the snow in that country."
"State."
"In that state we visited... Although I thought you said we visited another country."
"Well, we just popped over the border into Canada. Hardly a big deal. Montana, Manitoba. Big diff."
"It was lovely, though," Thor said. "The hot drinks and the warmed mead and the decorative lights and the garlands and the Yule log and the stockings by the fireplace and the presents... and the food.
"So much food. It reminded me of... it reminded me of home," Thor managed to finish with only the slightest hitch in his voice.
"Hmmm... it wasn't perfect though. Remember that time we got lost in the woods and you wouldn't trust my GPS signal?"
"There was no-"
"GPS is everywhere on this continent, dear," Jane sighed with a put-up voice as she recited the age old argument. "This is North America, for goodness sake. Not some backwoods in-
"I did not know at the time. I barely knew anything-"
"Well, now you know," Jane rolled her eyes and laughed. "But it was fun cuddling up in the warm cabin later on that evening."
"Yes," Thor smirked. "That was indeed... fun."

They laughed again and Jane sighed.

"I miss you."
"When will I see you again?"
"Summer vacation, of course. If I can make myself have one."
"You must-"
"I will try my best-
"She will try her best!" shouted Darcy's voice from somewhere. "I'll drag her over to New Mexico if I have to by myself!"
"Darcy!" Jane yelled back. "Can you just-
"No, but she is right," Thor said seriously. "If you must remain there, then I will come to you. I have some money set aside now. With leave from the Boss and Jake as well as Coulson, I would be more than willing to meet you in this England. England."
"England. Yes. Well... that would be... lovely. I'm sure you would enjoy the castles around here with all the old armour. Bunratty in Ireland and Warwick in England and there's Glamis in Scotland. Or we could go to Paris, France for a romantic weekend getaway. Paris is the city for lovers-
"if people aren't on strike!" added Darcy again.
"Just ignore her," Jane waved a hand. "Anyways... we'll have to set the dates soon, so we can take the time off when we want."
"We shall find time to renew our memories of love and pleasure, Jane."
"Wow... OK... well... that's – that's great. That's, um, really..." Jane flapped a hand, blushing. "You do have a way with words."
"Wait until you meet my younger brother."
"You always say that," Jane smiled then, again. "But don't sell yourself short, OK? I think you're doing just fine."
"I am glad. I hope my father sees that as well."
"And your hammer."
"Hmmm... one day," Thor murmured. "One day, I will be worthy."
"Well, just be careful how you chase after that thing," Jane said, suddenly very serious. "We all know how that went down last time."

Thor, remembering the two times he had attempted to regain Mjolnir and failed, shivered. It had been so jarring to lay hand upon his beloved hammer and feel only metal. There had been no response, no welcoming spark, nothing.

"I have not paid Mjolnir a visit in a long time," Thor finally assured Jane in a quiet voice. "Nor have I attempted to call her. Until the day that I am worthy, I must continue what I am doing. Working hard – both on the ranch and with SHIELD."
"Well, just be careful you don't get sucked into some kind of superhero-like glamour life. Like that Tony Stark. Aw, hell, just thinking about that stuff gets me worried."
"Tony Stark?"
"You know – Iron Man."
"You met him?"
"Met him?"
"Met Tony Stark, Iron Man?" asked Jane curiously.
"Oh. No," Thor shook his head. "Not yet."
"Not yet. Oh jeez. That's great. Just great."
"I will be careful, Jane."
"That's what they all say," sighed the scientist. "Then they're off, chasing down criminals or villains or what have you and turning into military-directed glory hounds."
"Glory hounds?"
"Men who pursue glory because they believe it brings them honour," Jane shook her head and snorted with disgust. "Honour comes from doing the right thing, not because you did something in front of a ton of people and they like you in a general mob-like mentality way."

Thor nodded slowly, trying to make sense of Jane's words and gathering from her general demeanour that this form of gaining honour did not please her.

"You aren't getting anything I'm saying, are you. I can tell from that crinkle you get between your eyebrows." Jane went on. "Look, Thor. Let's just say that... maybe getting Mjolnir back isn't going to be a time when you kill some bad guy or save the girl. Maybe it'll be something simpler. Maybe it'll be when you make a decision to stand back or to seek peace or some thing like that."
"I don't think my father would think laying down one's weapon is the best move during a war."
"We aren't at war."
"We are at war," Thor said, soberly, gut clenching as he thought of Odin and Frigga and Loki and the rest of Asgard waging battle against Jotunheim.

*And not losing, he reassured himself. Never losing. They will never lose.*

"Oh, right. The Jotan, the Jat – the Jotunomers – the Jotun—"
"The Jotunn of Jotunheim."
"Yeah, those. How bad can it be?"
"Very terrible." Thor hesitated and then said slowly. "A long time ago, a few hundred years ago, there was a great war on this planet, Jake told me. He said many countries fought against a common enemy who threatened to take over the entire planet."
"Oh, right. The Second World War. Yes."
"The evil people... they were to you what the Jotunn are to us."
"So you are saying that the Jotunn are like Nazis. Or the equivalent of Nazis. Did they kill a ton of people?"
"A long time ago, yes. They wished to expand their Realm in hope of gaining resources. It is a long story."
"You keep saying that..." Jane leaned back in her chair and looked off into the distance somewhere past her computer screen and then she sighed. "I can't believe I'm suggesting this... but, maybe there's something you can do to sort this all out. What you have to do, what you think you have to do, this whole Nazi-Jotunn thing..."
"What is that?"
"Who, really," Jane said slowly. "I sometimes get the odd email from Selvig. He says that Captain America has been... well, woken up. Been up and about for a bit now. Perhaps you've met him already... I don't – I don't want to know. But maybe you could go talk to him. He's – I heard he's a – a – a good guy."
"Steve Rogers."
"Oh. You met him? No. Wait. Don't tell me. It's probably so classified, if you say anything, I'll have the Director or whoever he is or one of his black suited minions blasting down my door. But yeah,
talk to him."
"Very well."
"So let's talk about other things. Happier things," suggested Jane, brushing back a lock of hair absentely, as was her habit.
"Other happier things?" echoed Thor, blankly.
"I'll get her a bathing suit!" Darcy's voice rose again. "Something that'll knock your socks off so you can knock her socks off and just you know – do the things you guys do when – yeah –"
"Darcy!" Jane swivelled her chair about, the better to glare at her assistant and now fast friend. "I don't wanna hear it! Or, I mean, um, hearing about what you think 'it' is about or whatever."
"Hey! That's my line!" Darcy's snappy retort elicited a snort from both Jane and Thor.

With that, the entire conversation devolved into the usual argument between Jane and Darcy, broken up by the loud bellow of Thor's laughter. Darcy rolled her eyes and physically left the room for good this time, Jane assured her studly boyfriend and their conversation turned to other more mundane topics of Jane's latest horror story about Darcy's driving in England, Thor's newest daily routine and bunk mate on the ranch, Jake's new girlfriend, Jane's most recent would-be academic paramour (some weedy British man which Thor promised to bully once he arrived at Jane's side), the hottest scientific scandal amongst the physicist circles and the 'evil' bull which had finally met its fate and had been carted off in a truck to Thor's extreme satisfaction.

Two hours passed by eased with light laughter and the reminder, yet again, why their hearts, albeit separated by land and sea, could remain so bound together as though they had never left each others' side. When Thor signed off the tablet, the power signal blinking a bright red, he was smiling once again.

The usual gift from Jane, he thought, and I think I left her with hope as well.

[...Can you hear it...]

[...in the silences...]

Hope remained with Thor despite the long passage of days and dreary routine. Some months passed with little activity besides the daily riding and care of cattle and horse and the ranch. Other months were filled with activities – meeting with and romancing Jane or working for SHIELD. On gloomy, rainy days, Thor wondered if he was truly achieving what his father had hoped. On dull days, Thor chafed at the dreariness of his mundane existence. On sunny, quiet mornings, waking up with Jane at his side in a countryside inn (which Jane called a hotel or motel), Thor felt as though he could find some peace and joy on Midgard, Mjolnir or no. Power or no. On busy, productive days, after the end of a particularly dangerous yet equally successful mission, Thor felt as though he were once again with his companions, reminding himself what it meant truly to be Thor, to be alive.

SHIELD, despite Jane's misgivings, had welcomed Thor and his knowledge of the Realms, expertise in combat and strategy and fighting experience. Agent Coulson, a short, unassuming mortal, who always wore dark suits, dark sunglasses and an unreadable expression was most often the one who sat with the teams to which Thor had been assigned and walked through the 'mission parameters' and the various strategies expected to be enacted. Thor knew better than to protest. He remembered painfully how often he had sat through such council meetings with his father or with Loki before a quest.

How often had I swept such preparations aside, preferring to jump right into battle! How many times did I disregard the plans which Loki had carefully prepared or Father or Uncle Frey had suggested – and in so doing, risked the lives of my people...

The first time Thor had "gone outside mission parameters" he had been written up, lost some of his
pay in a fine to recompense damages and was set to "off-duty status", unable to take part in the quests which Agent Coulson had needed done.

You have to understand, Thor, Coulson had pinned Thor's guilty blue eyes with his harder grey-blue ones. I need you. I need your experience and strength. That's true. But... I need people I can trust even more. I can't have Lone Rangers on my teams.

A pause.

Do you know what Lone Ranger means?

Two days later upon Thor's dismissal back to the ranch, Jake had had to sit down with Thor and go through some basic cowboy films with Thor as well as some other important 'cult hits'. Once again, the lanky cowboy took Thor out for a long ride and reminded Thor of what they had talked about before. You hadn't meant harm, Jake agreed, but going off to do your own thing doesn't make you the person people want on their teams. They want someone who's got their back, not gallivanting off on some personal pursuit for whatever reason.

Thor had apologized. A real apology, Jake had told him, would go a long way. He had apologized for disobedience and for his disregard for the mission's parameters. Coulson had smiled and accepted Thor's slow words, knowing that the admission had cost the alien warrior something.

"Remember," Coulson quietly stated, shuffling a few papers into neater order before him before looking up to give Thor another hard stare, "if you have an idea, we're open to them. If you have ideas in the planning sessions, say so. If you have an idea while on the ground, in mission, radio it in. If there's comm silence, regroup and discuss. Unless you are the team leader, there can be no change of plan without my say so."
"When shall I be a team leader?" asked Thor, leaning forward in excitement.
"We'll see..." Coulson said slowly, leaning forward in his black office chair and folding his hands over the papers before him. "We'll see."

Others in SHIELD came to know Thor well. There was Director Fury who sometimes spoke long difficult talks with Thor about Asgard, its policies, its culture and society and what it would want with Midgard.

As if Asgard has any real interest in such a puny people, Thor sighed.

There was Hill and Knox and Zhang and a variety of other high-ranking officers who smiled and occasionally waved and gave Thor the time of day, but other than that, nothing more. There were the lower level officers and soldiers who ran, slept, worked and relaxed alongside Thor, teaching him a variety of Midgardian card games among other things. There were the few who had come, over time, to draw Thor into their close circle – Stonehurst and Holtz who had accompanied Thor to his first rifle and handgun targeting tests. There were the specialized skill fighters who had proven their efficiency and lethal capabilities on the field – and off. The cool, red-haired hand-to-hand combat fighter, Natasha, her quiet, calm, sharp-eyed friend, the archer, Clint and the famous (to Midgard anyways) yet humble 'super-soldier', Steve. All in all, life on Midgard was proving an interesting challenge. SHIELD, unexpectedly, brought some balance and much needed exercise and activity for the ever restless Thor.

On some nights, when the Helicarrier was in a rare moment of rest and it hovered silently over some Midgardian city or it rocked up and down, up and down, on the waves of the ocean, Thor stood on the edge of the great, black and grey platform of its aircraft runway and looked up at the stars. What he hoped to find there, no one could fully understand, he knew. No one could fully know what he had experienced in his youth among the stars, but now, trapped was he was down on Midgard, he
could only hope that Heimdall was watching, that Odin, Frigga, Loki and the rest of his companions were watching – and that they were proud.

[...] the silences [...]  
[...] speak to you [...]  
[...] drifting [...]  

A world of metal mazes and iron doors and steel infrastructure and the constant hum of engines and the faint odour of gasoline and oil and heated metal, the SHIELD Helicarrier was to Steve Rogers both a familiar and unfamiliar place. Unfamiliar faces, unfamiliar technology and yet, even in this strange world, there was something haunting similar to what he had left behind. He could see it in the fast loyalty the crew held for each other, the trust and respect shared by all on the deck. He could see it in the optimism and determination of the teams sent out time and again to their missions. There was enough of his world left for Steve Rogers to feel a hope that his time, his era, his values had not been entirely eradicated by post-War cynicism and modernity.

Whenever he was greeted by a new recruit, asking for his autograph or a 'selfie' with him, as they now liked to call the photographs, Steve Rogers smiled and acquiesced, knowing that he too stood for something in their eyes. A man of his time, a man of honour, valour and respect, a man who stood by good ol' American values, like apple pie and 'doing the right thing'.

Once Natasha, the red-haired assassin for SHIELD, asked Steve if he found it difficult to repeat over and over again the same mantras he had upheld in his earlier career within the army. Mantras are meaningless, Steve had replied stiffly. There is nothing meaningless in what I said.

But sometimes, sometimes, Steve wondered. Steve wondered if he really did have a chance in this second chance at life, in this brave new world. Those nights, he stayed up late, punching the Helicarrier gym's bags until the memories, the uncertainty, would ease a little.

On the odd occasion, Steve saw another there. A tall, longer blonde-haired, well-muscled operative, whom he came to know as Thor. Thor, he discovered before a very secretive job to "rescue" some scientist from his cell in Eastern Europe, was not in fact human nor indeed from this planet.

Watching Thor's sometimes bewildered gaze wander about the mess hall, the rooms and technology he was no doubt not very familiar with, Steve felt a pang of sympathy. Thor, the exiled Prince of "Asgard" (wherever, whatever that was), like him, was a man out of time and space. Thus, on quiet nights when Steve looked up and found that his new acquaintance had joined him in expelling his inner demons through exercise, the quiet super-soldier said nothing.

One day, coming back from a short mission – a trip to a local school to give a talk on 'saying no to substance abuse', Steve found Nat and Clint in the mess hall, looking speculatively up at the ceiling while nursing what looked like coffee, but, judging from a faint hard tinge, had been doctored with something else entirely. Noticing the more serious, thoughtful looks on their faces, Steve checked a smart comment he was about to make on substance abuse and drinking whilst on duty.

"Something up? You got back from a mission? Or are you on duty?" He asked, helping himself to a cup of black tar which someone had called coffee as a joke.
"Off duty," Clint said, giving Steve a 'don't-mother-me' look. "Of course."
"A particularly trying mission," Natasha smiled then, running her hands through longer dark-brown hair. "I keep telling him it's not as hard as holding Stark's hand, but he doesn't believe me."
"You try handling a depressed ex-god and then get back to me," snorted Clint.
"Well, according to Stark, he's basically a god of some sort," Natasha rolled her eyes. "If you
calculated godhood on ego alone, then he's probably up there with whatever."  
"We all have our burdens to bear," Steve smiled. "Something up with Thor?"
"Isn't there always?" asked Clint sourly.
"He's just being a bear," Natasha sighed. "I told Clint that he needs to get out and chill with a girl. Like you, Steve, the both of you would make anyone depressed."
"The answer to all your problems is dating," Clint said.
"Not all problems. Some problems can be dealt with an appropriate amount of death," Natasha said lightly.
"What is Thor's problem?" asked Steve.
"He wouldn't say much," Clint then flashed a shit-eating grin at Natasha. "But from what I could gather, it is girl trouble. It always is, isn't it?"
"So it's the girl's fault?" Natasha leaned forward, eyes suddenly sharp.
"I didn't say that..." Clint back-pedaled quickly.
"I'll talk to him," Steve said and beat a hasty retreat.

The super-soldier had no interest in getting caught in the crossfire between Natasha and Clint. The two assassins went way back, that much was obvious from the many exchanges he had seen between them, but apparently the relationship had a different dynamic than what Steve was used to seeing between a man and a woman. Remembering that one time Natasha had gotten Clint down on the floor in an impressive headlock, Steve shivered. Getting caught in the crossfire of an argument between them is suicidal at best, he thought.

Asking around and checking in with Hill, Steve finally managed to locate Thor in one of the alien's (Steve refused to call Thor 'god', that just didn't jive with him) favourite places to relax in peace in the later evening hours – the gym. Sitting on the stack of newest slightly broken punching bags, Thor lay back, glaring at the dark, shadowed ceiling. Steve joined him silently.

"It is not wise to join me at this time, Rogers' son," Thor said softly.

Roger's son. Not a good sign, Steve noted. Whenever under stress, he tends to shift back to his usual speech patterns... Hm.

"I just want to let you know you can... talk, if you need to, you know, share with me whatever is bothering you."
"Talking does help," Thor finally admitted after a moment. "My thoughts, however, do not make much sense to me at present..."
"What would you do if you were home?"
"I would talk to-" Thor stopped suddenly and then shifted uneasily.
"You would talk then."
"Yes. To Loki, more often than not. Or my three friends. Or if it was... very serious, my parents."
"I see."
"But this problem, I would most likely talk to Loki or my mother about," admitted Thor. "They are best suited for these kinds of...matters."
"Related to?" Steve prompted gently, feeling as though he were unravelling a particularly fragile bundle of spiderweb threads.
"Women."
"Women in general?"
"Oh. Miss Foster. Yes," Steve wracked his memory but all that he could remember of her was the occasional remark by Thor or Natasha about Jane being a scientist or some such thing and being remarkably pretty but incredibly pragmatic. There were other things... I'm sure... "Your, uh, girlfriend."
"Yes. That is what you mortals call it." Thor hesitated and added a little ashamedly. "We argued."
"Well, that happens."
"Hm. Yes. This time, she is very angry and has not been answering my calls."
"I see. Well, they say time is sometimes what people need."
"Loki would say that as well. Loki always needed time alone before he would be able to talk with me on matters upon which I had angered him... but how long am I supposed to wait?" Thor asked, voice rising with barely contained frustration.
"How long has it been?"
"Two days," Thor answered, with a bit of a pout.
"Maybe she needs more time," Steve suggested carefully. "Some do."
"Darcy says I must apologize and agree if I am to break the stalemate."
"Darcy?"
"Jane's assistant," Thor clarified quickly.
"Ah," Steve nodded, no longer confused. "OK. Well, what do you have to apologize for?"
"I... I believe it the problem lies within my supposition that our summer holiday would take place in a location that was more suited to strenuous activity."
"Strenuous activity?" Steve's blond eyebrow rose. "I thought you two were going to Paris. The Eiffel Tower is tall, but it's not strenuous."
"Ah! Well, I was speaking of our potential plan for Paris and Clint shared a holiday he enjoyed with Natasha."
"Where did they go?"
"To some country with mountains – perfectly suited for climbing and other kinds of sporting activities."

Steve attempted – and failed – to imagine the image of Jane which he had long harboured in his mind. *Petite, studious Jane climbing a mountain.* Jane was a pretty girl (if one liked au natural). The captain also knew that some would term her a plain jane, compared to other women who enjoyed high heels, glittery dresses and heavy makeup. *However, although Jane is not what one would term a "womanly" woman, neither is she an all out tomboy. Climbing a mountain would be a stretch for her – and more than likely not so enjoyable.*

"I take it she didn't agree," murmured Steve, seeing where this was all going. He thought.
"Yes!" Thor gave Steve a wounded look. "She said she wished for a rest! As if her job was that stressful and difficult! But then I realized that we Asgardians are engaged in much more laborious and physically demanding on a daily basis – farming, questing, riding horses and such like. Perhaps many mortals, then, consider activities such as hunting, riding, fishing, climbing as being 'extreme', when in reality, to a regular healthy Asgardian they are not so. It just goes to show the differences –"
"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" Steve waved a hand, breaking into Thor's monologue. "You told Jane that her work wasn't as stressful as yours?"
"Stressful?"
"You implied that as a human she can't be expected to be as good physically as you are."
"That is beside the point," Thor replied testily. "I agreed with her choice in the end, so I really can't understand her rationale. In the end, we will go to Paris."
"That's nice." Steve said coolly. "You just implied she is worth nothing as a mortal."
"What."
"Did you say anything else?"
"Well, then we discussed how the King, my father Odin, and the Court and my people view other Realms and species and how such viewpoints effect certain inter-realm foreign policies..."
"Holy Hannah."
"I do not see why one would be affronted by fact."
"Hm," Steve hummed, battling down a rising sense of frustration and annoyance. "No doubt you are right and there other species more powerful and advanced than us. Yet, many countries on Earth espouse that all men and women are created equal... So by extension, setting aside difference in
ability and culture, we believe - or, rather as our world comes to grips with the fact that we are not alone, we will believe - that all species are equal."

"I suppose," Thor said slowly, definitely disbelieving. "Yet everyone agrees that Asgard is superior in most ways. Our biology has gifted us with many strengths, including immense power, strong immunity against most diseases as well as long life. Our technology is so advanced as to allow us to live life in a simple manner most enjoyably. Our army and weaponry is well-advanced and incredibly powerful. This is why many races and planets and even entire Realms have created treaties, alliances and deep bonds with Asgard."

*Probably too afraid to say no,* Steve added mentally, recalling memories of imperialist nations throughout history.

Out loud, the soft spoken super-soldier asked, "So then, considering your people's power, considering Asgard's power, considering your superiority, do you think you are entitled to do as you please? That other beings have no right to speak out about their wishes? Jane does not have a right to speak her mind or disapprove anything?"

"Well..." Thor paused, non-plussed, for the first time in his long life no doubt, considering the practical ramifications of his beliefs. "I suppose so...?"

"You suppose." Steve repeated, dead-pan. He started on another tack. "I remember you speaking of a brother."

"Loki."

"Loki is adopted, right?"

"Yes, he-" Thor stopped suddenly as though realizing something.

"Am I right in remembering that he isn't Asgardian?"

Thor was silent, frowning, but then he slowly nodded.

"Do you consider Loki inferior?"

"Loki, well, he, um, ah, he is..." Thor trailed off, blue eyes gazing at the opposite grey wall of the gym, unfocussed and no doubt recalling some kind of memory. Then the ex-'god' grimaced, "Loki would say not. He would be very displeased were any of us to imply as such, yet many times I know that the generals and many of the Court feel as though Loki has never and will never entirely be able to embody all that is Asgard. However," Thor said softly, his fingers running along the edge of the punching bag he was sitting upon. "I know there are few as powerful, as stubborn, as cunning and as wise as Loki. He is a magickal being unlike many of Asgard and can hold his own more often than not in a fight, with or without magick. These long years we have lived together, I have come to trust him like no other. We have played together and fought together... and I would trust him with my life. There was that one time on Pelagos – but, ah, that is a tale for another day..."

"Are there others like Loki?"

"Hogun."

"Hogun?" asked Steve.

"Hogun of Vanaheim. He is a strong and capable warrior, taciturn and wise. Many years he has quested at my side. Asgard considers him a great warrior. Asgard has always given respect to those who earn it."

"Earn it in a way Asgard thinks is right, you mean," Steve corrected Thor. "I'm sure Asgard considers many Realms beneath it, as being inferior, which is why they are so protective. However, such protective behaviour on the part of Asgard, while well-meant, perhaps, can only create an unhealthy dependency so that the growing cultures never learn to fend for themselves... wouldn't you say?"

"But-" Thor paused in protest.

"Think about it," Steve urged. "If you helped them all the time, when can they learn to help themselves? Besides, I wonder – and I'm sure Fury has wondered – if Asgard's interest is merely
altruistic. Probably not.
"I am sure my father and the Court have only the best interests of the Realms at heart!"
"Well, we can hope so," Steve sighed. "Until then, ask yourself whether you think Jane is really
inferior to the women of Asgard – or the men. If she is less important to you or less lovely."
"Of course not," Thor bristled. "Jane is a wonderful woman – both wise and intelligent and fair and
her heart is true and honest. She is a woman of honour!"
"Are you less of an Asgardian for cherishing a mortal woman?" asked Steve.
"No."

Thor's quick reply sank into the following silence like a stone and then the exiled prince sighed.

"I do not know, Steve," he finally admitted. "I do not think so. This is what my heart tells me, but I
know my father's thoughts on this also. He would not consider cherishing a mortal as wise. Jane said
I should speak of such matters to you... I remember her saying as much some time ago. She said that
you, Steve, would be able to explain such matters – such opinions of difference and how they relate
to the wars of your planet."
"Ah. The world wars."
"Yes."
"They were a terrible time," Steve finally said, heart heavy as he remembered the last time he had
seen his love and his best friend. All of his friends now old or died or dying. A long lost time.
Another world.
"They lasted a long time?"
"Relative to other wars in history... no. The first birthed the second but the reasons were different for
each. In the end, we all fought in the Second World War – for freedom. Countries joined in battle for
their friends and allies with the hope of bringing freedom to those who were different – to the Jews
and the gypsies and the African immigrants and the, er, what they call 'gay' people and to Christians
who were persecuted for speaking out or helping others hide or escape the Holocaust. It was a
difficult time."
"What happened in the end?" asked Thor, eyes wide.
"Well, war happened," Steve shrugged. "Death happened. I was... made... during that time and I
fought for my brothers in arms and my family and my home and other people's families and homes.
And today, when it's all said and done, we can stand equal. More or less. That's the hope anyways."
"I see." Thor frowned. "And what happened to your enemies?"
"The Axis countries?"
"Were they destroyed never to harm your planet again?"
"Ummm... no... not really. I mean. No. I mean, you can go to Germany today and Japan and Italy
and Austria and it's all good. After all, we can't forget but we can forgive, you know?"
"So easily?" asked Thor, shocked and a little intrigued, judging by his expression.
"Well, not easily," sighed Steve. "There was a lot of anti-German, anti-Japanese sentiment and all
that, but nowadays for the common good, for the whatever they call it, 'global village' or whatever,
we try to get along." Steve stopped and glanced at Thor, noted his puzzled face and asked, "What
would you do? What would Asgard do?"

Thor went still for a moment and a dark expression for a moment flashed across his broad, open face.

"I would think extermination is the best course of action."
"Extermination... is a bit-"
"You have not yet met the Jotunn," Thor shook his head, interrupting Steve forcefully. "They are a
savage race and have recently attacked Asgard in an attempt to regain one of their lost heirlooms.
Jotunheim, the icy wasteland from which they hail, is a dying Realm, yet their will to conquer is
strong."
"Maybe they thought it was the only way to survive," Steve suggested. "Perhaps they have a
reason?"
"Who knows the mind of a Jotunn. If you were to meet them, you would understand."
"Or perhaps I would have a different opinion. After all, I barely know them, nor have they harmed us."
"They attacked Earth! A long time ago!" Thor's voice rose in affront. "My father descended to Earth to protect your people, at a time when your world was less civilized and able to protect itself."
"It was a long time ago," Steve pointed out. "I hardly think we'd hold grudges for something that happened so long ago even our ancestors can't remember it."
"That would be a foolish thing, Steve, to abandon such memories. It was a dark day for Jotunheim – a day when Asgard showed its full strength and pushed them back to their home world and took the base of their power from them. Yet, even now, I believe they plot and they plan our demise, waiting to strike. It was my hope to discover the truth of the matter, but my father would not see reason. I went to seek out the truth, but in the end..." Thor sighed. "A war began, which I will not be able to take part in."
"Your dad kicked you out, huh."
"Yes."
"Because you started a war with your old enemy."
"You provoked them?"
"Perhaps," Thor sighed. "I regret beginning something if truly there was nothing there beforehand, yet... yet... all of my life, I was told that the Jotunn were terrible, conniving creatures who wish nothing good for Asgard. How can I turn a blind eye to their attack?"
"You should have looked into it a bit more carefully then," Steve said. "You know, been a bit more patient or tried to see it from their point of view. Compromise can save many lives, you know. That should be the first go-to reaction."
"Some in Asgard's Court would call you naive," Thor's blue eyes met Steve's, and he smiled. "Yet, I can see that you merely wish for the best – for everyone. I will consider your words and think on them carefully, as best as I may. As an Asgardian, I know my duty, but perhaps, as Loki has told me before, there are other ways to go about them."
"Such as thinking twice before you act and trying to see things from the other's perspective," Steve nodded with a returning smile.
"Yes. You speak as my parents do, Steve."
"Well, it's good to be encouraged by the ones who care about you," Steve shrugged and clapped Thor on the shoulder. "I do care about you, Thor. I know it's hard for you. It's difficult and you aren't going to be able to change your feelings in a day. I don't know these Jotunn people like you seem to do, but maybe one day you guys will be able to find some common ground... maybe you'll prove yourself better than what anyone expects of you."
"It will be a hard road to tread," Thor said soberly, then he grinned. "Which is why I must walk it, for such paths are made for warriors such as I!"
"Ahhh..." Steve chuckled. "Yes. Fits your warrior's ethos – and ego - at any rate. And as for Jane, just... try to be honest with her about what you are struggling with. Ask her for help. I'm sure she wants to build those bridges between you two as much as you do."
"I will talk with her."

With that, Steve rose, leaving a much more thoughtful, yet optimistic Thor behind him. He hoped. As he left the gym, Steve turned one last time and looked back. Thor sat there, back to the Helicarrier's grey gym wall atop the pile of worn punching bags. His blue eyes traced the lines of the bolts studding the ceiling in an absent-minded kind of way. Steve nodded and left.

[...the silences hold promise...]

[...the silences...]
Jane, Thor thought, recalling Steve's words. Jane. What are you to me?

...ask yourself whether you think Jane is really inferior to the women of Asgard – or the men. If she is less important to you or less lovely...

Jane. Sif. Kayra. All of the women whom I have met over the years... Thor sighed. Jane has always treated me as an equal... as though who I was, what my station was, was not important to her. Or rather, being important, yet not defining who I am.

Jane is a wonderful woman – both wise and intelligent and fair and her heart is true and honest. She is a woman of honour!

Someone I cannot regret...

...Are you less of an Asgardian for cherishing a mortal woman...

No. That had been my instant response, yet in truth, when I consider the future, when I look to what could be, I do not know. I know what my father would say... I also know what my heart tells me and for whatever time I am given, I would spend it at her side...

And yet...

And yet...

Asgard remains in need of a King and my father's word is law...

Thor. What will you do?

He sat there and waited in silence for some kind of resolution to come to him.

[...the silences...]

[...speak to you...]

"Jane."
"Thor?"
"It is I."
"Yeah, I guessed as much. Who else calls occasionally from private, untraceable numbers?"
"Untraceable? You wish to trace my calls?" Thor asked good-humouredly.
"No. I mean," Jane sighed and rolled her eyes. "Never mind. What's up?"
"I was just wishing to ascertain as to whether you arrived home safely," Thor said quickly. "That all of your luggage was also not lost."
"Oh, Thor," the young scientist smiled bemused. "You do realize it's just a ride across the Channel from Paris to London? It's difficult to get lost or anything like that."
"Well..."
"But, thank you! I appreciate the thought. I assume you arrived at the Ranch OK?"
"Actually," Thor hesitated.
"Oh," Jane leaned back in her chair and sighed. "It's back to work for SHIELD for you, huh. Say hi for me and remind that Agent of yours that I'm still wanting my stuff back, if it's lying around free and not filed away in some secret government archive somewhere." She ended that on a note of light sarcasm, at which Thor laughed.
"Yes. I could ask about it, but you do realize that no doubt they have dismantled your equipment somewhere."
"Or given it to Tony Stark to look at," Jane scowled.
"Indeed."
"So, it's a classified mission, huh."
"Yes. I am sorry, Jane," Thor added softly. "This is what I feel I must do at the very least."
"I know. I understand. A little," she added, "and it helps that we at least had a nice vacation together."
"Two weeks felt too short a time."
"Right. We should hang for a month, next time. I can teach you some other ways to burn eggs," Jane laughed.
"And I could teach you other ways to adequately cook meat," Thor agreed with another chuckle.
"We could continue that ritual you suggested."
"Which one is that? We started so many..."
"The breaking of the night's fast in bed."
"Breakfast in bed? Yeah, that's pretty sweet, right?" Jane hummed as she enjoyed the memory of a shirtless Thor bringing her his own version of toast and eggs and orange juice (much more edible than her own attempts). "I look forward to the next time."
"Jake says that he will teach me something mortals call pancakes," Thor added. "Do you like pancakes?"
"Who doesn't? I will look forward to it!"

There was a short moment of silence as the two contemplated the next time they would be able to meet. Another holiday time, perhaps, such as Christmas.

"But it was good to find some rest with you," Thor said. "Your idea, in the end, was the best, Jane. You were right. I am sorry."
"Now, that's not so hard to admit, is it?" Jane smiled softly. "I accept your apology, Mr. Odinsson."
"It will be difficult, I think, to get this... this..." Thor stopped, unsure of what to say next, before continuing. "To get what we have right. I have a feeling I will continue to make many mistakes in the future."
"Well, that's what talking is for. That's what apologies and acceptances are for. Next time, I will do my hardest not to freeze you out. I know that you come from a totally different set of reality and it must be so hard for you to just accept what I think is right or wrong... I just..." Jane sighed. "I just want this to work out so badly and I want to help you, Thor. Sometimes, I look into your eyes and I just feel that you carry a burden so heavy... so heavy and there's nothing I can do about it:-"
"Just be yourself," Thor assured the young woman, his heart warming at her kind words and her usual honest attempt to reach out to him. "Your belief in me makes me a stronger man, a better man."
"Man, huh. What about Asgardian?"
"That too," Thor grinned.

With that, the conversation turned to other topics and the afternoon passed swiftly for Thor as the Helicarrier of SHIELD returned him to New York and a waiting team of operatives.

It was time to go a-questing once again. Thor's work was far from done.

-0-0-0-

The centre of each galaxy holds a vast void, as many scientists and mages and academics know the Realms over know. Many names have been attached to such a space of nothingness, where even matter is devoured and to whence it goes, no one entirely knows. This is the Void, the Black Hole, the Shadowed Eyes of Death, the Great Maw, the Tai'shu, the Muthr'a'Ginnung. One such phenomena hangs within the centre of the galaxy which is known to some as the Fen'chi Galaxy, to
others the Andromeda Galaxy or the K'varo Quadrant.

Shadowed, murky and devouring anything which crossed its wide, gaping maw, the black hole in the centre of the Fen'chi Galaxy whispered dark things to those who would listen to such voices which call out in the dead of the night and insidiously creep into the dreams of those whose minds are more open than most. Such a Void can hold nothing but the most wicked being of all, an ancient evil, a forgotten creature long caged within That Which Is Not. Some say it has been there since the dawn of time, as though even Life and Death have forgotten this dark monster.

Whispering, haunting, plotting and lurking, it reaches out to the minds of those ambitious, those gifted, those empowered. It calls even now.

...YOU ARE MINE...

The Chitauri have answered.

-0-0-0-

Drifting just outside the gravity well of the central tai'shu of the Fen'chi Galaxy, a ragged line of asteroids and dead planets slowly move over the face of the unfathomable darkness, providing a perfect meeting place for those who would commune with the exiled evil lurking within, imprisoned on the threshold of reality. Upon one such dark rock, a bio-mechanical warrior stood, cloaked in his finest, grasping his favoured electro-staff. His face, shadowed by his dark hood, the Chitauri general lifted his head, revealing the barest glimpse of a metal half-mask. His dark eyes gazed across the small flat room half-erected upon the asteroid, watched as the tall, menacing shadow by the window grew and formed itself into the familiar figure of the one called Thanos.

"My lord," breathed the Other in reverence. "Our plans continue forward unthwarted, our armies gather, our information grows by the day. Soon, all will be as you foresaw."

"YES, WE ARE ON THE THRESHOLD OF ACHIEVEMENT, WE ARE ON THE CUSP OF THE ULTIMATE DEFEAT."

"Yes, lord," the infamous general nodded.

For many years, the Other had awaited the chance to prove the quality of his people, to heap revenge upon the unsuspecting heads of the enemies who would dare extinguish his people. Looking out upon the army of the Chitauri which even now swarmed in an orderly mass about the drifting orbit of asteroids currently linked by gravity generators, rocket boosters, repulsors and magnetic technology. Other Leviathan ships flew slowly in formation close by the nearest star system, while smaller space ships, manned by mercenaries and other useful contacts, hovered over the more viable planets. The army was amassing, their power and technology was increasing. All that remained was a long journey across the Voids of space to the far galaxy and the distant, almost forgotten, protected planet of Midgard where a treasure lay hidden.

"YET, THERE IS THE ONE THING WHICH I SEEK, WHICH WOULD AID US-"

"The Tesseract."

"WHEN WE DISCOVERED ITS LOCATION, I KNEW THAT DEATH HAD PLANNED THIS DESTINY FROM THE DAY THIS COSMOS WAS BORN."

"However, in order to speed our arrival to Midgard, the only option is to utilize one who may be able to find it, connect with it, harness its power and, reaching Midgard, attain it and then use its power as a portal to hasten our arrival," the Other mused. "And such a one has only recently be approached. His answer has not yet been assured."

"IT WILL BE. THE LOST TREASURE OF MIDGARD WILL BE OURS."

"Until that final alliance is assured then, the Chitauri will continue searching for a sorcerer or mage of
the calibre essential for the task at hand."

"IT SHALL BE DONE AND LADY DEATH... SHALL BE APPEASED."

"It shall be done," bowed the Other and exited with careful reverence.

Plans and exigencies rose up within his mind’s eye as he made his way down the roughly hewn steps of the asteroids down to other stairs which led away from the tai’shu, hanging with the power of techno-magery. Further down and away from the looming black hole, the Other joined the solemn circle of generals and aides which he had left behind.

"We must continue our search of other options," the Other harshly barked out as he approached the circle of Chitauri now grouped around a flat holographic representation of their forces. A mighty army worthy of Death, Thanos had said with a cool smile.

"The mage has not agreed upon our terms?" asked one.

"Of course not," snapped another. "Otherwise, we would not be here at such a summit. What are you thoughts, lord?" He added obsequiously.

"Expand our search to the edge of the Mye'hyo'i," the Other said. "Mya'ar, search the farming communities, whatever species they may be. Kali'ir, open lines of communication with the mage we have spoken of before and see what other demands that creature would want. Li'ar and Coa'ru, travel to the Realm of the Jotunn and see what their galaxy has to offer. Re'en, meet with the Dark Elves again and see if there are any who may be bought for their services. Eno'ak, search the edges of the Mye'hyo'i, focusing on the prison planets. Perhaps there we may find some mage or sorcerer willing to lend its skills for hire. Bear in mind that we search for one whose abilities range from an Eno'ko or above. Nothing lower will do. Understand?"

"Yes, my lord," the answering rustles of gravel and machine brought temporary relief to the Other.

Soon, he thought with a cold smile, soon, we shall exact revenge, we shall show our worth... we shall be free.

...FREE...

...IN HER ARMS...

...SUCH FREEDOM...

[...the wind carries it onward...]

Carried through the spaces, through the Voids which connect all things, carried upon the light of the stars, in the altering melodies which chimed out warning after warning, the dark promises filtered down to Midgard, down to Jela. The Tesseract's bright colours swirled and flared within its metallic cage. It echoed back the call.

It sang.

...let he who has the ears to hear...

...let him hear...

...what the Heimrsal...

...what the spirit of the stars sing out...

...dark evil awakes...

...it is rising...
Chapter End Notes

Some of you guys wanted to see a more thorough look into the Thor/Jane relationship as I think of it. I hope this is an adequate portrayal. It's a bit different from the films because I think that Thor and Jane in the films really don't have a relationship really. My good friend who had gotten engaged once told me that you never really know someone unless you spend at least 4 months with them, preferably over the huge Western holidays (Christmas, Thanksgiving and Easter). Then you really get to know that person when they are under stress. On top of that, Thor is an ALIEN. I have some good friends over here who are Americans who married Chinese folks and they had A LOT of stuff to work out. How much more would Jane and Thor have to talk things through? People assume such relationships are impossible. They are not. They just need a lot of work. Of course, I also think that half the reason why divorces happen in general is because people assume being married is just same as always, when it's not. Perhaps if folks approached marriage more carefully as cross-cultural couples do, then divorce might not be such a danger. I dunno...

Anyways, all this to say, this is why I have Jane and Thor arguing and making up here. I also have parts where Thor is still struggling with bringing his recent epiphanies into a more practical sphere. It's one thing for a person to say "I shouldn't have done that..." because they feel sorry for themselves and the fact that they are missing out on the life they had before, as opposed to saying "I shouldn't have done that because I hurt others". Similarly, it's one thing to agree that "racism is bad" and it's entirely another thing for one to forgive terrorist-producing countries or religions. Anyways, I hope this chapter is OK!

Let me know what you think for reals!

-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
bollen - boulders/monoliths
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
Eno'Keshi'ko – the system of Eno, a type of magical level measurements
Fen'chi Galaxy – Andromeda Galaxy
gan'ga'war – steel balls
gan'ko – ganka'jya chon, a steel beetle
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
Janah – similar to dammit
Ka'autha'ndarna - Reality
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
Kholathan – Safety Belt/Protected Zone
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
kon'bi – short for konji'bifu, space bat
lasu – space rat
l'gon – storyteller
Morning-star - a mace
myech'myena - shape-shifting
Mye'hyoi Peyt – Milky Way
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
Nord-Stjarna – north star
Nyr'Fjor - Jotunn's original name for V'slozh'noi
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
pu'lotni – plutonium
pye'nee - a kind of bird
Ra'ska'yeh o Phyllo'xia – Tales of Phylloxia
roobyn – a red stone
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
Shen'grid – the Protected Zone, the zone in which habitable planets orbit around a sun
Shi'nuwu – Reality/Yggdrasil
sigan – short for yan'sigan, rock-worm
So'shah – Earth/Midgard
syem'fyerma – family/community farm
Tai'shu – The Void
tro'watal – perseverance
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
whota – wheat
The Dark Road: On The Edge

Chapter Notes

Hello.

Well, I'm back. I'm sorry for the impromptu, unannounced hiatus. A ton has happened since my last update. A TON. It's not that my summer was super jammed, but I was so busy finding some relaxing time finally, that other things got pushed to the wayside. Then, I volunteered to sub at my friend's school to help them out. Then, my computer crashed. Then, I lost all my files. Then, I had to write this chapter from scratch. If the quality is lacking, I apologize. Sincerely do. It's just so demoralizing to write a pretty good chapter and then lose it all.

Hopefully it'll not happen again... and if it does, sorry again. On the other hand, this is definitely writing on the wall for me – to get a new lappie and I've already chosen one, I just need to save up.

Still, losing all my data was so depressing. Goodbye music and English lesson plans and pictures and screencaps and games and ALL MY FANFIC AND ORIGINAL FIC WORK I WORKED ON THIS SUMMER! [I was working on a few original pieces because I think it'd be cool to try to sell my stuff...]

Needless to say, I went into shock. I may have shed more than a tear or two. Then, I had to move on. That's what I'm telling myself. I still can't get over the fact I lost a chunk of written work just because I forgot to back it up. Farewell that work I have just wasted my life upon. [waves goodbye]

OK. So that happened. And you know what's ironic or sad? None of my unimportant stuff which I could have always redownloaded (like my anime and tv shows and Tom Hiddleston YT movies) were lost. I just... [shakes head]

Moving onward.

Here's the new chapter. Once again, if you see any errors, if you see anything that disagrees with previous plot, if you see any plot holes, let me know. Please do let me know. I can debate as well as any author about reasons for writing or not writing certain material (see my author's notes below), but when it comes to nitty-gritty, con-crit, I'm def open.

Thanks to everyone who has been reviewing and letting me know that they enjoy this fic. Especially when it came to the romance of Thor/Jane. I don't wanna throw cold water on the canon, but I really wanted to make it a bit more realistic and you guys really got behind that, so thanks! You guys give me extra power to push through depression and etc to continue with this fic even though I'm tired and ridden with allergies and head colds and sadness over massive data loss. You guys rock. You know who you are.

To: lemomina, alex, SingSongSilence, Kai_Maciel, iBlameGlobalWarming, Skywinder, Dragonanzar and Elle - THANK YOU!!!

Responses to non-member reviewers are after the chapter! Thanks!
[...silence fell...]

All was stillness. Loki, crouching beneath a hanging flat green leaf of the giant spore giants, forced his breathing to slow as his dark red eyes watched the slow shuffling gait of the black and green furred, rabbit-like animal he was currently hunting. Earlier in the day, he had set his traps and now, revisiting each one, the exiled prince, now grimy jungle hunter and anonymous prison inmate, checked his traps for any prey. On arriving at his last trap, a long oblong, jagged toothed wooden contraption, Loki discovered that one of the jungle's more common herbivores had hopped within the soon to be cage, its black nose twitching as it pulled and nibbled upon the bright purple fruit which dangled invitingly in the middle.

[...silence...]
[...but in the silence...]
[...beneath it all...]
[...Can you hear it?...]
[...they are coming...]

Loki sat there, muscles tense and cramping. He waited. He waited until the final SNAP and sharp crack of wood as his trap closed about the unfortunate, unwary creature. Then, like the others, Loki slit the writhing creatures throat efficiently, skinned it, gutted it, packed its meat carefully in green leaves and hung its fur from his pack with the others. A day's hard work, now done.

Swiftly and silently as a shadow, Loki passed through the greenery of the thick dim jungle, keeping an eye out for any of the larger predators or crazed inmates roaming the jungle. When familiar grey rocks began to peek through the dense bracken and the sound of the wide river's splashing could be heard, Loki finally felt as though he could breathe again.

He was home.

Not home, he corrected himself quickly, grimacing as splashed his way across the shallows of the river. Never home.

-0-0-0-

Jela's forest jungle lay in quiet beneath it's night skies, and, looking up at the grey clouds passing overhead, Loki sat uneasily upon his high perch on the tallest most south-western tip of the small mountain range which broke the seemingly unending vista of jungle canopy. He sat there, gazing upward at the distant, unreachable stars, the bright span of light which showed him the map of the galaxy in which he now found himself abandoned.

It was not a clear night entirely but the clouds scurried across the planet's atmosphere herded by the wind as though they were an unruly flock of sheep tended by a stern shepherd. It was not the clouds
which gave Loki pause.

It was the shadow, the subtly disturbed pull of the dark, of the Void. He could feel it strongly, even here, could sense it reaching out, could perceive the strong pull of its dark call and its evil design and desires. A song sibilant to despairing ears.

A song of war.

A song of Death.

[...the call of the deep...]
[...the song of the abyss...]
[...across the worlds over...]
[...Can you hear it?...]

The first signs were the ominous silences which slowly enveloped the section of the jungle in which Kol'la's band now camped out. Trees swayed gently in the wind and gentle rustles the bracken indicated life, yet there was nothing else to be heard. The birds fell silent and the small creatures shivered within their hiding places and lairs and waited. Everything waited, breath drawn as if in anticipation of something. A terrible predator or a natural disaster. One of the usual great storms. Perhaps, Loki shivered at the memory of the last storm he had endured upon Jela, it heralds the coming of a storm. It is common enough during this season, if one is to believe the others.

Then, on the second night, the jungle sprang to life in a panicked rush. Wind rushed across the forest canopy, whipping the leafy heads of the spore giants and the broad leaf trees. Far off in the distance, Loki fancied he could hear a dull, throbbing hum. Something was coming.

Stationed as he was on a high peak of the southern foothills, Loki could see along the mountain canyon running to the east and glimpses of the jungle floor to the west. He gazed in consternation as a black cloud formed on the horizon and the air filled with the call of jungle cat, the chirrups of the nut-hoarders and the harsh croak of the reptilian giant lizards. Caws and screeches filled the air as the cloud drew nearer, resolving itself into a panicked mass of flying creatures, great and small.

Loki’s attention was jerked downward as the bracken suddenly parted, revealing various creatures running helter-skelter down the narrow valley by the mountains. Yelling and shouting incomprehensibly, a couple familiar and a few unfamiliar prison inmates passed by.

Hopping down to a lower level of rocks, Loki called out their names, but sheer panic had appeared to have taken hold of them. Only instinct remained and before long, their grimy orange jumpsuits disappeared around a bend, never, he thought distractedly, to be seen again. Running his hand through his dark mane of hair, Loki considered his options.

Clearly something is coming, he thought, but what? If it is something from the planet, then remaining here must mean certain death. On the other hand, if it is something from... above, from off planet, then there may be a chance of escape and getting aboard their craft. Perhaps. Perhaps...

Poised yet undecided, he stood on the edge and was just about to jump down and make his way down to the now rather busy path leading into the mountains, when Loki caught sight of a familiar figure. A familiar face. It was Aeto, looking less frightened and more concerned.

"Aeto!"

The Half-Breed Aedian’s eyes darted upward and then, baring his teeth in a fair approximation of a smile, Aeto waved back and began to climb the rocks hastily.
"Ko'la!" Aeto finally reached Loki's side, panting a little. "I was afraid I had missed you! So many have fled to the mountains – I thought – perhaps – you had gone already – but – obviously I underestimated your bravery yet again – or your stupidity, I don't know which one is to be blamed."

"Well," Loki smirked, "you figured it out yet?"

"No…" Aeto sighed. "But I will one of these days… At any rate, I thought I had missed you-

"Missed me?"

"In the rush," Aeto gestured as another flock of blue-black bat-birds swarmed over and three fawn-coloured, deer-like grass-grazers loped by. "You can smell it in the air, hear it in the trees." The Half-Breed shivered and twitched, glancing back over the rustling canopy. "Can you hear it?"

"The others?" Loki asked quickly after the rest of his small band.

"Bolted. Like the rest. You know how nervous L'oh gets on the best of days. Idiot creature."

"Like mindless beasts," Loki's white teeth were bared for a split second with a shark-like grin and his red eyes glinted like cold gems. Derisively he jerked his chin as another pack of animals and inmates passed by. "Mindless beasts, that is what we have become. Running from what is as yet to be seen, herded by fear. We do not know what it is yet, and already they run."

"Can you blame instinct?"

"Perhaps not… Yet, thinking about it rationally, it is merely some new mischief cooked up by the guardians of this place."

"Well, some of them appear to be running for a cause," Aeto shook his head. "I managed to slow down a Halfer and it babbled something about a ship harvesting folk-"

"A ship?" Loki asked, red eyes darting to the sky.

"The Halfer wouldn't say. One of the karm-root smoking folks from the ragtag gang over the ridge."

"I assume they are not scooping just anyone?"

"I suppose so," Aeto sighed. "I understand their fear. On the other hand, if it is a ship, they'll get who they want – easy enough – and if they don't want you, your running will have been in vain, for they will no doubt leave you in peace. Well, then, there you have it-" He paused as his comrade in distress climbed up to the first sentry, stationed on a flat, raised bit of rock, and sat down, legs crossed and eyes fixed on the far horizon. "What – what are you doing?"

"This is the only chance to get off this planet," Loki replied. He glanced down at the grey-skinned, black-eyed Half-Aedian who gazed back at him in perplexity. Loki laughed then. "What have I to lose?"

"You have no idea who or what they are!"

"Who was just saying something about the futility of running?" Loki laughed then.

"At least get to a more defensible area-"

"You pointed out, rightly, that hiding or running may end up an exercise of uselessness. If their tech is high enough, they will be able to pluck us out of the heart of a mountain."

"You cannot - you do not know where they will take you!"

"Better than here."

"You cannot know that!"

"Well it is moot either way," Loki pointed out, returning to Aeto's and his original conclusions. "I didn't say that… exactly. My conclusions were based on the panicked ravings of a korm-root sniffer!" Aeto threw his hands up in exasperation.

"Aeto," Loki's face grew suddenly serious. "I do not know about you, but I am an innocent, taken captive by forces fueled by greed. I do not belong on this Hel-forsaken planet – and I cannot afford to – to waste time-" Loki rubbed his eyes then, pinching the bridge of his nose wearily, overcome by all the things he could not explain. "Never mind," he finally said, voice low. "You cannot understand. Go now – while you can."

There was a short rattle and scuttling, scabbling sound and then some crunching and Loki glanced up to find that the narrow faced Half-Aedian had taken a seat beside him bony orange knee to bony orange knee. Loki raised a tired eyebrow, but he said nothing further.
They waited together then. In silence.

[…silence fell…]
[…skies grew dark…]

The sun had set when a distant hum vibrated across the valley. Below the rock formations upon which Loki and Aeto sat, animals and inmates continued to pass by, shouting, cursing, braying and grunting. Far in the distance, they could see the stars warped by the field of what most certainly was an invisible shielding device. As it drew closer, the throbbing and grating of the ship's engines as well as the size of the field promised a large spacecraft, no doubt capable of intergalactic flight.

Beneath it, the trees tossed their branches, leaves whipped about and bits of greenery and flew about in the small maelstrom created in the wake of the invisible spacecraft. Slowly it roved over the valley and every now and then a light blue ray like lightning shattered the dark. A transport beam.

Watching the dark unseen mass approach, Loki's gut tightened, yet he said nothing.

Then it was upon them.

All sounds of life disappeared beneath the roar of engines and cogs and the machinery of a giant airship. For a second there was nothing but heat and wind whipped about as it slowly loomed over the two warriors now standing on their rock. There was dark. There was heat. There was an overwhelming pressure. There was an overpowering flash of blue.

There was nothing.

-0-0-0-

"We got every last one of them, sir," the co-pilot turned to the captain seated in her chair, looking through the incoming data as it scrolled across her datapad. The newest updates of information on the cargo they had successfully culled from the ranks of the lowlife criminals on the prison planet.

Not as much as I had hoped – but enough, she thought. Fifteen above Eno'vee. I will be paid well for something attained with little trouble to myself. Remaining here, however, would gain us little. The bribe allowed only for a day… Best get a move on. Her talon-like fingernails hovered over the revolving holo of a bulky Phalanx. That one could be trouble, she thought. And…

The reptilian Captain paused at the glimpse of a lanky, blue-skinned humanoid. According to the databank, it was an unknown. The Captain smiled appreciatively at the lightly muscled back and the capable, clever-looking hands. A delicate, beautiful creature, the Half-Skrull captain thought. Never mind the odd magickal markers, he would fetch a fair price on the slave market as he is. The red eyes, the colour of blood were calm however and gave Captain Ko'li pause however. A promise of trouble, she mused. Never trust the quiet ones.

"A puzzle for sure," the First Mate's voice jolted her to awareness. "When I first saw him, I thought of my Oma's stories for sure."

"Stories?" Captain Ko'li stowed her datapad away in its side pocket and turned to her Noradian First Mate.

"Myths," First Mate Soran smiled vaguely. "If you ever get to Norad one day, you'll see what I mean."

"Soran," Captain Ko'li raised an inquiring eyebrow, "have you been sniffing again?"

"No!" Soran protested with affront. "It's a tale my Oma told me – about some blue-skinned race called the Phylloxians."

"Soran," the Captain said slowly. "You are aware there are many blue-skinned races out there?"
"Yeah, sure but none with lines."
"Hmph," the Half-Skrull captain shrugged dismissively. "Is the course plotted?"
"Yes, Captain," the pilot turned his chair slightly to look back at Captain Ko'li. "Set, laid and ready. Master T'cho'kal did a grand jo with the new nav-tech equipment."
"Let's get to the Dark System then," nodded the Captain. "I don't know about you folk, but I'm ready for pay day."

With a cheer, the Ovar'on's engines revved to life and with a giant jerk, the battered, yet trusty ship jumped through the void and whirled past the stars.

-0-0-0-

Looking about the containment room in which he and a good twenty other beings were held captive, Loki's stomach clenched. With no apparent doors or windows, the room presented smooth grey metal walls. There was no obvious clue as to who had kidnapped the lot of them, nor was there any hint or announcement as to where they were being taken. Dim lights flickered ominously overhead, bathing everything in a gloomy grey-brown light. Straining, Loki could barely catch the muffled rumble of giant engines and the occasional clatter overhead, which told him that the room in which they were being kept had been sealed off with various shielding, including sound.

Seated between Aeto and a Xandarian, opposite a Skrull and a Half-Breed, Loki battled unease and fear as old memories surfaced. Old memories of constrictive honeycomb cells, of forced feedings, of incredible loneliness, of the numb silences. Glancing about, Loki could guess that many of the beings locked up with him were similarly worried - although, beside him Aeto slept easily enough. The grey-skinned, scrawny Half-Aedian had attempted to open his mind to any aboard the ship, but the cell, apparently had magickal dampening, effectively restricting his abilities to ascertain who had captured them and why.

There is nothing to do, Loki thought morosely, but wait.

A few other occupants in the cell, half-wild from too long years in the jungle or naturally being of a violent nature, had battered the imposing, impenetrable walls of the cell. Exhausted, one by one, they eventually subsided to sit with the other calmer prisoners.

Finally, after some time, which was impossible to measure, thanks to their lack of time-keeping devices, a comm crackled to life. It was a Captain Ko'li, welcoming them to their destination and new life. Those unwilling to accept the new job offered them would find themselves escorted to freedom via the ship's airlock.

When the guards burst in, toting weapons and barking orders, Loki, like many of the others around him, followed the commands immediately. Facing the wall, with his hands laced behind his head, Loki watched out of the corner of his eyes as the others less willing were shot or stunned into silence. Forcing himself to stay silent, Loki glared at the wall and hoped that his friend would not be so foolish as to resist. Jerked by the elbow away from his spot, Loki followed the bellowed orders of the guards, feet stumbling uncertainly as he was pushed out of the room and up a few rickety metal grating stairs to a cat-walk.

Turning slightly, Loki glanced back, hoping to catch sight of Aeto. The last glimpse of the room chilled Loki as he watched the silent Phalanx, Anorin, finally succumb to several blaster shots from the Corinor AX-560 laser rifle toted by the squadron's commander.

Escorted to freedom, indeed, Loki shivered. Via the ship's airlock... and then out to the Void itself. There is only one way now, he told himself. This is the path you have chosen, Loki. Or perhaps this is the choice forced upon you – but you will make do. You always have.
Light blazed. Sirens wailed. The morning shift officially began with harsh white light and a
deafening clanging. Alongside the five other mages in the employ of the Chitauri's foraging ship, the
*X'ol*, Loki scrambled off his bunk and stood to attention as his platoon's commanding officer stalked
into the room, barking orders, cursing the unfortunately slower crew mates. Joilo, a spatial-distortion
warp artist, was kicked several times before she finally pulled herself to her feet. Loki, forcing his
eyes away as the slight, barely educated Ylezian girl staggered to her feet, tried his best to keep his
heavy lids open as the Chitarui platoon commander began to bark at them the orders for the day in
distorted Basic.

Platoon Commander Y'lrk, unlike the usual lower rank Chitauri, was able to communicate quite well
with other breeds as well as his own kind, being equipped with an self-regulated link to the Hive.
Like all Chitauri, Y'lrk's tiny yellow-brown eyes seemed to stare right through the mages lined up
before him. His grey skin and bio-mechanical enhancements did nothing to improve his looks – and
his temper and personality were just as ugly.

Now under the enforced employ of the Chitauri Army, Loki knew all too well why the Skrulls and
the Kree had treated the race with disdain and care. Driven by unfathomable ambition, the reptilian
and insect-like creatures had been spreading across the Midgardian galaxy for some time now. Loki
could remember the occasional conversations Odin, Thor and the King's Council would have on the
subject of the Skrull, the Kree and the Chitauri. Thor's opinion had been standard – wipe them all
out.

For once in his life, Loki could not agree more.

As he stood there listening to his commander give the spare details of their mission (protecting the
Chitauri forces landing on the planet as they foraged for energy resources), Loki wondered yet again
how he was going to get out of this. Unfortunately, he was alone.

I am alone.

Dressing quickly and silently into their black baggy serviceman uniforms under the watchful eye of
the Platoon Commander Y'lrk, Loki considered his options and found no easy way out. As usual, the
commander had them line up at the door in order of their "enlistment" numbers and there they
clipped on the usual gear: the nav-pad, the utility belt, the sig-nav and the shackles which controlled
their magickal abilities. The others said nothing as they trooped out of their small sleeping quarters
and down the halls to the canteen where they were given a bare fifteen minutes to wolf down the
slop with which they were fed. Surrounded by the guards and his fellow crew members, yet with no
hope of contact with the outside world, Loki felt the walls closing in on him even more than usual.

I am alone.

No one complained. Complaining led to beatings or deprivation of food or bedding. Declining the
Chitauri's "invitation" to work invariably led to death. Loki had as yet to see what revolt would lead
to, but he had a feeling that it was a dark path which would take him to a place from which he would
not be able to return. Without Aeto, without Nesta, without Mal, without Thor and any of his family
at his side, Loki could trust no one but himself.

*I am alone.*

Fatigued from overusing what abilities he had regained from Odin's spell, Loki, like the other mages, felt constantly weak and tired. Living in magic-suppressing quarters, the Jotunn warrior-mage whiled away the hours sleeping or meditating, trying to shore up what power he could. No doubt the rigorous schedule of work set out for his crew mates and himself was an attempt to ensure that none of them would be able to use their abilities to break free or cause trouble.

Today, like any other day, Loki and the others joined a platoon of Chitauri, rode with them down to the surface of a rather undeveloped rocky planet and set to work on raising barriers and setting energy-finding sigils. After successfully retrieving several containers of crystals, the platoon's small shuttle rose upward and disappeared, leaving behind an empty vista. Sitting in his seat, with Joila on one side and Ki'rilu, a Half-Breed, on the other side, Loki stared straight ahead at the Chitauri sitting across from them.

*A grey, twisted creature,* he thought. *Mindless and without will. Unable to be suborned or overcome by reason. Serving only the one. The Other. Loki shivered. They are many. I am only one.*

*I am alone.*

As per routine, the group of mages were escorted back to their shared quarters and locked in with no hope of escape. Without further word, the others pushed past to take their usual spots around the room: Joilo at the datapad charging station, Storinn on his bed, Razz and Ki'rilu on the sagging couch in front of the holo-comm monitor.

Loki, looking around the wide square room, sighed at the sight of the smudgy, grey-black walls and equally grey lighting. Along the far side of the wall, five beds stood in a neat row with storage containers built in below each one for clothing and what personal items they were allowed. At the end of each bed, another personal chest stood, where their uniforms were stored and any of their less "harmful" or "dangerous" work tools were stowed away.

To his left, a group of synth-food machines and a square metal table stood surrounded by six chairs. A tiny shelf with rows of plugs offered the mages a space for their datapads and other technological devices to charge. It was a cramped area and a poor excuse for a kitchen, but the group of five mages had learned how to make do with that they had been given.

To his right, two orange and purple, battered couches stood in front of a large holo-comm monitor which offered a limited choice of entertainment. Other containers stood against the wall, holding a variety of datacards and other broken items left from previous employees of the Chitauri army. A door on that side also opened to the cramped showers and toilets available to them. Two showers and two toilets.

*Not entirely conducive for good relationships,* Loki had thought, *but considering how we are treated and how little they think of us, I suppose we should be thankful that we got anything at all.*

Moving forward to take his usual spot on the second couch, Loki leaned back, allowing his dark head to loll a little on the slightly shredded back of the couch he had chosen. The hard studs of the couch's metal frame now working their way through the thinning fabric of the ancient piece of furniture did little to alleviate his aching neck muscles. With a groan, Loki shifted a little only to yelp sharply as a metal stud suddenly jabbed his lower back.

"Damn this couch," he grumbled. "I would settle for wood at this point."
"Or stone," Razz, a genial half-human fire-user, laughed. "Only you would find that funny," Kirilu's black mandibles clicked with annoyance, her multifaceted eyes glittering. "As a Kloidian, I can only be glad that I do not have the annoying szoft fleszh you OtherZ have been born with."

"Ko'l'a can shape-shift if he wanted to," Razz pointed out. "Too tired," Loki sighed.

"We are all too tired," Kirilu, an empathic insect-humanoid nodded. "They exzpect too much from usz. At thisz rate, they will work usz all to our deathsz."

"I hardly think-" Razz began but Joilo, looking up from her datapad, shook her head.

"Kirilu is right," the Ylezian girl sighed, rubbing her dark-ringed green eyes. "There will be no end to this."

This was an old conversation – an echo, a repeat of what they had all voiced before. Loki could already tell what each of them would say – or not say. Joilo would predict doom, as would Kirilu. Razz would hope for the best and believe that their "mission" such as it was would eventually come to an end. Storinn said nothing. The Xandarian rarely said anything, preferring to stare up at the grating lining the ceiling, hiding inside his head.

"They will take what they want from us and then they will kill us."

"You always say that," Razz rolled his eyes. "I overheard a conversation between two of the villagers from the planet we visited a few days ago – or was that a week…" A pause. "Anyways, it seems that there are other ships also with the same mission and that this is all preparation for an attack of some kind. I am pretty sure that we will be let go once the Chitauri are finished preparing."

"Why would they let us go?" Loki asked, raising a dark eyebrow. "I wish that were true, but I hardly see them as the charitable types."

"Agreed," Kirilu's clicked with rising ire. "They are preparing for an attack – that much isz obousz… and it muszt be a great disztancze from here, otherwisze they would not need usz to aid them in their foraging for energy sourcesz."

"Besides," Loki went on, "just because they are targeting someone else in their war, does not mean they will show us mercy."

"Szeriosity, Razz, I do not know how you szurvived to this day with such a low amount of brain cellsz within that carapace you call a szkull," Kirilu poked the Half-Breed with a spidery finger. "Izh if they had other energy alternativesz, I do not think they would have szcouted usz."

"Or maybe they do have something else in mind," Razz protested. "There is stuff out there that can pack a punch! If what you say is true, why aren't they going out for stuff like that?"

"Your way with words is encouraging, Razz," Loki said dryly, "but you prove a good point. I suppose their plans are not entirely set in stone as of yet – and they are looking at a variety of possibilities. There is, after all, as you say, "stuff out there that can pack a punch", but perhaps it is not so easily reached as one might think."

"Ah… you mean items of great power," Joilo said. "I have heard of Asgard and its Vaults before… and other nameless items of great power."

"Asgard?" Razz's forehead wrinkled. "That's just stories, isn't it?"

"Oh, szo you are the exzpert on the univerrsze now," the empathic Koloidian insect-humanoid chittered in a short laugh.

"Asgard exists, my friend," Loki said, "but surely the Chitauri would not attack the Golden Realm without a great army."

"Or maybe they are crazy enough to think they would succeed," Joilo said from her corner by the data-pad charging station. "Before I was picked up, I heard that the Asgardians have fallen silent and none have come out nor gone into the Realm. Perhaps, the Chitauri know the why of the matter and consider the Realm weakened."

A broken Bifrost rose up in Loki's mind and the blue-skinned Jotunn winced. A weakened Realm
indeed. Then, recalling determined set to his father's shoulders and the far-seeing golden eyes of Heimdall, Loki forced himself to find breath again. *Asgard is in good hands. Asgard's allies, however, will not be. Asgard's allies...*

"I hardly think they would have the temerity to attack Asgard," Kirilu said dismissively. "Not with the army they have now."
"Maybe it's bigger," Razz pointed out. "It's not like we have access to their information."
"Only you would say something like that," Kirilu snapped in disgust. "Whose side are you on, Razz?"
"On no one's side," grumbled Razz, glaring the holocomm monitor as the game show he had been watching gabbled on. "I was just pointing out the obvious. Really the only one who has actually seen anything of the Chitauri fleet is Storinn..."

At that, everyone glanced over at the silent Xandarian and shivered.

"And he's not saying," Razz ended lamely.
"Well, Asgard is in good hands," Loki went on hurriedly. "There is Odin All-Father and Heimdall and a host of warriors. I am certain they will be fun. Us, not so much."
"Agreed," Kirilu nodded. "And the allies of Asgard, perhaps, may find themselves at a disadvantage."
"The Elves can take care of themselves," Loki pointed out.
"Elves exist too?" asked Razz, brown eyes widening.
"Woah," Joilo raised an eyebrow, eyes focused on her datapad. "Even I know my species."
"Yes, they exist, Razz," sighed Loki. "Where did you come from? Under a rock?"
"Nooo..." Razz huffed and went back to glaring at the holo-drama.
"Anyways," Kirilu shrugged. "I wasn't thinking of the Elves – I was thinking more of the humanz – of Midgard."
"Midgard," Joilo frowned, head jerking up at the word. "What's on Midgard?"
"Other than a ton of humanz?" Kirilu's mandibles snapped sharply and she raised a black, segmented finger. "There's always the treasures stored there by the Ancients or the Asgardians."
"I thought Midgard was just some Skrull hoax about... never mind," Razz trailed off, catching the scandalized looks from the others about him.
"Treasures?" Loki decided to ignore his idiot of a crew mate and focused on the topic at hand, running his fingers through his long black hair worriedly. "There were rumours of the Tesseract, but... I thought it was just that - rumours."
"The Infinity Gems," Joilo supplied the answer to Razz's no doubt unspoken question. "Some say they are stones, others say they are magickal and technological devices of great power. Ylezian priestess had pictures of it at the Temple... the Tesseract, the Aether... some of them were taken by Asgard, or given to great Dragons or the Ancients for safe keeping...some were destroyed, others were lost. The tales are many," the young girl ended mysteriously, "but the truths are few."

"Let he who seeks knowledge, take heed, therefore, that he may not obscure the meanings of all things, hide or lock away the Truth and so keep it as useless treasure for the sacred few," Loki quoted softly, remembering the ghosts of Meerauk and Neo-Meerauk. "If the Tesseract is on Midgard, then to Midgard they will have to go, but it is a long way off... which..."

The blue-skinned mage glanced at Kirilu and then Joilo meaningfully. Razz, glancing from one mage to another, blinked uncertainly.

"Which would account for their need for energy sources," Joilo ended. "Midgard would account for a lot."
"Asgard will not let it pass."
"Unless as you say, Asgard is in some way on lock down," Joilo pointed out. "It's the perfect time then."
"Surely…" Loki's stomach, now roiling as the weight of this possibility settled upon him. "Surely not. Midgard could-
"Now who's sounding like Razz?" Kirilu asked shortly.
"If they wish to reach Midgard in good time with such a great army, then they would need energy sources – which we are finding, but surely not enough…" Loki said slowly. He added then, "Unless…"
"Unless…" Joilo prompted.
"Unless… they find a mage strong enough to locate the Tesseract, awaken it and use it as a portal…"
"Is that possible?" Razz asked. "In Mam's bedtime stories, the Tesseract is only yea-big." He gestured a small sized box. "Like, it could fit your hand."
"Small yet mighty," Kirilu nudged him, "and capable of reaching across the stars, binding one place to another. They say that in your bedtime stories?"
"Uhhh…" Razz scratched his short brown hair, frowned and then shrugged offering his friends a lop-sided smile. "Well, either way – whether they are headed for Midgard or not, whether they wish to challenge Asgard or not or whoever, it doesn't really concern us in the end. If we try to warn anyone – well, we can't – but if we tried, you know what would happen to us. Escape is impossible. Resistance is… well… forget about resisting, am I right – or am I right?"
"He's right about something for once, Kol'la," Joilo sighed bitterly. "There is really nothing we can do… and if you go poking your nose where it doesn't belong, Kol'la, you'll end up dead – or worse, under the scrutiny of the Chitauri Examiners."
"The Chitauri Examiners," Kirilu explained, "just another word for interrogators. Chitauri you would never wish to meet, I assure you."
"Ughhh…" Joilo twitched. "Just as bad as going down planet-side for one of the High Command meetings with Ylrk."
"High Command meetings?" Loki sat up then, interest piqued.
"Of course you would want to go. So did Storinn," Joilo jerked her head at their ever silent crew mate. "Look at what it did to him."
"He just went down there and… he came back like that?" the exiled Asgardian prince asked sceptically.
"You can hear it, smell it, feel it, can't you?" asked the young Ylezian girl.
"To draw so close to the Abyss, to peer into it's depths," Joilo shivered. "It changes you. For some, forever."
"What did he see exactly?" asked Loki.

The others shrugged, glancing at each other uneasily. Even Razz looked a little spooked.

"The truth," Storinn's dull voice broke the heavy silence. The words were the soft rustles of dead leaves, unused as they were to being spoken. "The truth of What Was, What Is, What Must Be and What Will."

Everyone turned then slowly, eyes widening as their gaze fell on the usually mute Xandarian. Storinn did not move, his dark eyes fixed on the ceiling above him, hands at his sides.

"What truth is that?" Loki found voice to ask.
"There is a darkness that never sleeps." A pause and then lower: "It was freed and now it plots to douse the light of the stars and bring all worlds into the arms of Death."
"You saw it?" Loki's voice rose sharply. Kirilu's mandibles clicked nervously and Joilo had put away her datapad.
"Those who are so gifted may see the Shadow within the shadows and hear the sibilant call of the Void." Storinn's voice trailed off. He added in a whisper, "Can you hear it? They are coming for
They came for Loki a week later, marching him without a word down several passageways and stairs until he was escorted into a small launching bays for the more convenient shuttles. There, the Commander waited and, catching sight of the tall, slender mage, nodded and then turned back to barking orders at a row of Platoon Captains. Meanwhile, Loki was led up the short ramp and forced into a small seat beside two other mages he had as yet to meet, obviously from other squadrons. A Chitauri barked out a harsh order for silence, but judging from the stark, panicked look on the other two mages' faces, Loki guessed that talking was the last thing anyone of the captive crew members had in mind.

Looking out the small round window, Loki watched as lines of soldiers streamed past for parts unknown in the ship. When Commander Yrlk and his two other co-Commanders stepped in, Loki and the mages quickly set to buckling themselves in, fingers fumbling frantically, while the pilots slipped into the front of the small space vehicle and began the routine pre-flight checks. After a good fifteen minutes, the door shut and the shuttle rose smoothly up and out of the ship before curving down and around to the dark planet's surface.

His small porthole was barely large enough to see anything, but Loki fancied he glimpsed a vista of dark, blackened earth spotted with metal and purple rock and vegetation. A dying world, he thought, as he realized that the sparks of glinting light were in fact small, singly manned spacecraft and satellites and probes and space debris. A dying world, a dying carcass of the world, surrounded by buzzing flies.

Then, the depressing view was swallowed up in dim light as the shuttle descended lower and lower into the atmosphere, rattling and roaring as it rocketed downwards. A dark world, Loki added to his mental list of notes. His red eyes darted from spot to spot, cataloging the odd rock formations, the lack of water, the obvious atmospheric enhancement mechanics and the various asteroid like platforms hanging in mid-air, no doubt held in place by some kind of grav-machine or electromagnetic technology... or magick.

Someone's will hung in the air, pressed down upon them all as though a cave of darkness were falling in on them. A will, a power so strong it threatened to crush them as they sat there, as the shuttle came to a hovering stop before lightly setting down. The other two mages beside him had stiffened, faces set in stone, petrified. Feeling as though a great rock had been placed upon his face, Loki found his breath coming in jerks.

Inhale. Exhale.

Unbuckle your seat fool. Move your fingers.

Inhale. Exhale.

Get up. Get up. Getupgetupgetupgetup.

Inhale. Exhale.

Follow the others. Eyes forward. Feet moving. Keep your feet moving.
Inhale. Exhale.

As he set foot on the planet, the young Jotunn mage gasped out sharply, earning him a sharp cuff from one of the accompanying guards. Forcing himself to keep marching forward, Loki strode in step behind the other two mages, trying to keep focused on his surroundings, on his breathing, on his feet. It was difficult, but somehow, sheer will enabled him to endure.

Glancing at the two Chitauri guardsmen and the three Commanders ahead, Loki wondered how the creatures could move so easily beneath the blanket of oppression. *Perhaps they cannot feel it,* Loki thought, *perhaps they are beings entirely without magick and so can never feel the effects of whatever power is instilled in this place. It would explain their need for other mages... Or perhaps they have grown up in such dire circumstances, it is no great burden to them.*

It did not bear thinking on. Loki instead allowed his head to turn a little from side to side, the barest twitching of his sharp blue chin, allowing for a wider range of sight. Now on the ground of the planet, Loki felt as though it was even worse, if possible than he had expected. The ground was rough and blackened as though a million fire mountains had exploded upon it. Great chasms appeared to gape open here and there across its charred surface, revealing dim red glowing. The exposed heart of the world.

There was no sun. None immediately visible to the eye at least. *Is the planet floating outside of a system? If so, how is it sustaining life? Not that it looks as though it is sustaining any life at present,* Loki corrected himself as he glanced yet again upward at the unfamiliar stars. *Still there is gravity to consider - and air. Although the atmospheric mechanics are no doubt compensating for the oxygen. Still...*

His red gaze drifted slowly over the vista before him as they moved down the long road to a great metallic tower, buzzing with furious activity. Hovercraft and other one-man vehicles whizzed past, towing supplies and crates and bulky anonymously packaged articles. Overhead a few Leviathans (Kirilu had described them enough for him to identify them immediately) glided eerily quiet, their bulk and girth at odds with their smooth manoeuvres through the air.

*Gruesome creatures, not even creatures, really - more like things,* Loki shuddered. *How many Chitauri are carried by each of those, I wonder...* Then the captive Jotunn warrior-mage stumbled suddenly as his wandering gaze, following one of the Leviathans, caught sight of something which nearly stopped him dead in his tracks.

*A Muthr'a'Ginnung. A Muthr'a'Ginnung.*

*Right on his doorstep.*

The Eye of the Void. Fed, he saw, slowly by a now rather diminished sun. Perhaps, the celestial fire ball had once had its own system. Perhaps this planet was the remnant of a complete microcosm – until it had drifted into the path of the ever hungry beast.

*The Muthr'a'Ginnung. The black hole.*

Trails of asteroids, no doubt the crumbled remains of planets, trailed downward and inward as well. Stardust, a long forgotten nebulae swirled about the black hole’s edges. Even the planet he now walked upon seemed to strain against the pull of the beast. Or perhaps it was on the cusp. Or perhaps it was protected and sustained by the dark magicks which blanketed the place.

*Anything seems possible. Impossible, yet somehow... possible.* Loki ignored the rough push of a blaster against his back, forcing his pace to quicken. His eyes followed the trails of the asteroids as...
the circled downward to the black hole. *Almost,* he thought, horrified, *a stairway into Hel itself.*

*I am on the doorstep of Death's Realm.*
On the doorstep of the Void.
Standing on the edge and looking in.

...there is a darkness that never sleeps...

Storinn's dead voice echoed in his memories.

...it was freed and now it plots to douse the light of the stars and bring all worlds into the arms of Death...

A dire forewarning of something even Loki could not imagine, something that Storinn could not, could never perhaps, fully voice.

...who are so gifted may see the Shadow within the shadows and hear the sibilant call of the Void...

With each step, Loki could feel the dark tentacles worming into his head. His forehead throbbed, his body ached with the pain of staying upright. One of the mages had fallen down and taken to crawling on its hands and knees, but Loki refused to succumb. He would not kneel. He would not kneel.

*I will never kneel.*

...*Can you hear it?...*

Somehow Loki managed to keep walking, ignoring the gasps of pain from the other mages, as the other staggered onward in front of him and the third now dragged along in the merciless grasp of the guards on either side. There was a door, another door. Too many doors. Halls. Passages. Loki could barely understand. Could barely keep track of his progress. They moved on quickly, without pause.

*One foot in front of the other.*

Inhale. Exhale.

Then they were passed some imposing doors. They were in a large room. *There were others. So many others, gathered around tables and various council circles. The center of the Chitauri hive.*

*The center of it all.*

Loki came to a halt behind his commander's chair, back to a pillar, eyes trained forward, blurring with unshed tears, jaw tense, bones literally creaking with the pain of staying on his feet. A few other mages were being dragged out, he noticed hazily. Others remained. *They are powerful, no doubt. More powerful than I.*

*What are you doing here?* Loki asked himself, derisively, his spirit sinking in despair as the full realization of his situation now sank in. *You have restored some of your magick, but it is barely at the level it should be. There is no chance in Hel you will have the endurance for this.*

The room's activity and noise quieted as a hooded pale, hunched figure entered the room, followed by a purplish-blue-skinned, bright blue-eyed alien, the like of which Loki had never seen before. He was tall, muscled and commanded attention – his face stern and unreadable. Unlike the dull, grey armor of the ugly creatures about him, this warrior stood apart with his splendid, polished armor, no doubt forged in the heart of some star.
Without further ado, the hooded creature, addressed by some Chitauri spokesperson as the Other, hissed a welcome of some kind and proceeded to speak rapidly, discussing a variety of issues. There was, apparently, some mage who would arrive and aid them in their quest. Last minute adjustments to the plan would be made this evening, taking into account their new, anonymous ally. An ally, the Other revealed, who sat poised at the heart of their enemy and would fight at their side, for the glory and the right to worship Death herself.

Enemy? Loki thought disjointedly. Where? Which enemy? The Skrull? The Elves? The Dwarves? Surely not... surely not...

Turning to the giant beside him, the Other nodded.

"Any last words, my Lord?"
"YOU SERVE WITH WISDOM."

YOU ARE MINE.

"YOU FIGHT A BATTLE ALREADY WON."

YOU ARE HERS.

"YOU ARE THE SOLDIERS OF THE GREATEST ARMY EVER CREATED – THE WORSHIPPERS OF ALL THE VOID CALLS HOLY."

YOU ARE OURS.

"DEATH, HERSELF, WELCOMES YOU ALL INTO HER RANKS! DEATH!"

With that the air hummed and vibrated and cries rose up among the ranks, chanting with the their leader.

"DEATH!"
"DEATH!"
"DEATH!"

With the last cry trailing off, the Chitauri split up into various groups already pre-ordered, no doubt communicated through the hive mind.

DEATH.

Loki, breath coming in swift and shallow, fought to keep conscious as the Commander brought up his holo-screen, projecting a green and blue world into the middle of his circular table. A green and blue world with swirls of white and grey and the faintest glimpse of brown. A living world. A populous world. A world he had only seen depicted in holos and in books. Midgard.

Midgard was the target after all. Midgard was – Thor. Thor was there. He had to tell Thor. Asgard has to know. How – how – Thor – Loki's fists clenched and unclenched as the headache, spreading across his brow began to pierce inward to his temples as though someone had grabbed his skull in a hard vise and had started to tighten it.

Someone – someone was in his head – someone was in his head, in his head – get out! Get out! Get out! Get out! Getoutgetoutgetout! Resistance – it was all futile – he had to get out of there – he had to get it out – he had to –
Loki’s hands rose to head, as he doubled over in a silent scream.

*Midgard.*
*Thor.*
*Thor!*
*This needs to stop –*
*They need to be warned –*

...they are coming for you...

Storinn's voice echoed eerily. The dry husk of a man.

...they are coming for you...

Darkness crowded in on him. Loki's world tilted sideways. He glimpsed a glint of metal and the dark shadow of Ylrk rising, looming – and there was a dark laugh. Somewhere. Someone was laughing. Was it him?

**YOU ARE OURS.**

...they are coming for you...

...they are coming for you...

Chapter End Notes

OK. Well, now we got Loki in a REALLY terrible place. [rubs hands gleefully] I really was looking forward to this... and I hope I can do this section justice. Needless to say, next chappie... has a lot of terrible stuff happening. [cackles]

PLEASE REVIEW IF YOU ENJOYED~~~

Onward to some replies to reviewers and questions:

RE: Tagging - I have tagged F/M on the fic. I'll prolly go back to the beginning if I decide to edit this beast and add it there.

RE: Sigyn - I have not planned Sigyn to show up. If she was going to be in this story, I would have mentioned her earlier. Mentioning her at a later date (or now) would be very after the fact and forced and just feel like I need to pair Loki up so I gotta put him with - someone-. Which I dislike doing. Furthermore, I'm not sure if the Sigyn I would wanna make would be ANYTHING like the Sigyn in the comics. Frankly, I don't like the comics all that much and there's a reason why I'm writing for MCU and not posting this in the comics section (I'm pretty sure some comic!/Norse!fanfic authors post here b/c there's more traffic in MCU, but the only real link to Loki of MCU is his looks... anyways, I'm not going there). Anyways, all this to say that Sigyn, I am sorry, will not be around unless I can think of a really interesting way to put her in. Until then, Loki is on a singular path.

RE: Bolded Capitals - Yes, they are THANOS. Fufufu. I had him way back in the first chapters. Scary, right? He's been there all along in Loki's mind. Creepy deepy, if you ask me. I must admit I think that the amount of foreshadowing I put into this fic is kinda
impressive, but maybe that's just me. Best not toot my own horn.

RE: Mal - Mal is not over. That's all I'm gonna say. She's not forever, but she's not over yet.

RE: Thor - The last Thor chapter was the last Thor chapter. The next time we see him is in the Avengers section. Sorry for Thor fans out there... I hope it works for you!

Information on Levels of Mage/Magical Abilities

Level 1 – Eno'sa
Level 2 – Eno'tho – Thanos
Level 3 – Eno'frei
Level 4 – Eno'ah – Elven Mages/Odin
Level 5 – Eno'ko – Asgard/Jotun/Any Other Healthy Realm Mage/Prince Loki before Odin caps him
Level 6 – Eno'yul – Sharda’aa/Regular Mage
Level 7 – Eno'vee – Uncollared Kol'la/Current Prince Loki post-Fall (past Sleen & Jela)
Level 8 – Eno'mah – Collared Kol'la/Current Prince Loki post-Fall (up until Sleen)
Level 9 – Eno'lei
Level 10 – Eno'sanai

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
bollen - boulders/monoliths
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
Eno'Keshi'ko – the system of Eno, a type of magical level measurements
Fen'chi Galaxy – Andromeda Galaxy
gan'ga'war – steel balls
gan'ko – ganka'jya chon, a steel beetle
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
Janah – similar to dammit
Ka'autha'ndarna - Reality
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
Kholathan – Safety Belt/Protected Zone
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
kolm (sniffer) - a kind of drug like weed
kon'bi – short for konji'bifu, space bat
lasu – space rat
l'gon – storyteller
Morning-star - a mace
myech'myena - shape-shifting
Mye'hyoi Peyt – Milky Way
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
Nord-Stjarna – north star
Nyr'Fjor - Jotunn's original name for V'slozh'noi
oma'auzha – mother-eff'er
oto'oa - big sister
pu'lotni – plutonium
pye'nee - a kind of bird
Ra'ska'yeh o Phyllo'xia – Tales of Phylloxia
roobyn – a red stone
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
Shen'grid – the Protected Zone, the zone in which habitable planets orbit around a sun
Shi'nwu – Reality/Yggdrasil
sigan – short for yan'sigan, rock-worm
So'shah – Earth/Midgard
syem'fyerma – family/community farm
Tai'shu – The Void
tro'watal – perseverance
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
whota – wheat
So, here we go. The chapter with which I struggled with for time immemorial. (That's what it feels like.) Ugh. So done. So done. In other news... Hiddles is doing some really surprising things these days - and the report from Rodney Crowell on Hiddles's massive prep done for "I Saw The Light" is a bit of an encouragement for those, like me, who were worried about this role. At least now we know that he has done his absolute best to prepare. HAAA~!

Also, GOG coming to theatres in China this Friday~! Yes~!

Thanks to... merichuel, lemomina, darkflower9, Sassiebone, iBlameGlobalWarming, cbc2v, Thalia Arche, Florreke, alex, Kai_Maciel, Skywinder! Thanks guys for being such encouragements when I've been a bum of a writer! Kisses!

HEADS UP: Massive author's notes on my TUMBLR (kakashidiot OR distortions-in-time) to address some questions about Loki's sex/gender, magick-related questions and etc.

OSTS: Assassin's Creed, Shutter Island, The Village.

If you are curious to know what I imagine the singing of the stars to be like, look up Howl's Moving Castle OST and listen to track "Suliman's Magick Square". The first minute and a half.

Remember if you're a Tumblr fan, be sure to add my distortions-in-time Tumblr to your follow list! I posted a side-story up there!

Onward!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time

Chapter 74
The Dark Road: On The Edge II

Somewhere, somewhere a tinny song crackled, stopped and started, creaking its way to the finish as brassy sounds and smoky-voiced girls crooned. It seemed... it seemed to last forever. Always playing, never ending. Perhaps, it was one of the guards' data-pads on loop. Perhaps, it was only in his head, as him mind struggled to focus on the memories which accompanied it. The sounds of girls calling and giggling and laughing and dancers' heels clattering across the plastic sheeted stage, managers shouting instructions, a faraway siren, the whoosh of some giant aircraft passing far overhead, rattling the bottles and tins and containers and fluted glasses. The scent of stale air tinged with hot plastic, sweat and the grey smoke curling upwards and around the crooks and crannies of the entertainment establishment. All of it closed in on him, borne on the wings of the song. The empty songs of the dancing girls and boys who kicked their heels to the stars, but whose eyes had been as Void as the darkness of space.
It was safe here, even here in these memories.

Somewhere, somewhere a tinny song crackled and the girls and boys crooned their vacuous lullabies.

Sometimes, he sang.

[…edging in…]

[…the stars whirl and time moves on…]

[…what time is there…]

[…this is no time…]

[…there is no…]

[…time is running out…]

It began innocuously enough. A small room. A metal table and two chairs seated across from each other. A quiet enough place. A place in which, Loki knew, he was meant to think and meditate and cogitate and contemplate his not so bright future. A place, judging by the scars, the scrapes, the dents and the grime left on the walls, meant to strike fear into the heart of its lone occupants.

Yet, Loki was no stranger to such tactics and so, when he woke seated on a black metal chair and slumped over a table, apparently unbound and more or less unrestricted, he did not react, knowing that there was no doubt cameras watching his every move. Instead, he leaned back, closed his eyes and kept himself still. Pressing down upon him, the air felt dense and heavy, yet it seemed lighter, quite unlike before. The captive of the Chitauri felt a little relieved, now out of the presence of the dark being. Thanos. Just thinking about it made his headache worsen a little.

The headache. It was still there. Still pushing, yet in some ways, retreating, easing. Allowing for him to just sit. To just… be.

When Commander Y’lrk entered, accompanied by a calm-looking pale humanoid with white hair and odd blue eyes, Loki watched them carefully. The Commander took a position behind Loki while the stranger took the seat opposite him, pulling a small datapad out of his dark uniform’s inner coat pocket and enlarging it. Watching his interrogator – Loki could tell that right away thanks to the inscrutable expression, the careful, watchful eyes and the insignia on the one piece uniform-suit – the warrior-mage said nothing, instead opting to slowly fold his hands and scrutinize them.

His hands. Had they always been so pale blue and long? And small? They had done so much, achieved so much, inflicted so much…

-fire raining down on an icy wasteland-

Loki wrenched his mind away from the memory and raised his eyes, meeting the other’s slightly amused eyes. He is laughing. Already. The captive’s gut twisted.

"So, you are part of Commander Y’lrk’s taskforce, is that right?"

Loki said nothing.

"You have been working… for the Commander for the past five months, give or take a few days.” More scrolling. "Hm…” Another long look. "Quite a few places and a fair bit of missions completed,
I see. Quite diligent."

Holding his tongue from saying something sarcastic to the effect that his diligence could not be entirely laid at his door thanks to everlasting death threat hanging over his head, Loki waited for the pale man to ask a question.

"Quite a good soldier."

Soldier. Quite a good soldier. A soldier. A soldier who came and took what he wanted. Some of the planets had been empty and retrieval had been easily achieved. Not all of the planets had been uninhabited and not all of the habitants had been willing to give up their hard earned resources. They had killed, they had bombed and shot and cut and brought curses from the heavens down upon the, more often than not, unprepared, uncivilized folk who had stood in their way. His hands were covered in the blood of innocents – and the not so innocent –

-fire raining down on an icy wasteland-

Yes, you are a soldier, a soft voice whispered. A sibilant voice, a familiar one too. What have you done to survive – and what will you do?

"Well," here the data-pad tipped forward, drawing Loki's attention back up from his hands. "The Commander here believes that you are a man of reason, a being who can be reasoned with and knows well enough the position in which he is put. It is simple enough, Kol'la." The pale one smiled then, a quick darting smile with white eyebrows tilting upward in a comforting way. "I am Inquisitor Wen Hun'jyo. You can call me Wen, if you like."

Loki blinked and waited.

"I am certain that you are more than ready to return to your duties with your Commander," Inquisitor Wen continued smoothly.

Smooth. Smooth and quiet, dangerously quiet. He had met men like Wen Hun'jyo before – a client at Poison Paradise, kicked out for nearly strangling a girl, several of the fighters at the Battlehouse… the Dark Elves… even a few mages came to mind, one in particular, a brooding bent figure with calculating eyes, a bent, white-haired man, brooding like a hawk, dark eyes glittering as he stood alone half-cast into shadow. That had been long ago. So long ago. Not as long ago as the others.

Which one had come first? A whisper. A whisper which stirred his memories slowly. His memories slowly rose to the surface. He had thought of this before.

I had thought of this before…
Thought what?
Memories are like Eldar Esaf's stew. Or was it Elder Skyne's?
Eldar Esaf?

-an icy wasteland, a world of grey and blue and white and little other colour-

With a blink, Loki was back in the room, breathing a little quicker, mind awhirl. His red eyes darted around, but there was only Commander Y'lrk. Commander Y'lrk who had moved just a little to his right. And Inquisitor Wen. Not Wen, never just Wen. Inquisitor Wen still sat there, watching him. Always watching.

"We would just like to ascertain, to make doubly sure you are no spy," Inquisitor Wen continued on, without missing a beat. As though the conversation had never stopped, as though they were actually having a conversation. "To ensure that our Lord's plans will continue on smoothly. To ensure that
you are, as Commander Y’lrk believes, not attempting to warn anyone of our current plans. If you can answer a few questions, particularly concerning your world of origin, which is not marked down, your species, which appears to be unknown, and your magickal signature, which is… well, rather odd, to say the least, then we will let you go back to your work,” Inquisitor Wen smiled again. "We will be able to put this behind all of us, all will be well."

"How does-" Loki paused, closed his eyes as another wave of pain stabbed, unfurled through his head. Inhaling sharply and then exhaling slowly, Loki opened his eyes and met Inquisitor Wen’s gaze. "How does knowing anything of this help you understand my allegiances?"

"'Allegiances'," Inquisitor Wen marked something down on his datapad. "Maybe nothing, maybe everything. Our Lord Thanos and our High Command, led by The Other, have little interest in you and your rather… irregular… abilities. It would be easy enough for me to execute you here in this little room as I have been unfortunately forced to do in the past on rare occasions. Still, the Commander likes your work ethic and we have need of mages."

"And if I were to tell you some information, how would you know I speak truly?" asked Loki, curiously.

Inquisitor Wen made another note on his datapad and then set it aside, its screen going dark.

"We have… ways… of verifying it," he smiled and leaned forward, hands folded on the table between them. Grinning at Loki, Inquisitor Wen asked, "Where do you come from?"

Where do you come from?
You know where, Loki thought darkly.

-an icy wasteland, a world of grey and blue and white and little other colour-
-icy waterfalls falling into the Void-
-giant wolves racing across a vast icy shelf towards the edge of a black-watered lake-

Or maybe… maybe… maybe… maybe…maybe…maybe…maybe… Loki grimaced as the pain blossomed, unfurled, spread throughout his head. Grinding his palms into his eyes, he forced his focus away. Away, away, away, awayawayaway – his voice. Think on his voice. We have ways of verifying it. We have ways. Ways.

Ways.
Vegr.

The mind, the memories can never lie.

Minne kan aldrig lyve.
Hvem er thu?

A line. A rope. It had hung outside the entire night and was now wet with the dew of early morning. Pearlescent beads of water hung along its length, ready to fall at the slightest of movements. A line. A rope. A cobweb. Cobwebs in the mind. Cobwebs which stretched from one side… from one side to another.

Hvem er thu? Loki asked in his common tongue. No response. Gently, he twined around the connection and followed it back, back –

Back, back to its source. Its origins.

Suddenly he was there - in a small room with another table and two Chitauri guards standing at either end and seated in between, a thin, pale sallow being dressed in the standard black and grey baggy, full-body uniform of the army's mages. A thin, sickly-looking being with a familiar long, sloping
skull and large dark eyes. Once, his skin had been a healthier bronze-gold colour. Once, they had fought together and ran together. Once, they had considered each other comrades.

_Aeto_. Half-Breed Aedian and mind-reader.

_Aeto_. Loki whispered, eyes falling closed, _ek lita thu._

He laid a hand on the line, the invisible tethers – and pulled.

_Vegr_. _Vegr vith thu._

[…we are bound together…]

[…we are made of stars…]

[…we come together and like swallows flying through, we leave…]

[…we are one…]

When Loki woke next, he was in a new room, a cell, this time. A cell consisting of familiar grey walls, familiar scrapes and gouges and dents, familiar sensations of cold, a familiar taunting small window allowing the barest glimpse of a black, star-filled sky and purple wisps of nebulae hanging like torn veils. At the sight of the barred window, Loki attempted to jerk to his feet and failed.

That was when he realized that he his hands had been bound above his head in thick metal cuffs, lined with blinking circuitry and magick dampeners. Feet slipping across the grimy floor, Loki tried and failed again to find his footing. For some reason, his legs no longer seemed to work. A spreading numbness.

"It'll hit soon," someone said, voice muffled. "We'll be watching."

_Watching._

Loki, twisting about, saw that the wall to the left had a large square smooth section. A one way glass, no doubt impervious to any kind of weaponry or magickal attack. _Behind it_, Loki guessed, _is Wen_. _Wen and Aeto and a dozen other scientists… waiting to see what their captive will do. What their captive will say. No one has entered in… which means…_

He was finding it difficult to breath.

_Which means that they wish to extract what they want easily. Which means… drugs. When I am ready, when I am ready, ready… Then he will come. The Inquisitor will come. Ahhh…_

The numbness was receding now, yet his body seemed incapable of response to his commands. Pain now began to twist along Loki's nerves, contracting his muscles painfully. Consciousness came and went –

Blink.

_What have I said? Have I said anything?_

His throat was sore. _Have I been screaming? Have I said_ –

Blink.

Seconds seemed to stretch into hours as odd sensations began to skitter along his body. Who he was,
who he had been, who he would be – none of it seemed to matter now. He was nothing, he was alone, he was trapped in a cage, warped by pain and sensation.

Blink.

He was in a barrel of spacer-pedes. Their long hairy legs danced across his skin. No – no – nononono – NO. It was not – it wasn't – it was –

Blink.

Not real. It was not real. Nothing was real. He wasn't real. It was all a lie. All a lie. He just had to say something.

It will be so easy, the voice reassured him, just say a name. You know the name. It is there...

The voice disappeared, smothered by pain.

Blink.

There was no thought. There was only fire. The fire was real. The fire which now burst along his insides, burning up his skin. He was overheating. He was heat. Hanging from his restraints, unresponsive, Loki sweated and panted, red eyes wide and blank, staring down at the floor.

The floor was black and grey with streaks of white where nails had clawed against the metal. No doubt, if he touched it, it would feel like ice. Flames licked around the edges of his vision.

Blink.

Someone was screaming. Why wouldn't they stop?

Blink.

Dark.

-L0-0-

Loki woke retching. Clutching at the arms suddenly about him, the captive warrior-mage coughed and spluttered as his mostly empty stomach rejected what little remained within and when that was gone, bile. Shaking and plagued with a steadily increasing headache, Loki was unable to pull away from the guards or the masked doctor who hovered over him with various needles and arcane-looking medical instruments.

They did not speak to their captive, nor did he attempt to reason with them, knowing that any objection to his treatment would be ignored anyways. Looking about the bare room, Loki saw no clock nor any window which could give a hint as to the time of day. Chained as he was to the bed, there was no apparent chance for escape and, judging by how badly his hands shook, Loki had a feeling he would not be able to walk more than a few paces.

More talking went on as Loki was forced back onto the hard cot and lumpy pillow offered him. Allowing his eyes to close for a moment, the captive mage listened to their mutterings. His heart was the subject of discussion. It was a close thing, the doctor said – and then stopped as he noticed Loki listening. Nothing more was said.

It was a close thing, Loki's stomach clenched again and he gritted his teeth, riding out another wave of pain as his abdomen cramped again. It was a close thing.
How close? Loki wondered. No... he thought. I do not really wish to know.

When he showed no signs of sleep, another drug was administered and Loki's cramps and headache faded away, as did the stench of vomit and the overwhelming agitation brought on (he had tried to tell himself again and again) by the chemicals of the previous interrogation drug.

It was a close thing.

Darkness edged in like a soft blanket being pulled down over his eyes, edging out the sickly yellow light of the medical room and the dark wavering shadows of his guards. They would still be there when he woke. They would ensure he would wake.

...a close thing...

-0-0-0-

When Loki woke next, he was back in the cell, this time lashed down to a chair with what seemed like an impossible amount of cuffs and loops and chains and straps. For a moment, he stared at them, dazedly, until the hilarity of it sank in. They are afraid of me? Loki smirked then and coughed a dry chuckle. They are afraid of me? Recovering from a near death experience, barely able to fight a kitten and they fear me? What –

The thought died as he raised his head and looked at his interlocutor. The white ghost of a man, a man no more. Inquisitor Wen.

"Sorry about that last round," Wen said conversationally, once again seemingly browsing some uninteresting data on his data-pad. He didn't appear to be very apologetic. "We had no idea the T'chata'ko drug would... wreck such havoc with a system like yours."

Yes, Loki identified the Inquisitor's tone right away. The interest, the curiosity of a scholar, piqued by an anomaly.

"That's what happens though when we continue on a path uninformed," Inquisitor Wen continued, faux regret lacing his voice. "If you had only shared with us your species, this would never have happened. Still, your kind, whatever it is, is quite physically resilient. You are not dead."

"Sorry to disappoint," Loki grinned.

"It speaks! Or should I say... He? She?" Inquisitor Wen smiled then. "You seem to be gifted with a rather different kind of biology compared to some. Although," here, the blue-eyed man's pale lips quirked upward, "not entirely uncommon in a natural state. Definitely more common among shape-shifters. The Skrull, some become interested in such... experimentation. Are you Skrull?"

Blink.

"Are you Skrull?"

Skrull. Green skin and red eyes. He had blue skin and red eyes. Wen had white skin and blue eyes. So much colour. The world blazed with it.

Loki shook his head and laughed.

Blink.

"...Skrull?"

Glo-Glo and the dancing girls. They had been female and soft and curvy and gentle. There were
others. Others who had visited him in the dark room. He looked back bleakly at that cowering youngster attempting to hide beneath the tattered sheets allowed him. *He had only been a child. He had only been a child.*

From that time onward. *From that time onward*, he had vowed never to be weak. *He had shifted. Yes, he had.*

Blink.

"…Skrull?"

*Mal.* Mal had not laughed. Mal had been female – but she had not been soft or gentle. She was lean vigour and clear skies and herbs and heather. She had not laughed at Loki and who he really was. She had only loved.

Blink.

Loki smiled then, a bitter small smile.

"Skrull?" he echoed the Inquisitor mockingly. "No. I am from nowhere –"

Blink.

The world blazed bright, colours flaring. Red lights along the edges of the three machines to his left flickered, hypnotizing pinpoints of flame. Overhead, the humming yellow light blazed bright like the sun and the Inquisitor's flesh took on the aspect of glass.

Blink.

*Such colours.*

Blink.

"I am from nowhere," Loki said softly. "My name is lost. It is lost to Time. My home is lost to me…"

Blink.

"Where do you come from?" The interrogator's voice seemed to filter through thick glass, slow moving like brown sludge. "What is your home planet?"

Loki's head was filled with color and light and he could hear someone singing – someone singing inside his head. Black and blue lines twisted about his legs and Loki fancied he could see the golden swirls of the spell which held his magick in even now.

*Even now. The rejection.*

Blink.

The grey flooring of the room gave way and they were soaring through space, whizzing past the stars like meteorites. He could hear the chanting of children – high and clear and warped and so, so alien, yet so comforting. *All of his life, he had heard this had he not? The dark voices and the light. Side by side.*

"Who are you with? Where do you come from?"

The Inquisitor seemed unmoved by the worlds spiraling about him. Loki, lifting his head, met the
pale blue eyes with serenity.

"I am alone, Inquisitor," he whispered. "Did I not just say?"

Red eyes met blue ones. Red eyes filled with the light of stars and unseen wonders reflected crazily back to the blank mirror before them. From the corners of the prisoner's eyes, purple-black tears of blood slowly ran down thin blue cheeks.

Loki was gone.

[…] those who are blessed […]

[…] those who are cursed […]

[…] they, they […]

[…] hear the song of the stars, the call of the Void […]

[…] a blessing, a curse […]

"Let he who has ears, let him hear,
Let him understand, let him know,
Let him experience, let him live,
Let him see -"

Let he who has ears…
Let him hear,
Let him understand,
Let him know,
Let him experience,
Let him live –
Let him live –
Let him live –

There was a chanting inside his head, a chanting high and shrill like the songs of children twirling around and around and around and around. He could hear them calling to each other, laughing and shouting –

Let him live –

Below him, the music swirled about, forming the back of a mighty ethereal creature coloured in interconnected streams of blue and green and orange and red. In time with the melody and rhythm, it pulsed at times brightly, at other times, darkly. Running his hand along the two-dimensional edges of the music-creature, Loki felt a surge of power and magick. A foreign thing.

Let him live, let him see –

Far in the distance, he could hear the echoes of another time, a monotonous song in the rough voice of an ancient story-teller.

Now, let us hear _ the twice-told tale…

No. It is someone else, he thought, someone familiar. Someone…

…the skies are empty on Jotunheim
…that is what the tales say, yet they are so wrong…
…for there is life even here…
…and beyond…

Beyond. Beyond –

At the thought, Loki was carried off, careening past the stars of the Fen’chi Galaxy until he was
teetering off the edge of the suddenly small plate of a galaxy and looking across the inky blackness
of the Void. In the distance, he could see the smaller, as yet un-tamed galaxy so called the Mye’hyoi
Peyt, the Milky Way according to the humans of Midgard. He looked down.

More galaxies drifted off into different directions – large and small, pinwheel, ellipses and other
shapes. Some galaxies were dying, he knew, and some were young babes in comparison. Some were
colliding with a neighbouring galaxy; others swanned through the dark of space alone.

And the light of each reached his eyes, spanning the Void, overcoming the vast darkness. Even here,
he thought, there is hope… why did I not see it before?

Why did I not see it…

Without warning, the music leapt upward, leapt across and suddenly Loki was surrounded by the
bright spheres of the youthful Milky Way.

Falling, falling, until he met the ground. Until he met the hard side of a vehicle and a bright-eyed
young maid woke him –

…No. That is not your dream… a soft familiar voice whispered. How long had it been since he
heard it – the Heimsrsal?

…That is the life span of another…

He stood on the craggy edge of a steep mountain surrounded by a desert plain, infinitely still with a
silence broken only by the occasional rattle of a snake or buzz of a fly or cry of a hawk. The world
was brown and yellow and red, hot and sweltering and alien to anything Loki had as yet
encountered. Testing the ground, Loki blinked.

"What is this place?"

Loki turned and grimaced at the sight of his old comrade – his no-longer comrade – Aeto.

"You do not know?" He asked, bitterly. "You brought me here."
"Your mind brought us here," Aeto said coolly.
"Your drugs brought my mind here," Loki bit out. "So you work for them?"
"What other choice did I have?"
"Anything… anything but this…"
"That is not a realistic analysis," Aeto finally said. "You know it. What is this place?"
"I have no idea," Loki shrugged. "I have never been here before."
"Then how could you remember it?"
"I know not." Loki snapped. He glanced about and pointed down at a group of yelling, cursing men
and barking dogs attempting to divide a large, dusty, foul-smelling, bawling herd of cattle.
"There must be a connection somewhere," Aeto insisted.

A muscular young man with long blond hair caught back in a ponytail, waving a brown, broad-
brimmed hat. Blue eyes the colour of a clear sky and hair as light and golden as the sun. Virtually
indistinguishable from the rest thanks to the odd tightly fitting blue pants and square-patterned red shirt he wore. *Thor.*

"Thor?" Aeto echoed Loki’s thoughts.

*No. There was nothing now between them. They were separated. They were – they were – there was nothing. No. No. No. No.* The world shook and tilted as though they stood upon a tray and everything began to slide and shake and peel away until there was nothing but a white world. Skies fuzzed and blurred in black and white squares and static hissed long and low, overwhelming and looming until Aeto’s form and voice disappeared, leaving only white.

A white unending world of cold and snow and a dark sky. He was there again, at the Eybjarg Rivers and the Hratah, the Place of a Thousand Falling Waters, facing the Void on the Outer Rim of the Utanheim.

Cold and slick beneath his feet, the rock chilled his bones – but nothing was as awesome as the sight before him. Inspiring, terrifying and profound. The sight of beyond a billion suns, he knew, burning through the Void. And he could hear them: voices calling to voices, spirits to spirits and before his eyes another world of colour opened as a scroll. It was the power of the Realms, the strength of the Heimsrsal chiming in unison. Birthing, growing, fading and dying in an endless cycle of magic and life. He could feel it. In his very bones, bursting outward.

He – the ulfrbarn – he – tried to keep it in, but the power of it could not help but pour out in song.

*It was Elska’s lullaby?*

*Sleep, little one,*
*Rest your eyes*  
The snow is falling,  
The wind carries a song of stars.  
Sleep, little one,  
Rest.

*No. No.* It was his own, spun with the instinct of one naturally gifted. *And so gifted, they said, and so gifted, they tie themselves ever closer to Yggdrasil’s magickal stream of Life – and thereby tap into the dangerous knowledge that may one day tear the soul apart…*

Flying now among the stars of white and blue and red and yellow and orange, dazzled by the vast array, the knowledge of all crammed into a short space of seconds, Loki understood. He understood. Whoever he was.

He was singing.

*Laugh into the blackness*  
And sing,  
For this is the day we pass onward  
And join our hands.  
Close your eyes, little one,  
And rest.  
We are always here, little one,  
Sleep.

The soothing lullaby intertwined with another, a softer voice, humming along to the steady clack-clack of a loom. Loki, peering through the soft haze of a nebulae caught a glimpse of a golden wavy
hair artistically styled and the smooth curve of a peach-tinted cheek above a high, simple collar. It was Frigga, working at her loom. Her eyes seemed faraway, as though she too had been transported to another world in a dream. Turning, she glanced back – her blue eyes met Loki’s and her mouth opened –

"Mother-

Yet, already she was becoming smaller and the outer wall of Palace blocked her from view as Asgard pulled away, shrinking in the distance – and Loki caught the barest glimpse of the Bifrost, undergoing repairs, at the end of which stood a tiny figure of grey-headed Odin and the darker, taller Heimdall.

Asgard. The land he thought home. His home. Home no more, perhaps. Lost to him…

-lines, draw us together-
-draw us together-

The patter of the lap, hide drums carrying the l'gon's gentle voice upward to the stars, drawing him away with them.

-lines draw us together-
-between past and future-
-between now and then-
-between dark and light-
-between birth and death-
-between, between, between-

"Yet, in all their glory, Innagard, Tower of the Cold Sun and Utangard, Citadel of the Pale Moon, could not compare to the intricate, yet organic beauty of Meerauk, which had been raised out of the very aura of Magick itself, by the First Sages who walked when Time was not counted."

A bird now, he soared across the open white plains of southern Jotunheim, crisscrossed with fields and roads and dotted with prosperous villages and quiet hamlets. Thicker and thicker they gathered until they met the gleaming walls of a pure white city, glowing with the light of the moon and the stars. Meerauk, the ancient city of the Kings.

Tales are many, yet truths are few – even fewer are those accurate tellings one can glean on Meerauk, the ancient city of Jotunheim. It had been a glorious place full of light and magick at a time when the worlds were young and life thrummed through the very particles of space, spawning What Is Seen from What Is Not – the very miracle of creation. Thus, the heart of Jotunheim was born, was carved within the ancient capital of gleaming black stone and ice and orbs of hanging light like Faerie globes and wide streets upon which paraded, upon which passed, Jotunn and many kinds of beasts of burden. The air, the Sages say, were filled with many winged creatures – dark-blue spirited ausa'songr fugl, darting flittermice and bumbling iss'hona'by. Above soared the rjoth'auga haukr and the broad-winged hjarr'veithr, which were fierce enough in their prime to blind a Jotunn – or so they say. Other beasts there were and upon their backs the Jotunn came to Meerauk – on the fabled snjarlang'hvartha and blar'iss hross, and there they lived on the Flat Plains with their glory and arrogance for all of Jotunheim to see.

As he circled overhead, he watched as the civilization slowly faded into the snow, receding into the mists of time until there was only a band of Lesser Kindred, raising great plinths within swirls of blue and silver magicks. Lining them with the stars and suns, they stood there, driven on by need and love and desire and praise of the earth upon which they had been born.
In reverence of the snow, they raised their voices and hands, lined palms upturned to the stars. His feet touched the ground – the calming snow rising up about his ankles. Here he stood now, within the softly glowing henge.

*He could – He could…*

"Let he who has ears, let him hear,  
Let him understand, let him know,  
Let him experience, let him live,  
Let him see –"

He could hear the youthful voice of the Heimsrsal, clear and bright and unwavering, unhindered. He could catch the syllables of magick rising from the tongues of the ancient sages. He could taste the snow and the fresh winds of the First Times. He could see the colours of magick.

Blue and white and silver swirled now within the air and red eyes wide, Loki watched as the power drew closer, knit together, bound slowly until there was nought but an unassuming, metal-detailed, intricately woven artifact of ice and magick. Immeasurable power, containing the memories of those lost to time, of their magicks, of their love and the power of the Heimsrsal herself.

The Casket of Ancient Winters.

*It is so beautiful. He was, he thought, he was crying.*

The ancient highway has, for generations, been obscured by snows and the ways are no longer made plain. Yet, the Sages, those tied more deeply to this cold Realm’s roots, speak of a broad road which curves to the southern reaches and then disappears in giant ruins and great crevices. These, are, so they tell, are ancient Meerauk. I know the words of witless Giants are rarely heeded, but the Voice of Heimsrsal is sacred and those who hear Her Voice are the Chosen and are held close to her bosom with other secrets. Let he who seeks knowledge, take heed, therefore, that he may sharpen his inner ear to the songs of the Celestial Spheres, that he may sing with the Souls of the Realms and, in so doing, bear the burden of responsibility which all true Mages will bear to the end of Time itself.

*Hluti knew, Loki thought, somehow he knew. Knew without knowing, hearing the unheard, seeing the unseen. It is the gift of any close to the heart of the Heimsrsal, those who stand on the Void and see things for what they are… Hluti knew… and so did I. And yet…*

*And yet…*

The scene faded within the moon glow and white sheets drew back and he found himself nestling back into a pile of newly laundered pillows in the small waystation upon which Mal and he had decided to stay. He looked down at the sound of a familiar voice.

"The snow that fell yesteryear has long since melted, Kol'la."

It was Mal. Lithe and lean and with far-seeing eyes belying her years. They had been discussing something more serious than usual, less suitable for the bed, Loki would have thought, yet as the days passed, Mal's frame of mind frequently became more pensive, no doubt matching his own.

"That definitely sounds Phylloxian," Loki had said, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and drawing her close, while pulling up the light sheets now bunched about them. "It reminds me of what my people would say."

"Well," Mal said softly, her fingers running down the side of his ribs absent-mindedly. "We are…"
Kol'la… perhaps, in the end, we are more connected than we thought, more supported than we hoped, less alone than we dreamed."

"I am less alone with you," Loki had agreed, accepting the kiss which had finalized her rather poetic remark. "And I must say, Mal, you have a silver-tongue of your own, I wager, however hidden it may be."

"Hush," Mal had smiled then, her soft lips meeting his. "Words waste space – and time."

He had said no more for a long time.

Night fell. Time lapsed forward and the shadows shifted upon the ceiling and the walls and moving through the window slats, drifted across the floor and crumpled sheets. He lay there in her arms and listened as he had always done – listened to the dark.

...SOON...

It was waiting. He was waiting. All this time. He had been there. He had been there. He had been there… Nonono….

...IT WILL BE MINE...

...YOU ALL SHALL BE MINE...

No.

...AND HERS...

...WE ARE WAITING...

...THE BEAUTIFUL END...

...WAITING...

No. His entire being screamed in denial, yet his words – his only weapons of power had been ripped away from him, swallowed by the darkness and the Void until there was nothing left – only who he was. Who he was.

Who was he…

A soft voice then broke the dark and a white face emerged from the shadows, dark hair one with the night as though it had been clothed in the Void itself. Black eyes as fathomless and empty as a Mithr'aGinnung. Dark lips formed words and a white hand rose. Her garments, as her hair and eyes and lips, were one with the dark, yet her pale skin was lovely beyond compare and Loki’s breath caught as a finger rose slowly.

She leaned forward and her hand found his.

"Beloved, child mine, we meet at last," Her voice seemed to vibrate with dark power, a vast emptiness which threatened to overwhelm yet seemed to remain at bay, wrapping about him as though swaddling a child. "This is not your time." Another enigmatic smile. "All of our children have their own ascension and descent, brilliant stars as they are in the tapestry we all weave. Those closest to our hearts, we shelter as we may. Come, beloved mine."

Another pale hand rose to cup his chin, drawing him away. Away from what?

"You stray too far from the Land of Dreams, beloved."
A cold kiss upon his brow.

"Wake now…"

Wake now…

This is the new world laid before you – go forth and partake of those grand adventures that await for you. Yet, at journey's end, return to me.

Return…

We are waiting…

Few return to the Realm of the Cold Suns…

Rise above the Realms
and soar,
for this is the time to stretch your wings
and seek new lands.
Return home, little one,
and rest.
We are waiting here, little one,
come.

He was Loki. He was of Asgard. He was loved.

Many fall into the shadowed land of the Sunken City but few return to the Realm of the Cold Suns.

Loki woke.

[…those who are blessed…]

[…those who are cursed…]

[…they, they…]

[…hold the Cosmos within their hearts, their minds…]

[…hold the stars within their eyes…]

"We nearly lost him," Wen said with his usual understated, dry succinctness, back to the others as he stared through the one-way glass into the empty room before him. "The Fier-Korm was a brilliant failure."

The mostly empty room. There only remained a bed with the captive strapped down onto it yet again, wearing the thin grey-white papery suit of prisoners in sickbay. Watching the prisoner, so called Kol'la, twitch and pull at his restraints as he moved restlessly in his medically induced unconscious state, Aeto felt his face smooth and tighten.

"There is nothing more that you can do," Wen continued after a short moment. His voice, gentle as a bird's rustling wing, seemed more ominously intense than usual. "The question remains as to the next step: another attempt, a different dosage, or perhaps… other risks to consider."

Aeto said nothing.
"You did your best, Aeto," Wen turned then and offered Aeto a pale smile. "His chemistry and brain patterns, as you say, are too difficult to decipher. For now."
"For now," Aeto said. "Unless he is unable to carry the strain, unless he..."
"For now," Wen repeated. "All we need is time. Time is on our side."
"Time... are you not going to board the Primera Second within a few days?" Aeto asked, his bronzed brow wrinkling.
"Yes, and you will be on the Fourth, I hear. Congratulations."

Wen turned back to the window.

"I will take him with me."

Aeto did not ask how Wen was about to do that. He knew better than to ask. Knowledge meant liability. The bronze-skinned Half-Aedian held his tongue and watched Kol'la stir restlessly. Above and around the blue-skinned alien, tubes ran down to the unknown alien's right and left arms, feeding him and cleaning the purple-black blood as best as their technology could.

Kol'la was a strange being, Aeto had learned over the month he had watched his old comrade clawed his way to health, wracked with pain and disorientation, hunger and humiliation. As he had learned on Jela, Kol'la was strong. Kol'la was smart. Kol'la was different. Remembering the fascination and faint flare of interest in Wen's eyes as the Inquisitor had reviewed the full body scans taken during Kol'la's first hospital incarceration, Aeto's gut twisted. Wen had said nothing about the implications of Kol'la's strange physiology combined with the ability to shape-shift. Inter-sexed creatures were not as rare as some would believe, Aeto knew, yet neither were they common. Wen had said nothing. That made it worse.

-Watching Kol'la, Aeto felt his face smooth and tighten.-


"I will take him with me. There is much to learn from the creature. The bonds upon his magick loosen with time and his powers grow, untrammeled."
"To break the bond would kill him."
"Yes. Which is why I wait."
"The magickal bonds are Asgardian work," Aeto noted again for the tenth time. "Perhaps the Asgardians will come looking for him."
"Hardly," sniffed Wen. "Asgardian criminals are cast off and rarely are rescued by their kind."

Silence followed for a few more minutes. Behind them, various medics pattered to and fro, adding new information as the data updated every few minutes. Without stirring, Wen spoke again.

"He hardly looks Asgardian, does he. No, I fancy this is an creature whom even the Asgardian’s hate. He will not be missed, I fancy."

Another pause. Then: "He is perfect. If our contact with the Asgardian traitor fails to go well, perhaps this one will do just as well."

Aeto caught Wen's reflection in the glass, a smile twitched at the edge of the pale Inquisitor's lips.

"He has, after all, nothing to lose. Or we could turn him."
"There is always Level Three," Aeto nodded.
"Yes," Wen smiled then. "There is always Level Three."

-0-0-0-
It was a dance.

*Almost a dance,* Loki thought, his thoughts wandering idly as the waves of calm and pleasure coursed through his body. He looked up at Wen and smiled as the Inquisitor entered the room for the sixth time—no, he corrected himself—eighth. *There were those other two times… but you were laughing too hard to make sense.*

Ruby eyes meeting pale blue, Loki allowed a flame of warmth to light his own as his ever-hated interrogator took a seat before him. The serum was coursing through his veins, loosening his tongue. *That's what they hope. That's what they always hope. Day after day. Well, if there is day. If there is day on a ship.*

He was on a ship. That was what he assumed from the gentle vibration of the deck below his feet. He could feel it. He could always feel it. The lullaby hum of the soothing machinery, softening the ever looming presence of the Void. *Not as nice as the Tro'watal. No, not so nice. But almost just as good.*

"Feeling better today, are we?" Wen allowed a smile.

Loki shrugged.

"You tell me. You are the man with all the data scans."

"Man?" Wen smiled.

"Ah, well. I assumed as much, judging by…your rather bland demeanor," Loki gestured expansively with one hand, chains clinking.

"You should never judge a datapad by its cover," Wen pointed out mildly. "Take a look at yourself."

"We were talking about you," smirked Loki.

"And now we are speaking of you," Wen continued without a beat. "Have you ever borne children, Kol'la?"

Like tattered rags in the wind, the warmth of the drug slipped through Loki's fingers and his face hardened at the question. Coldly smirking, Loki met Wen's blank expression. Red jewel stones meeting cold, grey wall.

"Look at your data."

-0-0-0-

"The last time didn't go so well now, did it?" Wen said, imperturbably sitting down.

"When does it ever?" Loki replied evenly.

-0-0-0-

"You must know that this is far from an optimal situation," Wen pointed out mildly one day, watching as the technician administered another injection of the drug.

"For me or for you?"

"Why, for me, of course," Wen replied, his eyebrows rising in amusement. "I hardly wish to wile away my time in this dingy place."

"I am pleased to have that question cleared up," Loki replied sardonically.

-0-0-0-

"Violence is never the answer, you know."

Loki did not turn to look at Wen, he just laughed. Laughed and laughed and laughed as his body
ached with the pleasure and the enforced calm of the drug. He needed more these days, he thought. He tipped his head back, eyes falling close, his swollen, bruised profile set in stark relief against the white wall.

-0-0-0-

"Last session, you said you had a home."
"I did," Loki smiled amusedly as though remembering a fond memory.
"You did say that or you did have a home?"
"I did," Loki repeated infuriatingly. Then he shrugged, "Why would it matter?"
"Where you come from matters, Kol'la. We can help you."
"You can help me," Loki echoed in a deadpan voice. "Help me do what? You and your… lackeys will hardly set me free now, will they."
"Help you change your mind."

Loki laughed then again.

"My home... my home."

There was so much on the tip of his tongue, but he could not speak of it. *Golden Asgard. So far away. So close. So far away. No.* He could not speak of it, but he could speak of another home. A forgotten one. He needed to speak of it. It tugged at his lips wishing to be spoken.

He spoke then, led by wandering thoughts, saying everything and, in the end, he hoped, nothing.

-0-0-0-

"Your home is dying – an ice world crumbling away. Is it in a neighbouring galaxy or in Asgard's Realm?"
"You have numbered all the stars in this remote part of the universe?" Loki asked.
"Many." A pause. "Most."
"Your planet is close by?" Loki watched Wen's face. "Or perhaps it is gone as well and you are but one lone survivor of a remnant... No."
"X'ollos is alive and well, I am afraid," Wen smiled then at his captive's impudence. "There are many more of us – all of us devoted this wonderful cause."
"The cause you wish me to embrace," mused Loki thoughtfully. "The cause which seems to offer me no hope..."
"A better life than the one you have now."
"I've had worse," Loki shrugged. "Nothing changes... in the end."

-0-0-0-

"So your leader is a great mage," Loki sighed, rolling his eyes. He chuckled and shook his head, fighting the overwhelming urge to just... laugh. "You do realize that the Commander Y'lrk spoke of this to me before. A great worker of magick who aims to reinvent the universe. Whatever that may entail."
"He brings favour and great hope to the Chitauri and other races of similar opinion," Wen agreed.
"Many planets subscribe to his cause."
"And Xollos, I suppose," Loki added.
"Indeed. Xollarians, after all, understand the truth of the matter – that in the end, Life is only able to find its balance in Death. There cannot be one without the other and unless we embrace Death, we cannot experience Life fully."
"This Thanos also embraces Death."
"He woos her."
"He sees Death as a woman?" Loki's dark eyebrow rose. "Interesting."
"You have heard of such beliefs before."
"Even Asgardian cast offs," Wen's lips twitched upward as the jab found its mark and Loki winced. "Even those."

"Sometimes, I can hear him in the night," Loki drawled slowly, head resting on the back of his chair, sharp cheekbone resting on his handcuffed wrist.
"Hear who?"
"Thanos," Loki said softly. "Can you hear it?" He trailed off. "The call..."
"His voice?" Wen added, regretfully. "No."
"You should be so lucky."
"Those who are gifted, hear his Voice," Wen said, his stylus tapping against his datapad's interface softly. "He is a Titan, an ancient spirit of old. You are blessed."
"Blessed," Loki's smile was wry as he pocketed away this new piece of information. "More like cursed."

"Your magickal recovery is slowing."
"You do not seem pleased," Loki noted with mild surprise.
"We had hoped you would aid us in reaching our target, our destination," Wen said with a short, put-upon sigh. "Perhaps you could have helped us retrieve the treasure we seek."
"I thought you already had a capable enough ally in Asgard."
"Asgard is never to be trusted," Wen shrugged. "And your potential, I think, is greater."
"Many thanks..." Loki replied sardonically.

A pause. Far away, someone's scream cut off and Wen looked up annoyed. A glance at his subject however showed the captive, Kof'la, to be rather unmoved, lying as he was, head and arms on the table in a rather relaxed state of mind.

"The target is Midgard," Loki finally said, red eyes lifted then catching the flash of surprise crossing Wen's face. "There is something on Midgard, you need."
"A device capable of bending space," Wen said carefully.
"You wished me to manipulate it for you?"
"Well, combined with the might of Thanos, you would harness its power and travel to the other side, activate it and allow us to travel through a rip in time to the other side."
"I see." Pause. "An Infinity Stone then. Only something of that size could achieve such a feat. The Space Stone... the Tesseract. You think it on Midgard. Hmmm... The Tesseract. Some legends speak of a vast field of energy, others claim it was housed in a white cube. Others say it was an ephemeral ball of light which disappeared at the Dawn of Time and only remains in memory of the Olden Days when the Titans warred. Including your Mad Titan."

Loki turned then and a frown marred his lined forehead.

"A thought comes to me."
"Hmmm..." Wen glanced over at Loki who sat up now in a half-slouched position, blue skin clashing with the ugly orange-brown suit given the prisoner.
"If your Thanos is so powerful," Loki wondered aloud, "why is he not harnessing the energy of the Tesseract for himself?"

Crack! The blow came out of nowhere, seemingly. Wen's open-handed palm rose and fell again,
striking the blue-skinned alien full across the face as second time. For a moment, there was nothing but heavy breathing as the captive prisoner caught his breath, hand rising shakily to brush away the tiny trickle of blood oozing from the corner of his dark lips where his teeth must have cut the inside of his mouth. Wen did not care. Wiping his hand carefully against the side of his dark Inquisitor's uniform, he sat down, a picture of calm.

"Speak nothing of what you obviously do not know, ignorant creature," Wen's voice was colder than the cutting winds of the Utanheim. "Our Lord Thanos broke the ancient bonds which had held him for so long and only through his graciousness has allowed us to partake in his great work. Be grateful, wretch."

A pause. Loki did not meet Wen's hard gaze. The chain clinked softly as he turned back slowly, allowing Wen to see the marks of his handiwork. Tattered ribbons of pleasure, ribbons of peace tugged away from his mind as the pain counteracted the drugs.

"Soon our Lord will show his power. Soon, you will see him wreck his vengeance on his ancient enemies. Soon, you will witness the true might of his power."

Wen's pale hand snaked forward, digging into Loki's long black hair, twisting sharply at the roots, digging into his scalp and forcing him to meet Wen's chill stare. Loki inhaled the pain of it, feeling the fog of well-being ebb away, allowing for him to think clearly for once in a long time. An ugly laugh spilled out of him then.

"Ahhh…" He sighed then, closing his eyes and then slowly opening them with as though filled with ecstasy. "It is soon then, is it?"

Wen's blue eyes widened. He whispered harshly.

"Fool."
"A fool, yes. A witty fool, even more so. A sly one, perhaps…” Loki grin twisted painfully like barbed wire. "Now, Inquisitor Wen, how shall we end this dance?"

-0-0-0-

It ended, as he had always guessed it would, in pain. Pain incandescent, glowing and shuddering in electric sparks. Pain exquisite, blazing and flaring in heated flames. Pain acuminous, stinging and spiking in blood-letting needles.

There was no respite, no chance for relief, no words now he could say which would alleviate his affliction. There was only silent hours spent alone, huddled in the cage-like cell, sweating from the intense heat pressing down upon his skin. His grey-white suit, now stained with sweat and blood and grime and other things, clung to him like a second skin. Somewhere, he knew dimly, remembered faintly, somewhere there was a world of comfort and there were friends waiting. He had thought, had clung to desperately.

Yet with each passing day, even the memories of dark, chill, desolate wastelands which had brought some spare comfort faded. There was only oppressive heat. There was only pain.

There was light too. Overpowering and blinding, bringing into painful clarity the dire predicament in which he now found himself and stripping away the comforting cloak of darkness. There was no sleep to be had and when he found short respite in the short turns of the clock allotted him, his dreams were filled with vague whisperings of threats and repetitious denigration stirred and brought to life from the depths of his long memory.
Vaetki. He was nothing, trapped in a fog, in a maze of light, in a blinding void – running. *Always running. Always alone.*

There was no one else, but him. And he who was nameless lived each second of agony as though each tiny increment of time were themselves a year, visited only by the occasional visitor.

There were visitors. Faceless beings – sometimes he glimpsed distorted grey-green faces with small yellow eyes, Chitauri, or a pale face, some unknown humanoid. Some unknown humanoid or the Xollarian. Inquisitor Wen. Or perhaps not. Perhaps he too had abandoned the nameless captive.

There were visitors and with them came new, renewed forms of pain or humiliation until he only hung limply from his restraints, unresisting. Battered and bruised, the captive barely responded to their blows, his skin already mottled with the patchy black bruising common to his kind. A mute picture of misery. His mind now drifted among the stars.

[…edging in…]

[…the stars whirl and time moves on…]

[…what time is there…]

There was nothing but pain. Nothing but the heat, the light, the dark, the stale air, the constant gnawing hunger and thirst.

There was, somewhere, a tinny song, crackling, stopping and starting as it creaked its way to the finish. Brassy sounds and smoky-voiced girls crooned over and over the same tired melodies, but now there was no voice, no spirit to join them.

There were only memories, the refuge from his hellish world. Memories crowding together, muddled and growing faint.

*There was… there was… there was…*

[…this is no time…]

[…there is no…]

[…time is running out…]

Then, one day that seemed as similar as the one before and promised nothing different from the one to come, there was…

There was the fresh scent of heather and scrub and clear skies and wet, autumn leaves. Then, there was a luminescent glow, a swirl of blue and silver as spirit recognized spirit. Then, there was the sound of a long drawn sigh, like the music of an arrow on a bow. Then, there was voice, soft yet strong, calling him, reminding him with aching sweetness who he was again.

"Ko'ila, love."

[…time is running out…]

[…and yet…]

[…yet…]
[...perhaps, in the end...]

[...we are more connected than we thought...]

[...more supported than we hoped...]

[...less alone than we dreamed...]

Chapter End Notes

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB! We're here! I finished the chapter I had been looking forward to. I don't like it half as much as I hoped, but I hope you like it at least half as much as I hope you like it. LOL. AND THE ENDING! I'm interested in seeing what you guys thinking about the ending of this chapter. If anyone foresaw that... if anyone is yucked by it... if anyone is sitting on the edge of their seats...

OK... (tells self to breath)

I hope that I can write the next chapter much more smoothly. It'll be a shorter one. (sorry) But it'll be good. I hope.

Let me know what you guys think. If there are any spelling errors or stuff, let me know. XD Concrit always appreciated.
-KI

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
bollen - boulders/monoliths
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
Eno'Keshi'ko – the system of Eno, a type of magical level measurements
Fen'chi Galaxy – Andromeda Galaxy
gan'ga'war – steel balls
gan'ko – ganka'jya chon, a steel beetle
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
Janah – similar to dammit
Ka'autha'ndarna - Reality
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
Kholathan – Safety Belt/Protected Zone
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
kolm (sniffer) - a kind of drug like weed
kon'bi – short for konji'bifu, space bat
lasu – space rat
l'gon – storyteller
Morning-star - a mace
myech'myena - shape-shifting
Mye'hoyo Peyt – Milky Way
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
Nord-Stjarna – north star
Nyr'Fjor - Jotunn's original name for V'slozh'noi
oma'auzha – mother-eff'er
oto'oa - big sister
pu'lotni – plutonium
pye'nee - a kind of bird
Ra'ska'yeh o Phyllo'xia – Tales of Phylloxia
roobyn – a red stone
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
Shen'grid – the Protected Zone, the zone in which habitable planets orbit around a sun
Shi'nuwu – Reality/Yggdrasil
sigan – short for yan'sigan, rock-worm
So'shah – Earth/Midgard
syem'fyerma – family/community farm
Tai'shu – The Void
tro'watal – perseverance
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
whota – wheat
SORRY FOR THE WAIT GUYS! T_T I hope this is worth the wait! [14,000 words for the chapter alone, not including my chatter and answers to questions etc!] Replies to reviewers (this time a continuing discussion about Loki's sexuality & gender) after the chapter glossary...

Guardians of the Galaxy was so awesome to watch. You know, all my life, I have loved raccoons and I never could understand why people didn't like them. I collected stuffed raccoon toys and I am a proud owner of a cute hat that looks like a raccoon's head (not made from real raccoon). So to see my favourite animal in the world shooting people with a gun... I just had paroxysms of delight. Of course I loved Ronan (and his sexy ship) and Nebula. And Groot. So, of course, there's some GOG in this chapter.

Thanks to: lemomina, nevar_walc, Nox, Kai_Maciel, MistyDawn, iBlameGlobalWarming. You guys rock my world!

I hope everyone enjoys where I went with this chapter!

OSTS for this chapter: Ergo Proxy, Assassin's Creed, Imagine Dragons, Allegri's Misrere Mei, Enigma

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lesson 75

The Dark Road: On The Edge III

[…]the dance of the worlds…]

[…]the song of the stars…]

[…]can you hear it…]

[…]the Realm of What Is in all its diversity…]

[…]as thin as onion skin upon the vast Realm of What Is Not…]

Echoes reverberate, ripple across the Void, carried upon the thin streams of starlight. Aged lights and newborn glimmers, they span distance and time, carrying with their rays songs filled with memory. Across the Realms – cold Jotunheim, golden Asgard and empty Midgard – the starlight streams along their destined paths, weaving their own tapestry as all beings do.

Though teeming masses buried within rock and under clouds of smoke may never look up, may never hear, through armies mass and generals strategize and dark lords and wizened mages scheme, though great peoples build and sages postulate, though planets grow, develop and die, the star songs continue on until there is no one to hear.

Conquerors, militants, pirates, treasure seekers, bounty hunters, merchants and cargo carriers traverse
these great spaces. Some remain on the edges and look up, others stand above and look down at the swirls of life and death and activities. Some gifted with Sight see, while others study with care the patterns – and within the recent movements of the Chitauri, within the supposed chaos, one can see it.

A Void. In the center, in the eye of the storm, a darkness overshadowing all, impenetrable, unreachable, menacing.

[…]lines connect us…

[…]unseen…

[…]bring us, hold us together…

[…]perhaps, in the end…

[…]we are more connected than we thought…

All her life, Mal had felt the tug of the stars, had known she had been born for a purpose. Now, on yet another mission for the High Council, alongside five other cargo ships, Mal was, as usually, looking at yet another life threatening mission. A mission which promised great reward if completed but also carried the risk of never seeing her loved ones again.

Faced with such a task, Mal once again found herself searching for the answer to the unasked question which she had pondered all her life. *Truly, what draws me to this life – to this risk – when I have so much to lose?* Seated in her command chair, fingers flying automatically over her datapad screen, mind far away as she yet again reviewed the codes assigned to the mission. It was all familiar: the same mission, the same parameters, the same tension and unease which accompanied each trip into the heart of the steadily amassing Chitauri army.

As her crew bustled about, double and triple checking their passes, their identification permits, the digital safeguards, the computers Interface and mainframe security, the efficiency of the Oxorbal Crystal Core and the engines.

*For getting away quickly, Mal thought grimly. Code Red, being followed. Or Code Yellow, if we need to play decoy. Hopefully nothing like that will be needed. But… just thinking about it…*

"Hey, Cap."

It was Hanni, her ever ready First Mate. Like the rest of the crew, Hanni had already shape-shifted and had emerged from her cabin, wearing tattered pants, a metal-ringed jacket and several piercings.

"Hanni – did you ask something?" Mal stuffed her datapad back into its seat pocket and turned to look her good friend and trusty shipmate over. She raised an amused eyebrow at her friend's new look. "You look appropriately fierce." A pause then: "I thought you wanted to try blue this time."

"Well, you know how it is – I get these ideas and Klick shoots them down."

"For a hacker, he does tend to play it safe," Mal smiled ruefully. "What did he think you would do – go all Nebula on us?"

"See – that's what I told him – I'm not interested in having to worry about prosthetics… just have the blue skin with a shocking head of white hair – but no." Hanni rolled her eyes. "Nothing like Nebula is allowed… 'Too strange', he said. 'It'll make us stick out like a sore thumb,' he said. Although in a swarm of stinking Chitauri, who wouldn't stick out. Worm-hearted dou'ma."

"I heard that!" Klick protested from behind his station. The usually pale-skinned, black-haired shape-shifter clad in muted browns now looked his part with a ragged, many pocketed black spacer's suit
complete with headset.
"I feel ready, at any rate," Hanni flapped a hand back at Klick insouciantly. "I don't know about you but I feel like this might be the moment."
"You said that the last fourteen times," grunted Sharx, the Tro'watal's latest pilot and co-engineer. "Every time we've gotten in, nothing's happened. Nothing's turned up."
"It's the worst invasion I've seen," Hanni had to agree. "No clear date. No clear destination. It's definitely new for the Chitauri to be so indecisive."
"Or perhaps everything is being kept incredibly secretive for some reason. Perhaps…” Mal paused to stare out her ship's viewports down at the ringed planet looming over them. "Perhaps they are waiting."
"You've got a feeling, cap?" Comm Officer and Tro'watal's physician, Tando, asked.
"A feeling…” Mal shrugged then, pushing her unease further down.

There is something…

There is something…

She could not help but remember her parents admonitions to listen. Listen, they had urged her after yet another scrape she had gotten herself into. Listen – the silences will speak to you, will warn you. Unspoken words may yet lead you to where you ought to be.

There is something…

Mal never could understand what her parents had meant. Mystical mumbo-jumbo had never been the pragmatic girl's strong suit. There was only what she knew: another mission, another reconnaissance mission, another attempt to find the time and destination of the Chitauri's attack. The shape-shifter crew was to, yet again, infiltrate the fleet, bearing much needed energy and food supplies. Deployed from a small, as yet entirely formed star system, Mal and the other captains, under the command of the High Council, risked life and freedom to ascertain the motivations and movements of the Chitauri.

Not that they are moving all that much, Mal sighed, glancing over at a secondary screen at her elbow which displayed the main positions of the Chitauri forces in the Fen'chi Galaxy three days prior. Information was crucial but difficult to ascertain as true or false, which resulted in covert missions to scope out the fleet's positioning. Hardly making any headway…Perhaps this time it would be different.

There is something… No. There is only what I know, Mal told herself. The mission, the parameters, the rational possibilities, the Codes.

"Cap – Mal?"

Hanni again, this time joined by a concerned looking CO Tando. A short, round-faced sensitive individual, Tando had been Mal's source of mainstay, particularly when crises arose.

"It's alright, Hanni, Tando," Mal sighed. "I'm just thinking…”
"Thinking is good…” Tando agreed tentatively.
"I just feel like there is something…”

There is something…
…wrong…

"Wrong," Mal murmured and then sat up, shaking her head. "Never mind me, I'm just being… Ugh, I don't know."
"What is it that pops into your mind?" Tando asked. "Breathe deeply and speak what comes to your
"You know I can't just do that -"
"Try," Tando placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Give it a try."
"It's just," Mal glared at her hands. "We must go... And yet... something bad... has happened? Will happen?"
"We know the codes, we know the drills. There's nothing for it," Tando said, with an encouraging smile. "If you feel something, it's for a reason and all we can do is be more wary than usual. Otherwise, no cause for concern, correct?"
"Yeah," Hanni agreed. "Unless we run into the Dark One ourselves, or unless the High Command of the Chitauri comes round for an inspection, or the Other has another fit of impatience or Nebula or Gamorrah show up and we get press-ganged into -"
"You aren't helping," Klick said.
"Don't do anything stupid and we'll be fine," Sharx nodded. "No blabbing, no getting lost on off-limit decks, no hacking -"
"Hacking will happen -" Klick muttered.
"No overt messy hacking will happen -"
"We hope," Klick muttered again gloomily. "The organic bionic systems would drive anyone mad -"
"No one unexpected will show up," went on Sharx. "We'll just offload. Walk about. Negotiate a return. And our pay. Listen a lot. Leave."
"The usual Code Blue," Tando nodded.
"I'm hoping for results," Hanni smiled. "We'll get good news -"
"Good news?" Klick asked, eyebrows rising.
"Bad news?" Hanni corrected herself.
"Well... not so much bad news for us. We can return home," Sharx pointed out.
"News," Hanni rolled her eyes at her nit-picky crewmates. "We'll have news and we'll get out and we'll be the team to achieve Code White."
"Speculation," Mal absently reminded them, then forced herself to focus on the group before her.
"Well, Tando is right. There is no way but forward. Let's do it then – what will be, will be."

[...we are more connected than we thought...]
[...more supported than we hoped...]
[...less alone than we dreamed...]
[...bound together...]

*We were all born for a reason*, that was what her mother had told her time and time again. *We were all given our parts to play, our threads to weave in the tapestry that is Life. So you must be still, Mal, be still and listen when you lose your way, so that the silence, the starlight may lead you to where you ought to be.*

[...less alone than we dreamed...]
[...bound together...]

"All hands on deck," Mal pulled the comm link down in front of her mouth, headset now firmly in place. Adjusting her battered jacket lapels, double-checking her look in the telecomm screen, Mal's red eyes wandered over her outfit. Her long hair was now pulled back, severely braided and her face, stark and strong and accented harshly by neat facial tattoo she had applied carefully the day before, looked cool and confident, speaking of long experience in the Captain's chair.

"All hands on deck," she repeated. "Tando on Radar, Sharx at the Wheel, Vyrn'or in Engineering."
Smyu and Lonil will stand by with Vyn’or. Klick on the Interface. Klick, keep a signal ready for the Sarcofagi just in case. Have your insertion programs running the moment we arrive. Keep me updated. Hanni, on Tactical Offense-Defense. Tora, stand by in the cargo bay – by the Shields Console to back up Hanni if need be."

A pause. The rest were taking their seats, faces solemn – a shared familiar light of determination in unfamiliar features.

"We all know the drill. Let's run to success, let's follow the path, let's play our part, let's return home."

With a grave nod, Mal sat back.

"Full speed ahead, Sharx."

-Sanctuary. That was the official name for the dying planet upon which the Mad Titan, Thanos, had seemingly first appeared. From whence he came, none knew for certain, yet tales spawned, as they must in the wake of a great coming. The Titan had reformed himself with the power of a dying star, some had said, and in doing so had destroyed an entire star system. Others surmised Thanos had ripped his way through the barriers of time and space and reality itself with his power and had forced his way out of the prison in which he had been incarcerated (intended to last until the end of time), the black hole itself. Or perhaps it was nothing so spectacular and, after having hid for time immemorial, Thanos had been licking his wounds until such an opportunity as the Chitauri's madness arrived. Whatever the case, the dark Lord who courted death now took up a position of power on the dying planet, surrounded by broken asteroids and drifting pieces of planets and the battered metal remnants of any Skrull, Xandarian or Noradian resistance, testaments to his adoration of the end of all things, of his Lady Death.

And over all, spread the gaping maw of the black hole. The same black hole, perhaps, as the one in which he had been imprisoned for so long. Or perhaps not, Mal mused. Or perhaps so. One never knows – and you don't ask either.

Mal had never landed on the dark surface of the planet upon which Thanos now resided – nor did the young Captain ever wish to. Even this close, this far away, she could feel his presence soak the air with the lust for blood, for vengeance – the deep desire to suck life from the very air itself. She shuddered.

Thankfully, we are nowhere near close to the planet today, Mal comforted herself bleakly. Tando was speaking rapidly in Chitauri with someone over the comm channel as Sharx brought the Tro’watal in a slow drifting arc down, under and around three more of the larger ships in the fleet. Ships is... one word to use for them, Mal mused as she leaned forward to look closer at the underbelly of the large biomechanical creatures which the Chitauri used for war. Other standard ships also hovered in between, large ungainly shepherds in the midst of equally large sheep. Two space stations also turned slowly in their places, no doubt housing even more of the army. Mal shivered as they passed by. So many. So, so many. And yet...

Mal frowned.

There is... something...

There is something wrong. No, not wrong, off – strange – unusual.
"Captain," Tando's voice broke into her musings. "The Kirrik is not here – we are to rendezvous at the coordinates up on the screen."
"Ku'sha!" Sharx glared up at the new headings. "That's a good jump from here!"
"Not that far," Hanni shook her head. "Only the Quor quadrant. Look, it's by the Sabraz system. Poor bastards."
"Sabraz System. Not where we expected, for certain," Mal frowned. "Any reason given, Tando?"
"Apparently a half of the fleet is going ahead to their destination," Tando shrugged. "That was all they said."
"No word on the destination, hm."
"No, but… we were right – the main portion of the fleet is waiting for something. Wherever they are going, I think they mean to hop it all in one."
"There's no way you gonna hop across the galaxy just like that," Klick snorted. "No amount of power can carry that. Not with a fleet their size."
"Especially not if they are aiming for another galaxy," Hanna added thoughtfully. "Unless…"
"Unless they have something with infinite power," Mal said grimly. "Unless they intend to use an artifact of infinite power."
"An infinity stone?" Klick scoffed. "Please, there's no way they found one – else we'd all be dead now."
"Not if it's the space stone. Not if they don't exactly have it…" Mal paused and shook her head. "It sounds crazy – but there's no hope for it. We have to get to the Kirrik and see what we can find there. Maybe answers can be had on the Kirrik."
"They haven't gotten too far," Hanni said.
"Of course, it'll all be a waste if they hop it when we're gone, chasing the Kirrik," Klick pointed out.
"We have no idea what their timeline or schedule is and all they need-"
"Shut up, Klick!"

The Kirrik and the rest of the fleet was indeed hovering in wait by the Sabraz system. Distress calls echoed through the comm and Tando quickly tuned his equipment to the Chitauri's signals, face shadowed with sadness as local news updates scrolled past his monitor. The primera planet was in the midst of fending off a Chitauri foraging attack and large parts of the capital city was now in flames. Every hostelry and scientific stations orbiting the planet now blazed their way through the atmosphere, some of them hitting the oceans, others decimating the landscapes they had the misfortune to crash onto.

Mal, glancing at her crew's solemn faces, sighed.

"Are there any of our people in the Sabrax system?" she asked softly.
"Well, if there were – they are probably dead now," Sharx grunted. "The oma'auszha's destroy everything."
"Or they would escape. No one is idiotic enough to set down somewhere they aren't able to get off easily," Vyrn'or's voice sounded tinny over the ship's comm, no doubt listening in at his engineering station.
"Well, I'd like to believe that – but I heard there's a whole group stuck on Midgard-" Sharx pointed out.
"Terra," corrected Hanni. "That's how they say it these days."
"Same difference," Sharx shrugged. "My point still stands."
"Only idiots mess around on Midgard," Mal shrugged. "I've heard that some folk, pirates and other desperate folk, land there – but the Skrull stay away and anyone with a healthy fear of Asgard stay away. Away and off."
"Well, the High Council won't be pleased about Sabrax, at all," Hanni pointed at another reading. "Even if none of our people are on the planet, the Sabrax System is a non-hostile environment for
potential settling-"
"Not anymore."
"Shut up, Klick."

Carefully, the Tro'watal approached the fleet, offering the usual greeting and pass codes along with their identifications and ship manifests. Singling out the Kirrik, a sturdy, unprepossessing war cruiser, Sharx drew closer, following the familiar instructions of the flight dispatcher. Finding the appropriate docking stations, the Tro'watal latched on and, a few minutes later, Tora'a verified the seal lock and by the time both ships' hatch doors rose, Mal had made her way back to the cargo bay as well to oversee the transaction.

What followed was the usual chatter, the usual bargaining, the usual demand to triple-check the cargo, the usual attempt at renegotiations – all of which Hanni and Tora'a took in stride, thanks to their experience. Mal, watching the others bustle about, felt relieved that her almost new crew had already formed a great working relationship and seamless teamwork. Following the Chitauri Commander onto the Kirrik, Mal completed her official duties – compliments, careful questions, the usual bribery and discussion about the possibility of further deliveries.

As she sat down to review the ship's manifest with the Commander and then sign it, Mal paused, her stylus hovering over the glowing white screen of the wide datapad offered her.

There is…
…something…
…something…

A whisper. A distant call. As a child, she had sometimes heard her name called, but when she rose and sought out her mother blending fruit or writing up lists or her father reading through his usual scientific publications, Mal found that neither had yelled for her. A phantom call, she had named them.

Whispers of the silence, her mother had told her. You should listen. Many things call out – many things speak. Listen.

Now, she could hear it – faint and pale and weak.

-Mal-

Her name.

Mal.

Glancing through the list and double-checking the price and the payment, Mal quickly signed her name. Rising from her seat, Mal nodded with the slightest of bows and exited quickly.

For the next hour, she knew that she could roam, mostly unhindered down the halls. The Chitauri were used to the odd pirate or mercenary striding down their passages. Many traders, cargo haulers and mercenaries met in the canteens for quick exchange of news and gossip as well as taking advantage of the chance to broker a trade or exchange of goods or information. Wandering up and down, ascending and descending various grilled stairways and metal ladders, Mal watched as masses of Chitauri soldiers passed by chattering in their native tongue. There were others besides the guards and the soldiers and the mercenaries and the traders. There were the ship's High Command, stalking about looking officious, various staff, running about looking harried and busy, and officials and Inquisitors mumbling and muttering over information (which they ceased speaking of at the sight of the female Skrullian pirate captain).
Aside from the fleet's movement toward the edge of the Fen'chi Galaxy, it seemed as yet another uneventful day upon the warship and nothing appeared suspicious or odd to Mal's experienced eyes. None of the traders or mercs she stopped to speak with knew anything other than the fact that they were heading to an unknown destination where, they were promised, an abundance of wealth and rare loot. Nothing pointed toward Mal's suspicions about Midgard and no one spoke of Infinity Stones.

And yet…
And yet…
There is something…

The whispers grew louder, grew faint. A distant clear call as faint as a far flung star. Or a dying one, Mal thought. She frowned at the thought. There was something unusually dramatic about it. This is not like me, the young woman scowled at her faint reflection in smudgy glass as she passed yet another monitor screen. Reaching up to her ear, Mal tapped her comm.

"Klick."
"Yeah."
"How's it going?"
"As normal. Everything going smoothly."

Smoothly. The code word for 'nothing out of the ordinary'.

"I'm thinking things need to be double-checked," Mal replied carefully.
"Making avalanches out of snow slides?" asked Klick with mock cheer. "Well, everything seems set. There're just a few items left and then we're done."
"No hitches?"
"Well, your usual… arguments."

Arguments. Probably a brawl in the canteen between mercs.

"And there're are some new visitors who apparently are causing trouble… could head your way, so keep an eye out for that."
"I'm just feeling… something isn't right." Mal finally admitted, hoping that the Chitauri wouldn't find anything suspicious about what she had just said.

If they are listening. With the fleet underway, there's a chance that in the shuffle, comm lines won't be as frequently 'supervised'.

"It's… there's a whisper… What does the Eno-graph say?"
"Let me see…" She could hear Klick tap a few keys. "We don't use these old mechs as much as we used to, but you never know, I guess. Got them all up and running. Let's see what's up…” Some shuffling. "Well-" Klick paused suddenly, his voice cutting off.
"Well what?" Mal asked, coming to a halt in a handy nook by another metal stairwell. "Klick?"
"Something's… sparking below."

Below… below… Mal nodded as she caught Klick's reference. 'Below' – the detention quarters.

"Sparking?"
"It's… I can't…" Klick sounded stunned, surprised, perplexed, frustrated. "It is the whitest-blue I have ever seen–"
"Whitest-blue?"
"A glow."
"A glow," Mal repeated, wracking her memory as she tried to read Klick's subtext
"Yes, it's flares and then fades... flares and then fades..."
"On the cams?" she asked. "Where is it? Can you pinpoint it?"

There was a short pause and then Klick's voice returned, sounding a little more confident.

"Encrypted line now set up. It's on the Eno-spectrograph," Klick's voice lowered to an awed whisper. "And it's... seismic."

Mal froze as what Klick was saying suddenly became clear. The Eno-spectrograph measured the presence of magick and projected it onto a moving graph defined by colours. Utilized by many species (particularly slavers) for data gathering, the Eno-spectrograph displayed a variety of colours and intensity of colours to define a being's magickal signature. Seismic meant there was a steady, high range of magickal interference.

"That explains everything," Mal breathed. "I thought I was going crazy."
"So was I..."
"White-blue? You are certain?"
"Yes... on the flare, it's standing at Ko, on the fade, Lei. Mal..." Klick stopped. "I just turned on the Stjam's'gram. The sensors are going... I've never seen anything like it before."

The Stjamrodagram, a small, unassuming, grey-black machine, was another sensor which measured a very particular set of energies. Certain crystals, of course, which emitted the rare radiation, could set it off – as well as living stars, gifted with Voice. The stories called such phenomena many names, Star's Light, the Unseen Voices, the Shin'Yin, Lor'ateel... the Heimsrsal. Those stories had long been forgotten, only remembered by the wise and those who carried the memory of their ancients close to heart – and there were other stories. Bed-time stories of Ancients, of specially gifted ones who could create the kind of magickal output that could be sensed by the Stjam's'gram: Half-Souls and powerful peoples of Phyloxia.

"It's a Voice," Mal said, finding it difficult to keep her voice steady.
"Ye-yes... but... but-but how – how could they have captured a... The Kirrik runs on the usual Binary Nucleic-Energy Field. You don't think they are trying to meld a Oxorbal Generator Crystal with their engines? Would that create the kind of readings we're getting?"
"An energy factory in a detention center?" Mal hissed back, descending the stairs to the detention block below, trying to keep her shoulders, neck and facial muscles relaxed as the ramification of their finding began to flood in. "That's ridic, Klick. Look - Can you pinpoint it?"
"You want to-"
"If it is one of ours, we are duty bound... Goodness knows what they would do if they got their hands on a powerful enough mage." Mal trailed off meaningfully.
"They don't have a Sarcofagi."
"That we know of," Mal said quietly. "If it's a lifljos, we have no choice, Klick. I'll go in quiet. Code Orange."

DISTRACTION. I'll need one if I'm to casually break into the detention block, Mal sighed as she quickly wedged herself into a dark corner of the ship and watched a squadron of guards and two Inquisitors pass by. Klick will have the security aspect dealt with... but I can't find a billion and one Chitauri all by myself. I'm good... She straightened carefully, sitting back on her heels as she waited for Klick's response. I'm good – but not that good.

"I sent the mark to your 'pad. You'll also find a quick passage to a service hatch. Eject – and Tro'watal will be there to pick you up."
"Everyone is ready?"
We can get to your side of the ship... and pick you up there. For better or worse, if it's a Voice, we can't leave without double-checking."
"That sounds like Tando."
"He has a ton of things to say about it... but we have no time for words now."
"Agreed," Mal nodded, quickly glancing down at her micro-datapad strapped to her wrist. The small holo enlarged, showing a detailed section of the detention block. "We might need to prepare for a Code Red as well."
"All ready. We are ejecting in five."
"May the stars guide you," Klick double-tapped the comm, signing off.
"And you," Mal whispered. Quickly reviewing the information Klick sent her, noting the cell and the short distance away to the service hatch. Good man, she nodded. Now I have to do my part...

[...such is Fate...]

[...such is the ever shifting tapestry...]

[...the dance...]

[...of Life and Death...]

Detention Block Tahl was far from what Mal had expected. She had seen vids of Xandarian prisons – floating jails, basically metal boxes with recycled air and water. She had seen firsthand the underground crypts of the Skrull and the Kree – high-security facilities from which none could escape – and once or twice, Mal had left supplies at the prison planets run by the Judges. Each one held its particular stink of blood and guts and despair, oppressive air filled with fear and hate.

Depressing, she thought, as she quickly made her way down one passage and then right down another. Her boots, despite her quiet tread, seemed loud in her ears as she passed one cell after another, following the signal Klick had sent her. Yet, here... Mal frowned, once again looking about before continuing onward. The guards seem to be absent. Odd. She flicked on her holoscreen and quickly perused the sector's name. Long-term Facility. Ah. These were the ones left to rot, I suppose. Minimal attention needed... lower security, yes, but no security?

Klick's distraction must have been good, the green-skinned woman thought as she turned another corner, oriented herself and nodded as she realized that she was nearer to her goal than she had feared. I wonder what he cooked up...

When she arrived at the dull, green and black specked door of the cell, there was no name anywhere, nor any sign of cords or power cables which would signify a power generator of some kind. It was as she had guessed – a prisoner. Her hand rose involuntarily to the door, resting on the cool metal for a few seconds. A being, she thought, with a Voice.

She could hear her mother's voice once again, soft and low. We were all born for a reason. We all have our part, our thread to weave in the tapestry that is Life... Thinking back to those days when she had squirmed in her seat in their village's school, as she stared out of her classroom's windows, bored, Mal would never have guessed that her life would culminate in this moment.

All of my life, I had heard such stories of greatness – of ancients raising cities in stones, of warrior-mages doing battle wreathed in magick, of the Voices of the Stars... of Half-Souls... And here I am, on the cusp...

"This better be open, Klick," Mal murmured to herself, hand lowering to steel bar on the left side of the door. Cranking it upward, the door's hatch opened smoothly with the gentlest of hisses. No alarm sounded. Far away, she could hear the pounding of boots rushing off in another direction, closer, she
could hear the clanging and hisses of steam and other machinery. One of the prisoners' faint yelling could be heard further down the hall, but around her, there was nothing but quiet.

Stepping in, Mal peered into the gloomy, dimly lit cell, glimpsed the pale-blue skin of the unresponsive captive who sagged on his knees, hands abound above his head in blinking shackles. Swiftly making her way over to the captive's side, Mal leaned forward, hand immediately running along the thin, corded neck of the emaciated prisoner, pushing back his – her? – long stringy black hair, revealing a grimy, yet strong-looking jaw. His skin, an unhealthy pale blue, was smooth, but the lines, circling and running in intricate patterns along his cheekbones and chin, were not. It was as she had hoped and feared – and they were something more. Mal paused, frowning and then leaned forward, trying to peer closer in the dim light.

_They look…_ Mal paused and horror rose within her, coiling up and around as though a giant serpent within her stirred.

_There is…_ 
There is something… wrong…
…_familiar…_

_No. No._

Memories flooded in. Memories of a light husky voice, gentle, long sensitive fingers and bright, ruby-red eyes.

-_you cannot turn your back, you must not turn your back on it. It is there, always has been, perhaps, waiting to swallow us whole-
-_some, some may stand on the edge, and facing forward, warn those who do not heed the call of the Fates-
-_a strong name, Mal'myrn, yet beautiful… like its owner-

_No. No. No._ Frantically, feverishly, Mal fell to her knees, fingers fumbling as she swept back the unruly curling to reveal the face of one she least expected to see.

-_you have no idea what you did to my heart-
-_can only hope to satisfy-

_And yet…_ 
_And yet…_ She thought. _It makes so much sense. It feels so right…_

-_I must go-

She found her voice.

"_Koll'a, love._"

-0-0-0-

Klick, typing furiously on his monitor, looked up and across toward Hanni, now seated in the Captain's seat and Tando standing at his station to her left.

"What's taking her so long?"
"Is the brawl dissipating?" Tando asked, a frown marring his usually serene face.
"The bounty hunters are on the run," Klick sighed, double-checking his loop of the security cameras. A short, legged alien creature and a giant tree.
Really, the hacker shook his head, watching as the shorter creature proceeded to very ably hack yet another door with a small console. Just when you think you saw everything in the galaxy…

"They'll probably escape – and with their booty. Maybe."
"Maybe," Hanni bit her thumb, glancing over her datapad. "She's in the cell… Have you hacked the restraints, Klick?"
"Ages ago," grumped the hacker, glaring at the back of the green-skinned alien. "Seriously… what's she doing in there – holding a ceremony?"
"If it's a mage, the captive could be stark raving mad… folk go mad listening the stars, my mam told me," Sharx spoke up from his seat behind the wheel, carefully bringing the Tro'watal up alongside the larger warship, positioning it at cruising speed by the hatchway.
"Folk tales," snorted Klick, but he added nothing further and returned to watching the rapidly blinking Eno-graph and the now muted Stjarn's'gram with mounting unease. "Mal," he muttered to himself. "Get the Hel out of there…"

-0-0-0-

It was Kol'la, but it was hardly the same Kol'la she had left on V'loszh'noi. This Kol'la barely responded to her touch – a slight fluttering of his eyelids gave a clue to some sort of rising consciousness and a small flinch as her fingers ran across his bruised, cut cheekbones to tuck a long lock of his black mane back behind his ears.

Kol'la had always been fastidious. This Kol'la, skin dark and grimy, stained with sweat and blood and dirt and refuse, was a dejected picture of neglect. Like the cell around him, he looked battered and misused and aged.

Kol'la had been strong. Although the aloof alien had been more apt to use his cutting voice and skilled words than his fists, Kol'la had taken care to demonstrate that he was more than able to stand his ground in a fight. The skeletal frame of skin and bones before her barely resembled the strong, lithe warrior she had picked up in the asteroid belt. As she pried open his restraints, Kol'la barely responded, collapsing in a heap on the floor, his long limbs curling in a little. His bared feet, arms and face were scattered with bruises and cuts – some older, some newer. A testimony to a long history of abuse.

Kol'la had been independent. As she leaned forward, hauling him up a little with her arms wrapping around his thin chest, he turned to her instinctively. Long, bony fingers dug into the back of her suit as she slowly pulled him to his feet, only to discover that once they were both standing, Kol'la seemed more than happy to cling to her.

Turning her head slightly, she caught a flash of red as his lids opened a crack. Kol'la grimaced and for a moment, his lips moved but no words emerged. Then, voice grating and rough, he managed a short disbelieving question.

"Ma-al?"
"Hush, love, it's me. Don't worry," she found herself suddenly babbling in a whisper. "We'll be out of here in a minute or two. We just need to – we just need to – Kol'la-"

Kol'la blinked confused and his fingers dug sharply into her shoulder as he swayed in her tight grip.

"You-" He stopped and then managed to add in a visibly painful whisper: "It – it's not your turn to visit."
"I'm not visiting," Mal said softly, biting her lip and trying another step toward the door. "I am here, love. Here to rescue you."
Kol'la seemed unable to move and Mal cursed softly under her breath as she considered her options.

"Re-rescue…" Kol'la trailed off and lifting his head off her shoulder for a few seconds before slumping back, exhausted. "You – you don’t – you leave…"

"Not this time, I'm not," Mal said grimly, forcing down a rising wave of rage and hatred and a great desire to find whoever was responsible for this and make them pay.

Pay, the wilderness within her howled. Make them pay for eternity.

"This time, I'm leaving with you," Mal awkwardly turned the pair of them toward the door. "We're leaving together."

Kol'la did not respond, seemingly content to let her do as she pleased.

This was not the Kol'la she knew. Mal felt sick.

Focus, she berated herself, focus, idiot woman. You need to get to the hatch. Eject. The Tro'watal is waiting. We'll be out in a few minutes. You need to get going.

Remembering Klick's diagram, Mal sent a silent prayer of thanks to the Fates for the short walk she needed to achieve. It was clear that Kol'la was in no state to walk, much less run to the hatchway. For a moment, she considered dragging him down the passageway, but then, with a sigh, the green Skrull allowed herself to shift a little, increasing her height. Now closer to her natural body shape, Mal felt more able to (more or less) carry the weakened prisoner down the hall to the hatch.

Carefully steering Kol'la along, Mal pulled him out of the cell, shut the door behind her soundlessly and then continued the short journey to the service hatch at the end of the hall to her right. Only four cells away, Mal, she told herself. You can do this.

It felt like forever, but eventually the young Skrull Captain reached the hatch, found that, no doubt thanks to Klick, it opened with minimal resistance. Propping Kol'la up between herself and the wall, she rotated the short wheel, opened the service door and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the familiar dark hull of the Tro'watal. Instantly, a red-blue beam shot out and, pulling Kol'la out with her, Mal jumped forward, allowing herself and her prize to fly forward in the grav beam toward the side cargo bay of the Tro'watal. Behind her, the hatch closed automatically with a short hiss. In front of her, the Tro'watal's hatch rolled open, allowing for her and Kol'la to fall together in a heap on the floor of cargo bay.

For a moment, Mal found herself unable to do anything but allow her heart to pound and her tension to ease out of her limbs. Light and sound and warmth and oxygen returned in an overwhelming rush as she lay gasping on the floor. Rolling to her side, Mal looked down at the man she had rescued. It is so hard to accept… This is Kol'la. The one who stole my heart. The one who has sealed my Fate… She remembered Klick's words. The one who spoke with the Voice of a star.

Overhead, alarms rang out and somewhere a light whirled red and orange but Mal could only see the unresponsive face of her lover, the barely perceptible rise and fall of his chest.

He is safe. He is alive. He is safe.

Closing her eyes, breathing in deeply and forcing her breath to steady, counting to five and slowly regulating her rapidly beating heart, Mal focused on the moment.

Kol'la's hand in hers.
He is safe. He is alive. He is safe.

The jerk of the Tro'watal brought her to the present sharply. Tando was at her side, asking questions as was Tora and Hanni. Words spilled out of her then – words she hoped answered the queries she could barely register.

"He's – he's alive – just – it was taxing for him… I – I think he'll be alright. Tando. He'll be alright, right?"
"Yes, yes," Tando was already administering oxygen through a small mask now strapped to Kol'la's face. "I'll need to get some sustenance immediately.-"
"He's gonna need rest, lots of rest," Hanni said. "Here, let's shift him to the stretcher and get him to the infirmary."

Mal looked down at Kol'la's hand and nodded. Then, suddenly, the slender blue hand in her green one, clenched tightly. Looking up, Mal met red eyes. Half-lidded red eyes, rimmed with black and blue – bruises and fatigue – but somewhere deep, a fire flickered. Beneath the plastic oxy-mask, his dark lips moved.

"He's trying to say something!" Tando was leaning forward now. "Can you – can you-" "He needs water," Hanni said.
"He won't be able to take it," Tando shook his head in sharp disagreement. "Trust me, he'd spew it up and black out – he's practically concave-"
"His name is Kol'la," Mal said, "and let him talk – Kol'la! It's Mal. You remember, Mal-" "You met him-"
"Mal – you knew him?"
"Where did you-
"Kol'la," Mal shut out her crewmates' questions as she gently pushed Tora aside to lift him up gently into her arms. "Kol'la. It'll be alright. Things will get better."

He closed his eyes then and jerked his head in disagreement.

"M-
"He's trying to say something-"
"Shut up, Hanni-" Tando hissed at the First Mate.
"You shut it!"
"Shhhhhhhhh!" Mal glared everyone into silence.
"Ma-Mal."

Kol'la eyes flickered open again and for a moment his shoulder twitched and then with a grunt, Kol'la's hand rose, shaking, to Mal's cheek. His gritty palm caressed her cheek, thumb brushing against her ear. A slight tug – and Mal allowed herself to lean down until her forehead touched his, their lips nearly meeting.

"Ru-run… " He managed to scrape out another word. "Sss-ssooo-soon."
"Soon." Mal repeated softly. "Soon what?"
"The w-"

His fingers dug into her skin and she could feel it in the coiled tension running through his body. Even now, damaged as he was, Kol'la's will ran strong and deep. His will – and his emotions. Tension. Urgency. Despair. Frustration.

"So-sorry," Kol'la croaked.

Dry cracked lips pressed against hers and suddenly, she was there with him, entwined together with
him in a new way altogether. He was there in her mind's eyes standing as he had always been – but he was her and she was him and she was soaring high above the universe, watching as a great shadow spread through the Fen-chi Galaxy, spread through the various quadrants as a giant wave would spread through the ocean. Eating up the stars as though a hungry black hole, the shadow reached the edges of the galaxy and then with barely a pause, flew through the Void to other worlds nearby.

_The worlds will end. They will be as though they had never been. With the power of the Tesseract, Thanos will bend space to his will and sacrifice all living things upon the altar of Death._

*When?* She asked.

_Soon,_ Kol'la's voice reverberated around her head, echoing, rising and falling, faint and overlapping. A muddle of thoughts. She was connected with the fevered mind of one who had fallen into the world of the Void and the stars and now, lost, wandered the Spaces of That Which Is Unseen, That Which Is Not. Mal, remembering the patter of the l'gon, shuddered, feeling sick. *Kol'la had had great abilities, but those with abilities were most susceptible, were more easily lost. Without a guide, Mal fought to keep her nausea down. What has he seen – where has he gone – what took him to such a place?*

_Soon,_ Kol'la continued. _Soon they will attack._

*Where?*

Midgard, first. Then – Asgard and all other Realms who would protect the weak. He must be stopped. They must be stopped.

Midgard must be warned, she turned to him. *We can send one there with a message.*

Midgard is in no position to protect itself. The humans are weak, their technology are limited.

The humans, yes, Mal nodded. *Yet, humans do not occupy that planet only._ She hesitated before adding, there are others.

Kol'la said nothing for a moment and then he said:

_Thor._

*Thor? She asked. The Warrior of Lightning from Asgard?*_

Thor, Crown Prince of Asgard, Kol'la corrected her softly and then added ruefully, *and yes, he does get called the God of Lightning every now and then._

He is on Midgard? Then Asgard will come to Midgard's aid. Mal sighed with relief. *That would be well for Midgard._

_The bridge is broken._

*How-*_

Before Mal could ask Kol'la how he could possibly know such things – *had he seen it in a vision?*_ – Kol'la continued onward.

_There is a traitor in Asgard. A traitor who will awaken the Tesseract on Midgard and bring the Chitauri to the protected planet._

I thought you said the bridge is broken.

There are… Kol'la paused and then said in a darker tone. *There are other ways._

Then we must warn them. We have a way to send one to Midgard.

It will have to be done quickly, Kol'la's voice seemed to be fading fast now. *A pause. They are coming._

For a moment everything went dark and then, faraway, Mal could hear her name called and there was a red-orange light flaring and fading in the distance. Clawing her way to it, she jerked upright – finding herself face to face with a worried-looking Tando, who was apparently shaking her.
"Mal – you – what happened?"
"We talked."
"Talked?" Tando's voice rose several tones. "Talked?"
"I – he – he said... they are coming. They are headed for Midgard and plan to use the Tesseract to open a portal for the rest of the army. There is a traitor in Asgard and Midgard must be warned," Mal's words couldn't seem to stop. "There is no time – they are coming – I think he can feel them – he's been, I don't know--"
"Signs of heavy infusions of various serums," Tando said grimly.

Hanni nodded, holding up the scanner Tando must have given her, looking more than little worried.

"He's going through various stages of withdrawal," she whispered, red-eyes wide, her green skin looking a little paler than usual. "Drugs for interrogation."
"The usual thing, I'm afraid – but if he's..." Tando trailed off. "Well, the Chitauri are fond of using T'chata'ko and Fier-Korm, among other things, for their interrogations – neither of them good for..."
Another meaningful pause.

Mal understood Tando's unease. None of us talk about the Truth, she mused. None of us can be who we were truly meant to be. All of our lives, we have lived in the shadows. All of our lives, we have lived in fear of the Shadow. All of our lives, we have feared our Fates, and here we are – faced with the reality of it all. A Voice, a true mage, a being of great power...

"Code Red now in effect, I repeat, Code Red."
Klick's voice.

"We're being followed," Mal looked down at the now seemingly unconscious man lying between them. "Just as he said. Light speed will only protect us for so long. We need to get back to Base – and the Sarcofagi. We're going to do it."
"And we have just the person to achieve it," whispered Tando, eyes wide. "He could max out the engines and arrive there within seconds!"
"If it doesn't blow up first," Tora interjected, clearly uncertain about the success rate of the mission. "No one has successfully manned a Sarcofagi whatever the High Council says."
"We have no choice," Mal said.
"Just because you were ready to use a Sarcofagi doesn't mean that he can," Tora bit out. "Look at him – he's a wreck!"
"The Sarcofagi could channel his energies – it would, to some extent, heal him," Hanni shook her head. "Trust me, Tora. Mal is right. This could work. Unbelievable. If it had been the original plan, one of us would be manning the ship and we wouldn't be a hundred percent sure of our accuracy or abilities – but he..."
"Code Red, folks," Klick's voice echoed over the comm. "Can anyone let us know what's going on down there?"

Mal rose to her feet, took a deep breath, ordered her thoughts, ran through the codes one more time and then spoke.

"Ship's Interface, open the ship's intercom." A pause. "This is a message from Captain Mal'myrn to the crew. I am proud to say that on this day, we have finally achieved successful completion of the mission given to the entire taskforce of Quadrant 76-Chi. With the information I have been told, I can safely say that never before has it been so urgent that we warn the innocents who are the target of the one we call Thanos. The man we rescued today – the one I know as Kol'la – he is one who has touched the stars and it is our duty to ensure that he arrives safely to warn Terra – to warn Midgard of their impending doom. With this in mind, we will now terminate Code Orange. We are currently
in Code Red. Klick, who is following?"
"Ah, well, that would be the *Kirrik*, Captain."
"Ku'sha," Mal swore briefly. "They probably have no idea as to the true significance of the captive they have just lost, but it is important that not only we warn Midgard but that we save Ko'l'a as well." She paused. "We will commence Code White and hopefully we can shake the *Kirrik* off our tail and return home in safety. If not…" Mal said nothing for a moment but then, finding her voice again, she ended, "if not, then we will at least know that we achieved greatness and our stories will be carried forward in the songs of our people and in the memories of those to come. With our ancestors, with the stars, we will rest."

Mal looked down at the still face of the one she called Ko'l'a, the one she barely knew and yet, somehow, loved with all her being even until death.

"Let's go, folks. Tando, you'll stay with Ko'l'a and stabilize him as much as you can by this hatch. Klick, commence Code White. Start up the *Sarcofagi*, so that it will be ready to latch on right upon our arrival. Vyr'or, you and Lonill will continue to look to the engines. We need all of our power reserves at the ready for when we provide bait. Code Yellow, that is. Smyu, continue on comm station. Sharx will be at the wheel. Hanni will take the chair when the *Sarcofagi* docks. Tora will be at the Tactical Offense-Defense station. I'll install Ko'l'a personally with Tendo's help, we'll set the autopilot, just in case, and then we'll jump the *Tro'watal* onward and hopefully the *Kirrik* won't stay around long enough to find the *Sarcofagi*."
"We could hide it back in the rings," Klick added. "It's small enough to pass notice."
"Right. Any questions? None?" Mal nodded. "Let's do it."

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Far across the Voids, beyond the gaps between Reality and within the fair Realm of Asgard, the construction on the Bridge had ended for the night, allowing Heimdall to have a few hours of peace. Sword at the ready, the dark-skinned Gatekeeper's golden eyes searched the galaxy, watching the various activities of those Odin had charged him upon which to keep an eye.

Svartalfheim lay in dim quiet. It's ancient battlefields empty and solemn – gloomy graveyards devoid of life. Muspelheim as well seemed to be at peace with only the occasional fire duel between the fierce giants who made their home in the inhospitable Realm. Thor, on Midgard, was returning from a long day's work alongside the Midgardians known as SHIELD. He looked, Heimdall thought, rather content and happy for a princeling stripped of his powers.

Shifting his gaze past Midgard, Heimdall sought out the ever tempestuous galaxy beyond. A dark shadow, as always, hung over the galaxy which some called Fen'chi. The Midgardians, he knew, named it after Andromeda. What Andromeda referred to, Heimdall was not certain of, but he wondered if the innocent humans ever guessed what a chaotic, terrible world lay beyond the borders of their protected quadrant. *Probably not*, he grimaced, the vision of the world seems rather small and limited, as usual.

On the other hand, the Fen'chi Galaxy, as ever, seemed to churn with turmoil. It stunk of strife and contention – and wherever his eyes roved, there was nothing but an unceasing fight for survival. Reavers and Marauders and smaller bands of pirates roamed, seeking out for weak colonies and easy cities to ravage and plunder. Smaller mercenary armies shuttled between employers, hawking the wares of war. Various empires jostled for space – the Xandarians, the Noradians, the Kree and the Chitauri alongside the multi-dimension empires of the Skrull and the Yoran.

Odin, his Privy Council, the High Council of Midgard and the Courts as well as the Mages had long watched the movements of the Skrull, the Kree, the Chitauri, the Marauders and other pirate groups.
However, not until now, when Asgard was most unable to make any move against its enemies, had Odin been overly concerned.

*Let them extinguish each other, he had said on many an occasion before. Let them wipe each other out – they will fight our battles for us and we can find peace.*

The war, Heimdall thought, took a toll on our King and I know how the Crown Prince chafed under such a rule. All-Father wishes for peace of some sort. Truly, if Asgard is able to maintain its position through the threat of war, it would be enough for him. A clever scheme… and one that the young Prince Loki would approve of, certainly. Yet, Thor is gone and Loki as well.

Loki. Ever since the young, pale-skinned, dark-haired Prince had been cast off the edge of Jotunheim, Heimdall had kept a firm eye on him, watching with rising concern as the Prince moved further and further into the shadowed lands of the Fen'chi Galaxy. Eventually, his gaze had been blocked by the heaviest of magick and only a few times had Frigga's sight managed to rend a small path to Loki's heart and soul.

There had only been anguish and pain and, for days on end, Frigga had wept bitterly, arguing with Odin, pressing upon him the urgency of reaching out for her lost second son. Heimdall, although a pragmatic soldier, could remember his own mother's heart and understood that the tender-hearted Queen blamed herself heavily for what had transpired with Loki.

Now, as he stood on the bridge, Heimdall's gaze drifted over the galaxy in hopes of a glimpse of the Prince. *Anything at this point, he thought, would ease the Queen's mind – and the King's.*

Despite holding outward calm about the missing Prince, the All-Father had been concerned. Whenever he met the Gatekeeper, Odin asked after Loki in a short gruff manner and, when Heimdall had assured the King that he would never give up his search for the lost prince, Odin seemed rather relieved. Heimdall knew that Odin and the Mages had begun to shore up Dark Energy within the Enclave in hopes of sending someone to rescue Loki should the chance arrive. Extreme some might think, all things considered, yet Heimdall's long experience with the royalty of Asgard understood. It was, after all, a matter of state security and pride to retrieve royalty lost through misadventure, even if the royalty in question deserved (or didn't deserve) to be rescued. What opinions Heimdall may have had concerning Loki's true heritage (now a heavily guarded secret between Odin, Frigga and himself) was unsought for and Heimdall, knowing his place, held his tongue and did what he could only do – watch and wait.

Today seemed like any other day – but then, he saw it. A familiar spark which he traced back – back and down and in, until he was looking down upon a streamlined cargo ship speeding along at the speed of light, then dropping down into a young star system to apparently connect to a smaller ship. Approaching the cargo ship, his Sight bent and skewed and suddenly, Heimdall was inside and looking down at the motionless prone figure of his Prince lying upon the metal flooring, being assiduously attended to by a green-skinned physician and another green-skinned Skrullian woman dressed like a pirate.

Loki. Prince Loki alive and safe. Not easily retrievable certainly, but this was better news than most. Perhaps Odin's secondary plan – to return Loki's magick to him – would alleviate the Prince's problematic situation.

Sheathing his sword, Heimdall ran back to his horse, mounted and galloped down the newer sections of the glistening Bifrost.

Loki was alive.
The *Tro'watal*, dropping out of space, had some time to spare judging by Klick's chrono, but there was precious little time in reality. To Mal, the seconds seemed to speed by as though warped through time and then drag into painful milliseconds which seemed to last forever. No sooner had the *Tro'watal* popped out above the gas giant which they had made their base, the *Sarcofagi* shot out of its hiding place, camouflaged as it had been by planet's thick rings, and connected with the left-hatch. The bullet-shaped, one-man spaceship, the *Sarcofagi*, was the best of old Noradian tech. Salvaged from an ancient Noradian starship, the *Sarcofagi's* spare lines and streamlined edges promised speed and efficiency. With only room enough for one, the High Council had given each quadrant a *Sarcofagi* to be used in order to send warning to the chosen target of the Chitauri should the target hold a significant population of their people. Only those with a certain level of native abilities could be expected to link with and guide the navigational systems. Even with autopilot installed, the entire technology relied on a deep neural interface between the subject and the ships computers. 

Long ago, stories told of how the Noradians had enslaved the Phylloxians, placed them within the coffins stored in the centers of their ships and, feeding off the magick emitted from the ancient, blue-skinned beings, used the Phylloxian's gifts to power their engines through space and time, achieving not only inter-galactic but also trans-dimensional travel. In more recent times, some mages with certain levels of power could turn on the coffins and use them – but at great risk to sanity and to health, for after some time, the immense demand taxed the psyche and powers of the mage piloting the machinery. 

*Sarcofagi.* That was what the coffins were now called. Boxes in which the enslaved Phylloxian lay down and, connecting through electrodes and various linked bonds, they melded with the ship and drove it through the galaxies, flying upon the pathways of the stars. Just touching it, soaking in the aura of despair and madness, Mal felt sick. She had always avoided such things – jails and old bedtime stories and *Sarcofagi* – if she could. 

*But here I am,* Mal sighed, helping Tando lift Kol'la up and into the pale white and grey metal and stone box set in the center of the *Sarcofagi*. Inside, conductive stone and granite aided the entire process, while surrounding it, cables and sensors and various magick conductors streamed outwards to disappear into the innards of the tiny ship. *A ship without an engine.* *With an engine,* she corrected herself as she lay Kol'la's head back on the soft pillow provided kindly by Tando. *An engine made of flesh and blood and a heart and a soul.* A beautiful soul. 

"You worried this won't work?" Tando asked.  
"It should work. They said it would work." 
"The High Council says a lot of things." 
"It should work. If it would work for anyone it would work for Kol'la." 
"Hm." Tando didn't look entirely convinced. 
"The Eno-graph doesn't lie," Mal pointed out mildly. 
"There is that." 

Tendo began to fiddle with a variety of knobs as well as screwing in a clamp to which he affixed a stand from which he hung a couple nutrient bags strung together. 

"For his health," Tendo muttered. "He's going to need all the help he can get. The magick will burn him – as it is removed from him... it will heal him and burn him. He may not survive... You'd best
say farewell and quickly, Mal."
"He'll get there," Mal shook her head stubbornly, forcing herself to sound calm and collected, ignoring the roiling tension within her belly. "Kol'la is a survivor."
"You really seem to know him."
"I found him on an asteroid belt. He had fallen through time and space – through a rift… he had fallen…" Mal said softly. "Fallen from Jotunheim."
"So those marks on his face…"
"Those are his own," Mal's fingers traced the edges of the lines on Kol'la's brow.
"The marks of a King," Tendo said with a tinge of awe. "I would never have guessed that I would see something like this."
"Neither did I," admitted Mal. "We take what we can get."
"Always the pragmatist," Tendo rose to his feet. "You have five. I'll be outside."

With a short nod, the physician disappeared, leaving Mal alone with Kol'la. As she drew his hair back, double-checked the bands on his wrists and ankles and readjusted the electrodes which she had placed across his brow carefully. Her fingers paused as Kol'la's lids fluttered again and the young man seemed to slowly come to consciousness.

"M-mal," he coughed and then, grimaced. "You – you aren't a dream?"
"Sad to say, no," Mal replied lightly, twining her fingers with his. "But I can only be here for a short time. You have other places to be."
"Wha – No. Mal…"
"There is not enough time," Mal fought hard to keep her voice steady and calm. Kol'la could not see her tears. Not now. There was no time for tears. "I know… we didn't have enough time. We never did."

With a reassuring look, she squeezed his hand and with her other hand, she slipped a small, thin, thumb-sized box inside his suit, tucking it carefully in one of the raggedy-edged inner pockets.

"This ship… it is a Sarcofagi. It was made, I think, for the mages of the Phylloxians-"
"Like me," Kol'la coughed and his tongue licked the edges of his still dry lips. He frowned and turned a little, trying to hold up his wrists. "They bound them."
"They were slaves to the Noradians. That is the regret of Nesta…" Mal sighed, "but from such travesty, there is salvation. There is hope."
"Hope," echoed Kol'la.
"This is a Sarcofagi, stripped down to the basic coffin, carrying only one passenger, it will take you to whatever place you wish, breaking the barriers of time and space. These are not bonds but interface cords, aiding you as you connect with the ship. With it, you, Kol'la, can return to your home. Think of your family and it will take you there."
"I can't… I can't go back…"
"Then, perhaps you may wish to go to another place. To Midgard which needs to be warned," Mal suggested. "To Thor."
"My brother, Thor…" Kol'la seemed to fade away for a moment and then his red eyes focused on Mal's face intently. "He is on Midgard."
"You said that before… maybe you don't remember… but you didn't say he was your brother… that can't be. The infamous Crown Prince Thor has a brother?"

Kol'la raised a shaky hand and contemplated it.

"I de-" A pause. "Denied my – my race. Hid behind… green eyes and pale skin and dark hair." His hand dropped back and Kol'la peered back up at Mal. "I never did… I never…" He stopped, took a deep breath and found the strength to finish his sentence. "I never told you my name."
"Kol'la is enough for me."
"No. Kol'la was my slave my. My real name… it's… Loki."

"Loki," Mal smiled softly, her face lighting up, accepting his gift of honesty for what it was. "That," she said, "is a beautiful name, a promise of greatness, I think. A mighty worker of Fate."

"Where – did you –" But before Kol'la – no, Loki – could continue, Mal shook her head.

"Shhh… There is no time. I must go."

"I do not wish you to go -" Kol'la - Loki protested weakly.

"I have other things I must do," Mal said firmly, a sad smile spreading across his face. "As do you."

"You always say that," he grumbled roughly.

"I always do," Mal replied simply.

With that, she leaned forward and pressed upon his brow and then upon his lips two quick kisses. The last one lingered a little and his fingers dug into her jacket, unwilling to let her go. Gently drawing back, Mal gave her lover, her friend, her miracle, another small smile.

"I love you," she said simply. "It sounds trite to say, but when I first saw you, something… something special lay between us and it seemed so right that the lines of our lives should cross."

"The feeling was mutual," Loki rasped, his fingers still twined with hers. His ruby red eyes begged her to stay, but Mal was already drawing back, drawing away. "I have never… I have never loved another as I loved you."

"I know," Mal nodded and before he could see her rising tears, she pressed the coffin's button and watched the cover slide slowly over.

For a few seconds, she knelt there. Then, without further word, she input the final trajectories, linked in Klick's and Sharx's navigational feeds and set the autopilot. With that, Mal left the Sarcofagi, closed the hatch, avoided Tando's sympathetic gaze and continued onward and upward to her usual station.

Her captain's chair. Now, more than ever, it seemed so lonely and as she sat back in her chair, taking the place of Hanni, as she watched the Sarcofagi drift back into the protection of the rings, Mal knew that her life would always seem a little empty without Kol'la – without Loki there.

"You said goodbye," Hanni said, her red eyes sympathetic.

"I did." Mal nodded stiffly, refusing to admit to the tears which stained her cheeks. "It was a good farewell."

"We touched history today, Mal," Tando added in vain encouragement. "We did what was right."

"Of course we did," Mal nodded stiffly. "Sharx. Do you have our next path set?"

"Yes, plotted, laid and set in," Sharx replied in muted tones.

"Let's get going, then, shall we? We have a merry chase to lead. Did Smyu send out any comm?"

"Yes, Ma'am," the older Skrullian nodded. "I sent off word with a quick report of our actions as well as the path we intend to take. Perhaps we will receive back up before the Kirrik catches up with us."

"ETA of the Kirrik is in five, by the way," Klick's voice was raised a notch with tension. "Just in case someone is interested and or worried about our steadily decreasing chances for survival."

"Sharx, hit it," Mal nodded. "Let's do this."

The Tro'watal's engines, previously idling, flared to life and after hanging in space for a few seconds, there was a crack, a burst of light and the Tro'watal was gone.

-0-0-0-

The Sarcofagi, diminutive as it was, buffeted about with the rest of the frozen rocks and ice which sped about the blue-green gas giant below. Its shields held firm, but Loki, remembering Mal's words, began to focus his energies as best as he could. It was difficult – nausea, weakness, fever, shaking and dizziness constantly threatened to break his concentration, while new memories of pain, while
uncertainty and fear and renewed feelings of inadequacy rose to the fore of his mind. Trapped in a box, Loki could not help but remember a far off time he had hoped to bury forever.

The Mah'ko'nai and their honeycomb ships. Strapped down and bound and alone and trapped in silence, a wild thing broken through neglect and isolation.

Here he was again, in another cage, with only the promise of freedom.

*This could all be in your head, Loki,* he told himself. *You've been here before.*

*-trust us, dear heart-*

The whispers reverberated back, comfortingly familiar. All of his life, he had heard the voices in the silences – the dark shadows and the thin light of the stars. Heimsrsal and the sentience of those who had passed on before him.

*It's been so long. Even now, it has not abandoned me…* 

*-our other heart-*

*-the one we held to our bosom-*

*-we will never let go-*

*-we will never lose hope-*

*Hope.* Mal had spoke of it as well. She had spoke of hope and greatness and Fate. She was depending on him. Mal and her crew and Asgard and Jotunheim and Thor.

*Thor.*

Just thinking of his brother, Loki could feel his worries rising even more. *What if Thor sees me like this… what would happen then?*

*That is hardly the least of our concerns. Your magick is barely able to heal you, much less shift a pea, much less a ship, across a galaxy and then some.*

*Focus.*

*Focus.*

Loki inhaled and exhaled, pulling carefully on the frayed strands of his magick. He would salvage what power he could. He had no choice. There was only one way. There was only forward.

*Focus.*

*-0-0-0-

The *Kirrik*, dropping out of space, scanned the area. Bits of metal, bits of ice and rock and various trash spread in orbit of three planets spoke of an base, recently abandoned. Sensors detected anomalies along the outer rings of the blue-green gas giant – traces of the fleeing ship's exhaust. Computers reeled out data and the Hive collating the data, speedily recreated the ship's new trajectory.

Without further inspection, the *Kirrik* jumped back onto the trail of the *Tro'watal*. Behind it, the young star system continued on as it had before, empty and silent.

*-0-0-0-*
The Enclave, one of the most secure halls of the Mage's Court, was a dimly lit, bronze and iron decorated room with vaulted ceilings and a spectacular domed ceiling which slid open to reveal the star-studded night sky. It was opened now, revealing the usual vista of the seasonal stars, the looping constellations, the drifting clouds of purple, blue-green and orange nebulae and the occasional streaking comet and meteorites. A rectangular room, at one end, the Enclave not only housed the StarScope, but also the arcane artifact, known as the Farn'a'Dath, which stood enshrouded in the shadowy gloom of the far end of the room, attended by five mage technicians who, with careful gestures and precise measurements, manipulated the strings of energy leading into and out of the machine. From the east, west and south sides of the Enclave, passages extended into the rest of the Mage's Court. Rarely frequented as it was, the entire annex seemed archaic and displaced with its ancient carvings, weathered stonework, muted, outmoded wall hangings and archaic lighting.

Odin and Frigga made their way down the small side hall which led into the Enclave, barely glancing at the rows of the cloaked initiates lined against the walls in neat, orderly rows. The ceremony of the Farn'a'Dath, if deemed necessary, would entail the cooperation of the entire upper classmen of the Mage's Academy and any mages within Asgard's capital.

Within the Enclave, Odin found Heimdall easily among the crowd. Among the blacks, browns, blues and whites of the Mages, the Gatekeeper's golden horned helmet bobbed conspicuously. Agaeti, Hrotha and five other High Mages had gathered in a circle with the Gatekeeper, speaking rapidly and gesticulating vehemently.

"Have you seen anything new of Loki?" asked Frigga, rushing forward, her blue eyes and usually gentle, calm expression filled with worry. "Is he safe?"
"Safe as anyone may be in this troubled time, Your Majesty," Agaeti drew the Queen closer into the circle, his watery blue eyes calm beneath his craggy eyebrows. "He is hidden – within the environs of a ringed planet."
"So he is well." Frigga nodded, sagged with relief.
"For now," Heimdall nodded. "Danger has been averted and the pursuer has taken the bait, as it were. Yet, I fear that our prince may not be able to power the vehicle he was stowed in adequately. If he is to return home or…" Heimdall paused remembering Odin's mandate. "Or elsewhere. Prince Loki will need his abilities returned to their full state."
"You cannot draw him back?" Frigga asked, glancing over at her husband who was looking through several pages of scrip which Mage Hrotha had given him.

Odin, looking up from the notations, shook his head.
"Judging by the data and Heimdall's accounts, by the size of the ship and its distance from Asgard… pulling Loki toward us is well nigh impossible. Even with the use of the Farn'a'Dath, we would not be able to send anyone to his aid."
"The ship is unable to carry another," Heimdall quickly added, his golden eyes looked even more solemn than usual. "If we were to return his magick…"
"He would be able to power the ship?" Odin frowned. "How?"
"The vehicle appears attuned to… Loki's particular nature," Heimdall said carefully, giving the King and Queen a sharp look. "However, I fear that it will tax him physically. It could fail. It could destroy him."
"The data does suggest immense strain upon him," Mage Hrotha frowned, receiving back his notes from Odin. "It is hard to say exactly. Flarathir has more knowledge on space-time travel, but he is not within the capital at this time. What I can say for certain is that the return of the Prince's magick does not guarantee stability. After periods of restraint or vigorous use, it is common to experience power fluctuations as well as dizziness, nausea, headaches and extreme muscular as well as magickal fatigue. Burning sensations-"
"Well, Loki has always been a magickal being of great power," Mage Agaeti, waved a hand
dismissively, before turning to Frigga to pat her on the hand comfortingly. "While he may undergo some symptoms, and indeed he has experienced many of them in years past, I feel that Loki is more than capable of handling the side-effects."

"Yes, well," Odin sighed, turning back to look at the StarScope and then back at the machine. We have no choice. Loki has no choice. We shall use the Farn’aDath to open a path of magick. With the aid of the acolytes, we will use a portion of power to channel our spell and break the binding on Loki."

"Then he will return to Asgard," Frigga suggested, "Or will he travel elsewhere? Has he given any indication of his plans?"

"I cannot know his heart, Your Majesty," Heimdall replied, "yet he has emerged from the Shadow and perhaps he will bear us news of what transpires in that galaxy – or return to…" The Gatekeeper meaningfully glanced at Odin again. "Jotunheim or Midgard or some other friendly Realm. What I can say is that his compatriots, his rescuers, are no friends of the Chitauri and may have passed on information."

"Well, if he has heard news," Odin nodded, stroking his beard thoughtfully, "It would be best to return to Asgard… unless there is a Realm under imminent attack… in which case, going directly to warn them would be the smarter choice."

"I am certain Loki will choose the wisest course of action," Frigga smiled then. "Loki usually thinks through all options set before him."

"Hm, we shall see if his sojourn have taught him anything," Odin frowned. "He is young and has much to learn… yet, he was always a quick study."

"Perhaps he will join Thor."

"I should hope not," Odin grimaced. "I hardly think that Midgard can stand the foolishness those two boys. Between Thor's cockiness and Loki's schemes, the Norns can only know what harebrained plan they would concoct on the poor unsuspecting planet."

A pause, then Odin turned to the technicians who had now ceased their activity and stood at the ready behind their monitors.

"They are ready?" he nodded at Mage Hrotha.

"They are ready," the silvery-headed Mage nodded, drawing the King to his position behind another monitor. "It is time."

-0-0-0-

It was only a matter of time. Smaller, slighter and with less energy and engine power, the Tro’watal was easily overtaken by the larger sized Kirrik. Forced down out of light speed, violently shaken from side to side, the cargo ship battered its way through a scattered asteroid field, spiraling down and around until Sharx managed to get the steering back into control.

Bruised, silent and determined, the crew stared out the viewport and up at the looming warship as it hovered at the edges of the asteroid field. Sharx swore as he skillfully piloted the Tro’watal to the far edge of the asteroid field in hopes of at least gaining some kind of a lead before the Kirrik entered the field.

A yellow light began to flash at the comm station and Tondo's hand hovered over the comm button uncertainly.

"They are hailing, Captain," he asked. "Should we stall for time, perhaps Vyrn'or can get the Oxorbal Crystal online again-"

Mal, pinching her bottom lip, slowly nodded.

"We need time."
"There is no way the engines will be up quick enough-"

Hanni stopped as Mal raised a hand.

"We need time… for Loki."

Wheels turned; the Farn'a'Dath whirred to life and light crackled through the shadowed spaces as energy coalesced, drawn from the endless pool of energy consumed by the Mithra'a'Ginnung. The Void was a place of power, everyone knew that – yet few understood the ways in which one could draw from the forces of nature hidden in the dark. Leashing it and unleashing it was a gargantuan task, best handled by many coming together, providing a seamless conduit, turning What Is Unseen into What Is.

Such is the power of the spheres. Such is the will of Asgard.

[…the dance of the worlds…]

[…the song of the stars…]

[…can you hear it…]

[…the Realm of What Is in all its diversity…]

[…as thin as onion skin upon the vast Realm of What Is Not…]

He lay there. There was only the dark. There was the creak of ice. There was the rumble of stone and the thunderous crash of rock impacting rock.

Drifting in and out of consciousness, as lost and aimless as the ship in which he now lay bound, Loki weakly called upon his magick, upon the force of life which surrounded him. He could hear it so close and yet so far: the thin, high, pale voices of the distant older stars chiming with the boisterous refrain of the youthful sun surrounding him. They were waiting for him, calling his name, urging him on.

Breathing in and out, Loki gathered his magick, little by little. The bonds of Odin, he could feel them, reining in what power he had called his own. Closing his eyes, Loki allowed himself to fall back into the world he had been inhabiting for the past few months – the world of the Unseen, filled with wonder and colour and shifting spaces. Within his ship, Loki glowed a faint white-blue and, wrapping around his chest and arms and legs like fantastical ceremonial ornamentation, the bands of gold magick hovered just above his skin. He had been watching them slowly drift away from his skin, no longer strangulating his magic. Now, constricting his movement of magick and the limiting the amount allowed to wield or expend, the restrictions of Odin's spell became clear.

Inhale. Exhale.

*I could attempt to break them.*

Inhale. Exhale.

Yet, in the breaking of the spell… There could be backlash on the local environs, the entire space-time could explode and collapse, the explosion could collapse into a black hole, the ship could disintegrate…
Inhale. Exhale.

Father wished me to learn a lesson – to remind me that the means do not justify the end, that my pursuit for acceptance and love and security had driven me to acts of madness.

-an icy wasteland, a world of grey and blue and white and little other colour-
-a gold-white beam of light ripping through the dark soil-
-the sibilant call of the dark-
-a Muthra'Ginnung-

Even someone as clever as I could, like Thor, not calculate the actual ramifications of the plans which I had wrought, which I brought to fruition.

-DEATH IS MINE-
-YOU ARE MINE-

Madness to which I was blind, so desperate was my need to please. Now, in an hour of need, I cannot save the ones I love. I am – I am – weak and useless and – and – drifting – alone and lost and stranded…

Loki woke, panting and sweating. His breath sounded rough and foreign to him as he lay there. Darkness spotted on the corners of his vision. Loki could taste bile at the back of his mouth as another wave of dizziness and nausea washed over him.

The drugs, he thought hazily. This is… this is…

Panic clawed at him.

How long have I been here? How long will I be here? Days? Weeks? Months? Years? Have I even left the cell?

For a moment, he lay there, panting heavily, his hands twisting in the circular restraints, sharp pricking pain as the electrodes tugged at the skin on the back of his hands, his forehead and his feet. Attempting to get his breathing under control, Loki turned his head and glanced through grille on his left. The slowly blinking lights of green and orange and the flaring and fading bars of the computers blurred as exhaustion and despair weighed down upon him.

That was when he first felt it. Lying there in the relative quiet, watching the hypnotic lights blinking, Loki floated in the soft light of the stars when he felt the warm arms – such warm arms – fold around him as tenderly as a mother.

-courage, dear heart-
-we are here-
-your calls-
-carried upon the rays of the stars-
-have been heard-
-by those who love you dearly-

It was Frigga. So long, he thought disjointedly, I have not heard her voice for such a long time, it
seems… seems impossible, seems foreign…

He tried to turn, but she only clung to him tighter, her fragrant breath brushing against his cheek as drew him into her warm embrace.

-brace yourself-

-it is coming-

Then, he felt it: time and space shifting, magick streaming forward, swirling around him and a far off chant echoing through the rift. A clang. A familiar clang – and an equally familiar voice calling his name.

-Loki-

It was over so quickly – suddenly, the golden bands around him began to crackle, began to break into a fine gold dust. Drifting back through the rift, the spell slipped away and Loki's lungs filled with air as a waterfall of colour, the world of magick overwhelmed him –

[…]lines connect us…[]

[…]unseen…[]

[…]bring us, hold us together…[]

[…]perhaps, in the end…[]

[…]we are more connected than we thought…[]

They had run out of time. Without a single word, Hanni shifted the entire power to forward shields as the Tro'watal came about. Sharx, pushing the accelerator flat to the dash, looked grim as the cargo ship sped toward the Kirrik. Below, the comm knew that Vyrn'or had set self-destruct.

Perhaps the fleet will reach Midgard, Mal thought, glancing over at Tando, then Hanni and Sharx. Perhaps the Chitauri will get there, but they will get there with one less ship. If we have no choice but to die, then at least we will take our foe down with us.

She thought of the report she had sent to the High Council. Now they know. They know of Loki. They know of his heritage. They know of his abilities. They know where he is headed. They know of the success of their mission.

I have done my duty, I have played my role… Now, Loki, it is your time. Your time to shine… I only wish… Mal set her jaw as the Kirrik began to open fire. I only wish I had been there to see you fulfill your destiny. There never was enough time for us.

They were so close – they could see the shields of the Kirrik falling as Klick's final program – Code Black – kicked into high gear.

There was never enough time for me… for us… but in that short time, we blazed like the most glorious suns.

Mal closed her eyes, allowing the green skin she had worn all of her life to melt away. She could see Loki's half-smile, white sheets and bars of light on glorious blue skin. She could see the gifts he had given her – such beautiful gifts.
Even if it was a short time, she thought, there was reward... and I shall see them again... one day...

Loki... Mal opened her eyes as the world blazed red about her. Narfi... Nari...

-0-0-0-

Colours filled him. Blue and green, incandescent and iridescent, until there was no sight or sound or sense. There was nothing but him riding upon the barely controllable flood of magick. It swirled around him, through him and distantly, Loki could hear something reverberating, a cracking sound, a crashing sound and then growing more deafening by the minute, a sonic boom as the ship shot forward like an arrow, ripping through, no doubt, the planet below.

Coursing through this veins like a burning fire, the magick wreathed him in blue and green and white flames. Healing and destroying in one single motion, the energy ripped through him. He was everything and nothing. He was fire and ice. He was light and dark.

Who was he...

Loki began to scream.

Chapter End Notes

OK. There you guys are. The last chapter's questions are all answered, I hope. I also hope that a bunch of you are asking a few other questions now. Like... who/what was Mal really? Where is the High Council? Who are Narfi and Nari? All of these questions, if I decide to write a sequel, will be answered. Heh. We'll see how tired I am after finishing this novel.

Reply to review re Loki's Sexuality & Gender is on my Tumblr, follow this link! DO LET ME KNOW WHAT YOU THINK OF THIS CHAPTER! It took me a week and a half to write. I didn't write it in a linear fashion which scared me to death and I really struggled carrying the emotion through to the end. Let me know if there are any plot holes or spelling errors etc. Thanks so much for reading guys!

See you in a bit!-KI

Information on Levels of Mage/Magical Abilities

Level 1 – Eno'sa
Level 2 – Eno'tho – Thanos
Level 3 – Eno'frei
Level 4 – Eno'ah – Elven Mages/Odin
Level 5 – Eno'ko – Asgard/Jotun/Any Other Healthy Realm Mage/Prince Loki before Odin caps him
Level 6 – Eno'yul – Sharda'aa/Regular Mage
Level 7 – Eno’vee – Uncollared Kol'la/Current Prince Loki post-Fall (past Sleen & Jela)
Level 8 – Eno'mah – Collared Kol'la/Current Prince Loki post-Fall (up until Sleen)
Level 9 – Eno'lei
Level 10 – Eno'sanai
Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
bollen - boulders/monoliths
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
Eno'Keshi'ko – the system of Eno, a type of magical level measurements
Fen'chi Galaxy – Andromeda Galaxy
gan'ga'war – steel balls
gan'ko – ganka'jya chon, a steel beetle
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
Janah – similar to dammit
Ka'autha'ndarna - Reality
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
Kholathan – Safety Belt/Protected Zone
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
kolm (sniffer) - a kind of drug like weed
kon'bi – short for konji'bifu, space bat
ku'sha – "fuck"
lasu – space rat
l'gon – storyteller
lifeljos – life light/signature
Morning-star - a mace
myech'myena - shape-shifting
Mye'hyoi Peyt – Milky Way
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
Nord-Stjarna – north star
Nyr'Fjor - Jotunn's original name for V'slozh'noi
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
pu'lotni – plutonium
pye'nee - a kind of bird
Ra'ska'yeh o Phyllo'xia – Tales of Phylloxia
roobyn – a red stone
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
Shen'grid – the Protected Zone, the zone in which habitable planets orbit around a sun
Shi'nuwu – Reality/Yggdrasil
sigan – short for yan'sigan, rock-worm
So'shah – Earth/Midgard
syem'fyerma – family/community farm
Tai'shu – The Void
tro'watal – perseverance
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
whota – wheat
Chapter Summary

I seriously apologize for this delayed and crappy chapter. Life has been kinda blah lately and I can't seem to write for the life of me. Thanks to InsolentKatt and her accident/run in with a bus, I am able to finish this chapter in a manner of speaking.

Inspirational Music: Assassin's Creed: Unity and others, Port Blue, Machinarium

Quoted Stuff in this Chappie:
Gerard Manley Hopkins quote
Sufjan Stevens "The Lakes of Canada"
Gordon Lightfoot "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald"
The Wilderness of Manitoba "The Escape"
The Kramdens "Laura's Waltz"

Thanks to all reviewers who are so patient and encouraging in their comments towards myself. This story is far from perfect and feels like its far from over, so thanks for hanging in there guys! I so appreciate you all!

Thanks to: iBlameGlobalWarming, Jesenia, cbc2v, thaliaarche, Ophite, SingSongSilence, not_overjoyed, MistyDawn, nevar_walc, Kai_Macie, bahki, Mya, marh13, lemomina

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This chapter is dedicated to my awesome-possum friend (and fellow Loki fangirl), Katt, who despite her serious accident with a bus continued to encourage me to finish this horrific chapter comprised of writer's block pain.

Distortions In Time

Chapter 76
Refuge

[...the World That Is borders the World That Is Not…]
[...that Which Is Seen washes against the shores of that Which Is Unseen…]
[...overlaying and underlying…]
[...the song of the stars, the voices of the spirits ring out…]
[...and those close to those infinite powers…]
[...flare out and burn…]

The Heimsrsal of Jotunheim roams freely, it is said, unhindered and wild as the icy breezes which
race across the flat, snowy stretches of that cold Realm. The Spirit of Muspelheim rages and roars with thunderous energy, birthing its never-ending fires which course through its enflamed world. Vanahem's Voice works hard for its peace and Alfheim's Aegis stands aloof – a white, pure soul, lofty in its aspirations. Others stars, other voices fill the Void, the dark spaces in between, but there stand nine great souls, who, born at the dawn of time, burned brighter and flourished longer.

There stands one such Realm, one such spirit, protected by the rest – shielded. The Realm Eternally Sheltered and, in its turn, it bends over its Realm, the Realm of Midgard, and covers its worlds with soft wings, birthing life in multitudinous forms. A Realm of Life, a Realm of treasures, forever treasured.

[...one quiet corner...]
[...of a the universe...]
[...in a quiet galaxy...]
[...on a peripheral planet...]
[...Fate is coming...]
[...it is...]

The forest of pines and spruce and other deciduous stood silent in the early spring night. Still cool from the harsh winter which even now reluctantly loosened its grip on the northern landscape, the woods lay empty now, awaiting the full growth of spring and the brighter promise of summer. Melting snows ran down the rocks, between the grey crevices from the many small lakes, engorging the small streams and feeding into the vast, dark lake.

[...silence reigns on Midgard...]
[...but not really...]
[...here, here...]

Winter is a quiet season, muffled by snow and the blast of icy wind, yet spring, even early, wakes up the world with the cry of the hawk and the eagle, the growl of the waking bear and migrating wolves. As the sun sets, however, the chattering squirrels and chirping birds slowly fall silent as sleep claims them and all that remains is the wind which rattles the branches of the as yet naked trees. Rising slowly over the seemingly barren land, the moon soars, coating everything in silver and the stars shine hard as jewels, revealed clearly through the ragged wisps of cloud.

[...here, here...]

Suddenly, the wooded and rocky shore of the lake twisted, shimmered – bent – and there was an awful, rising tension in the air. Stones rose. A vee of wild geese disappeared momentarily only to reappear further down in the water. The clouds swirled slowly as though stirred by a contrary wind.

Silence broke with a shriek as the air twisted apart, rent by invisible forces. A seam appeared, spitting out a small, grey, bullet-shaped ship and then snapped shut.

[...silence fell...]
[...on Midgard...]
He woke to cold. Cold did not matter. He was used to that. In fact, he thought hazily, it is… comforting in some way… The thought slipped away, like sand running through his fingers.

Cold. Cold and pain. He could not move, could barely think, could not turn… There was only barely registered realizations.

Cold. Cold and pain and hard ground. Rocky ground from which he could not rise. Pinned like an insect, he lay there and just was.

Just to be. That is a gift.

-0-0-0-

When consciousness came upon him next, there was still cold and pain and hard ground – but there were other things too. Light and dark, shifting shadows, pale moonlight and quiet voices.

He was not alone.

Panic, visions of suffocating walls and faceless guards, welled up within him – yet attempting to rise only brought more pain and then darkness.

-0-0-0-

He was not alone. Not attempting to open his eyes again, he let the world around him stabilize and, opening his awareness with his newly restored magick, allowed the engulfing wave of pain wash over him. Burned raw from the excess of power, his nerves screamed. A familiar feeling. He had felt much the same before…

Before…

The thought escaped him momentarily until the world shifted, altered a little and he was back in a forgotten sunken city. Meerauk. Yes. Meerauk. After Meerauk. After his journey to Meerauk within the path of the spirits. He could hear Healer Hlorin lecturing him, his silver, crackling voice repeating, fading and flaring: "Overused magickal pathways in the flesh and the spirit had become sensitive as they were stretched beyond the usual capacity. Through pain, one grows."

Through pain.

He had done it again then. Overwhelmed his own maximum capabilities in one massive blast and had arrived to the world of cold and pain and hard ground. Of moonlight and shadows.

A soft world teeming with living things. He could feel them. Hear them, see them and smell them, pressing down on all of his senses. Below him in the hardened ground, sleeping… about him, the growing things and the hibernating creatures and those wild things that roved in the night. The heartbeat of life.

…rest…

A soft admonition with a gentle voice, slightly scolding with only a hint of power.
Mother…. He thought disjointedly. Frigga and Loki. He remembered then – with a flare of memory, his name, his past, his mother, her tears and disappointment. There had been a young man named Loki who loved his mother dearly and treasured his family. He had wanted to save her, to show his worth, to protect his home and in the end…

In the end, I lost it all.

…no…
…dear heart…
…that which is lost, may yet be found…
…that which is broken, may yet be healed…
…that which is dead, may yet find life…
…rest, dear heart, rest…

Loki could feel the power – green and vibrant – gently pass over him, through him. A brief respite.

Mother…

He was not alone. He was sheltered. He was safe.

*She is here.*

---

When Loki next woke, he was no longer on the cold, hard ground. He was lying on his side, more or less curled up uncomfortably on a narrow couch. A narrow couch with lumpy padding. A blanket of some dark fluffy material covered him and beneath his head was a small pillow.

For a moment, the world rocked from side to side as though he were an infant in a cradle, and then it rested upon its center and Loki found enough strength to raise his arm, only to discover that one of his arms appeared to be tethered by some thin cording. Loki peered closer attempting to make sense of the small world around him.

*A door. Escape.*

The world dimmed, shifting to a filmy purple-blue and from nowhere a kind of horn sounded, blaring discordantly, making him jump and jerk.

*Thirst. Water. Something.* His mouth was not working properly. *Had they taken away his voice?* Loki's panic skyrocketed as he realized that he could not speak.

*Where was – was not – Mother… Frigga… where… No. No. Nonono. He could not go back again – by Hel, he could not…*

-a mute vaetki from another time-
-another time, another place, another person-
-and yet not-

"What's happening?" a nearby voice asked.
"He's awake," another voice said. "I don't think he's happy."
"Talk to him, idiot," the first voice answered sharply. "He's all freaked out and stuff."
"Something's not right."
"What?" asked the first, light tension lacing their tone.
"Like… he's tripping, I think."
"Drugs…" A sigh emanated from somewhere. "Let me see."

Shifting voices which swirled around on carefree breezes. If he looked hard enough, he could see the trails of sound, of blue and yellow strands of music. Little people danced along the pathways... A dark shadow loomed, like a blanket of night un-scrolling across the sky.

Loki flinched away as something heavy and cold pressed against his forehead.

"Detox." A pause. "Fuck."
"So he's tripping."
"You think?"
"This is bad."
"It's just started. Obviously he's needing some kind of a fix. I'll call Karl and figure out what. You keep him cool. You know the drill. The saline will keep him hydrated and balance things out, but we'll need the good stuff."
"And soon."
"And soon," echoed the first.

Soon. Loki closed his eyes suddenly. As the world swayed about him, he felt a rising urge to spew his guts. Except his guts were empty. Empty.

The word roiled about, snaked about, curled up in his head and lurked. Empty.

He was empty and there was nothing between him and the emptiness. It lay before him now: the dark land, the Void. Receding into the distances, the voices of the others faded, their unintelligible words jumbled about.

Let them take what they wish, for they will find naught. Let them come and go, for there is nothing. There is only the emptiness and I have nothing left to give.

Loki escaped the only way he knew well.

He flew among the stars.

-0-0-0-

He was so thirsty. So, so thirsty. His mouth felt as dry and bitter as the volcanic sands of Svartalfheim. There were memories. Long ago, not so long ago, they had discovered that as a creature of ice, when in his natural form, heat drove him wild.

So thirsty.

He had begged. Yet, when he had found enough energy to cry out, no one had deigned to answer. There had only been laughter.

Opening his eyes, a world of jarring reds and oranges and yellows swirled about him, burning his vision and heating his skin. Thrashing weakly, Loki attempted to rise, only to find a hand pressing his head back firmly. The hard rim of cool glass touched his lips and the barest trickle of lukewarm water passed his cracked lips.

"Not too fast," someone instructed. "His stomach won't handle it."
"He's got an IV… I don't get it."
"Dry mouth. Just another symptom."
"Shit. What do we do?"

A silence, then the first voice said muttered:

"We drive faster.

-0-0-0-

Light. Dark. Light. Dark. Light, dark, light, dark. Bars of dull yellow light passed over his eyelids and when he opened his eyes, there seemed to be no change. Ancient memories of honeycomb cells and claustrophobic cells swamped him – bound, trammeled, enclosed, entombed.

…dear heart, rest…

Who are they? Who are they? What do they want? What do they search for? Where are they taking me?

…peace…
…we are connected…
…in the end…
…our lives are woven together in the tapestry…
…this is Fate…
…and we are His children…
…we are one…

So… I was meant to come here. There is something I must do. I must remember. Thor. I must… must remember.

…there is time…
…little, yet there is…
…there is time…

For a moment, he lay there, silent. Watching the passing shadows. Shadows, he now saw as his eyes adjusted to the dimness, which passed over glass and frames of glinting metal. A vehicle. Have I thought that thought before?

Turning his head, he caught a glimpse of a hooded figure, the head nodded up and down gently in a regular rhythm. Obviously the caretaker was asleep, swaying in time with the vehicle's movements. It worried him. He had been reassured, had been told not to worry and yet….

And yet…

It gnawed at him. Memories rose then – memories of aged men and women talking, memories of Healers, memories of a visiting Healer discussing the effects of various mendicants when used over long periods of time. Anxiety. Fear. Dreams and visions. Other signs.

He could not remember. Intellectually, he understood.

And yet...
And yet...

Twisting slightly, Loki raised a shaking hand and stared at it. Just watching his trembling fingers, the
warrior-mage knew he was in no shape for walking, running, any form of escape, much less battle.

*I have no choice but to trust. For now.*

…*sleep…*

"You k-k-keep saying th-thhat," Loki’s voice crackled as his irritated retort broke the silence like a gunshot.

The hood snapped upright and long, skinny arms flailed about, gripping the edge of the seat. Shuddering to a sudden halt with grinding gears, the vehicle jerked several times.

"He talked!"
"Of course he can talk, idiot," said the first voice. "He's not brain dead… yet."
"Sh-sh-sh-she tells m-me t'sleep – b-b-but I cannot. I cannot. If I do…” Loki trailed off and shivered, closing his eyes momentarily. "I ss-see them – see… SEE…”
"You've been Wandering."

The vehicle started up again. Loki’s eyes watched as the patterns of light and dark, light and dark, began again. Judging by the sound, it was a wheeled contrivance going down a paved road. *Not cobbled. Not stones.* He had been on worlds with paved roads and great cities erected out of mixed stone and other compounds. *Sharda’aa. Vlozh’noi…* There were other worlds he had visited when he had been free, *carefree… So many worlds.*

*Have I actually gone to all of them? Or… or…*

"I don't think… he knows…”
"He may not be ready," the first voice said. "I'll put on some ambient."
"Ambient is good."

[…*music and mendicants…*]

[…*sound and sense…*]

[…*motion and stillness…*]

[…*vehicles that carry the soul to the stars…*]

[…*some travel farther, some are bound closer…*]

[…*these are the Stars and their Voices…*]

[…*life is treasure…*]

[…*birthed, grown, sheltered…*]

[…*we are the caretakers, the spirits…*]

[…*look after all of our cousins…*]

[…*our sisters and brothers…*]

[…*the Voices of the Stars…*]

[…*those who speak for us…*]

[…*music and mendicants…*]

[…*sound and sense…*]
At some point, the vehicle stopped and the unseen driver rested. There was nothing but the howling wind, occasional slams and shuffling as other vehicles came and went and the rise and fall as vehicles approached, passed by and departed. Like an ocean, waves drawing in and receding.

They were not far from the main road. A kind of rest stop, he concluded. He lay there and listened and wished and dreamed. Lulled by the rise and fall of the vehicles, Loki allowed himself to drift off into a light doze.

A shuffle. Rustling. Some weight pushed against the back of Loki's makeshift bed. Jerking awake and gasping as shreds of Void and the Stars faded, Loki tensed. Pulling away, he raised his left hand only to find it tethered again. Frantically, he pulled and clawed at the thin cording, only to be stopped by gentle fingers. A round, pale face came into view. A boy's face – a boy with longish, straight, dark-brown hair which fell about his face, obscuring blue-green eyes. Old eyes.

"Hey, man, hey..." The boy frowned as he watched Loki's fingers worry at the cord. "Um, you might not wanna... touch that..."

"Wha-at..." Loki managed to find enough air and power to voice the question, after which he sank back, unable to move, now spent.

"It's an IV, you know?"

A pause.

"Maybe not. I mean. It's, uh, um..." "It's not a restraint," the voice from the front said.

"No, no..." The boy leaned forward and pulled up Loki's sleeve, revealing that the cord was in fact attached to a metal piece entering his arm like a pin. "It's a needle and it's, um, feeding you. You need food, man."

Man. I am not a man. I am a monster, Loki thought, his world for a few seconds whirling about disorienting, warping the young man's voice. Then it settled and sight and sound seeped back.

He could hear himself screaming at Odin from another time and place.

-Why did you not tell me from the beginning? Did you not trust me? Is that it? Were you wanting to see if I would show my true savage colours?-

Loki twisted then, turned away, forcing the memory down. No, he told himself, not here. Not now. There is no time. There is no time...

"Wh-" He tried again. "Whe-" Faltered and then managed to get it out somehow, exhausting the last of his reserves: "Where?"

"Where? Where are we?"

"He probably wants to know where he is," the voice up front commented. "I would."

"We're on Earth. Terra. Don't worry. You're safe for now."

You are safe. For now. Loki sighed and, closing his eyes, allowed himself to drift off. Right. She said that before. Frigga. Mother. The Stars...

He could still hear her voice.

....rest...

[...over the bent...]
He burned hot as a blazing star. He burned as cold as the empty spaces of the Void. He was everything. He was nothing.

Once upon a time, he had been Loki. *Loki, a creature of nothing.* Then he had been others. *So many faces. So many names.* Then he was Loki. After, not before. It was all twisted.

Time twisted and memories, surfacing and submerging, swirled slowly, pulling his consciousness in and out of reality, in and out of memory.

What was memory? Memory was a vault filled with treasure. Was he just another one of those? Memory was a warm embrace and the scent of flower tea and cordials and a light voice. Memory was battling at the side of Thor. Surely those were all memories.

What was reality? Reality was twisted and warped. Lines of dark and light, repeating patterns, sweat and vomit and pain. Fatigue… and driving need. A need for what, he did not know. It wracked him, coming and going in waves, and all he could do was wait.

Faces hovered over him. Some he knew. The face of the Inquisitor deceptively smiling. Odin's aloof visage. Mal's saddened face. Some he did not know.


Words came and went, washing over him in bits and pieces.

Soft fingers drifted over his dark markings, tracing the edges and the curves with devotion, with awe, with love. Her voice, strong and rough, spoke then.

"You're beautiful."

*Mal.* She had accepted, where he had rejected. She had seen what he had been blind to. *Mal.* Mal had bid him farewell. *Was it forever?*

There was someone else in the room, softly speaking, asking him questions. Slipping into his consciousness like a snake, it whispered. Casual and relaxed, deceptively whimsical and light.

"What did she say?"

"...I can only be here for a short time. You have other places to be."

That's what she had said, leaning over him, gently brushing his hair away from his blue skin, still revealed. He was still blue-skinned. Loki glanced down at his hands. *No. Purple now. Been purple for some time now.* The others did not seem worried though and had made no comment. Perhaps he was not purple.

"What else did she say?"

"There is not enough time," she had seemed calm, but her eyes and gleamed with unshed tears. "I know… we didn't have enough time. We never did."

She had squeezed his hand and she had put something… Loki tugged at his clothing. *New clothing. Where... where...*  

"We got you new clothes," the boy spoke up. "Your stuff is in a duffle under your bed. Prison garb, check. Boots, check. And socks. And a small flash drive. Well, high tech flash drive. Whatever they
"There is nothing to be afraid of," the soft voice continued. Loki turned and froze at the sight of the dark uniform, the simple silver and platinum insignia, the white skin and pale, blue eyes and unnaturally grey-white hair.

Wen. Inquisitor Wen. The sight of his interrogator brought on the memories. Wen's questions, Wen's glances, Wen's manipulations, Wen's touches. Stomach twisting and roiling at the memory, Loki found himself leaning to the side of the bed and coughing up what little water he had retained in his belly. Magickally, it seemed, a tin bowl appeared beneath his head as he lay there helplessly vomiting.

"It's gonna get worse," the young man said to the other who sat up front. "It's gonna get worse before it gets better."
"It always does," was the short reply.

Loki, after several long minutes, found the strength to push himself back, brushing away the support of his helper. He knew what they spoke of and felt ill of the thought. Like those who had stumbled into Poison Paradise –

-the dancing girls-
-their sparkling heels kicking towards the stars-

He was one of them. The lotus eaters, the fire drinkers, the spirit callers. The other voice is right, he told himself, it will get worse before it gets better. It always does.

Leaning back, Loki stared up at the nondescript velvet looking ceiling to the small vehicle he was in. It felt small. A longish square. Moving very fast though, judging by the passing trees and posts and fences and empty vistas of muddy fields and still barren forests.

It was difficult to grasp. He closed his eyes.

Later. Later…

-Look for me another day
I feel that I could change
I feel that I could change
There's a sudden joy that's like
A fish, a moving light
I thought I saw it
Rowing on the lakes of Canada-

Music filtered in through his dreams, not the ethereal yet piercing songs of the stars. It was solid and grounded, roughened and real. Loki chased after it in his dreams, chased until it brought him home.

-I feel that I could change-

When he woke next, Loki felt more alive than he had in a long time. Movement was sluggish, reality was distorted and the world spun about him like a child's top, yet, for the first time in a while, Loki felt something akin to hope. He knew the long journey to recovery had only just begun, yet perhaps he would survive it, survive it long enough to warn Thor.

Thor. He could remember the most important thing: Thor needed to know. The Mad Titan was coming. The Voice of the Void. He was coming. The Chitauri, the Other… the others.
With the aid of the boy, Loki was able to pry himself up into a seated position, resting his cheek against what appeared to be cool glass.

That was when he noticed the details which had slipped his attention earlier. How the small room shook and vibrated with the rough power of an engine. How the light falling upon him passed over with shifting regular patterns. He was, Loki realized, in a conveyance of some kind. Judging by the speed of the shadows passing over him, it was not a fast vehicle, but it could achieve a steady pace.

"You look… a bit… better…" The boy said, leaning forward to check Loki again. "More alive. Sorta."
"Relatively speaking," said the apparent driver seated in the left front seat. "He's got a long way to go – and not enough time."
"Time… no time…" Loki seized those words and groaned as he tried to sit further upright. "I must-"
"Hey, hey," the young man eased Loki back.

He was stronger than he looked. *That or I am still very weak*, Loki sighed, feeling more powerless than ever.

"Where do you needta go?"
"I need… I need to find my brother."
"Your brother?" The driver turned then, revealing the calm visage of an young woman. Her eyes, like the boy's, were matter of fact and serene. *Someone who stays calm in a crisis*, Loki supposed.
"You have a brother here?"
"A-Adopted… I mean…" Loki sighed, overwhelmed with the quest now before him.

So much to say, yet what can I say that would make them believe me? Without their help, I will not find Thor in time. Thor…

"I am adopted. He is… he is not like me…"
"OK…" The dark-haired boy blinked. "Where is he?"
"I-I know not," Loki heaved yet another sigh. "I only know he is on M-m-midgard – on Terra, Earth… whatever you call it."
"Midgard," repeated the girl thoughtfully. "That is an old name indeed. An old name from long ago."
She cocked her head. "Sounds Asgardian, wouldn't you say, Jace?"
"You're asking me?" Jace rolled his eyes then, good-humouredly. "I'm the one who's asleep in class."
"Yeah," the girl deadpanned. "What was I thinking?"

There was silence then Loki frowned.

"What does Midgard know of Asgard?"
"Uhhh…" The two glanced at each other before meeting Loki's eyes calmly. "The humans don't know much. But there are others around."
"Others." Loki echoed, coughing a little as the back of his throat tickled.

Leaning forward, the boy offered him a sip of warm water. Even the barest trickle felt heavy in his stomach and the energy necessary to swallow left Loki breathless. He cursed his weak state, mentally, lacking the spare power to voice his disgust.

"Non-humans. Some visit, some stay." The girl was saying.
"Mildy, there're bunches all over. Right?" the boy asked.
"I thought Asgard did not permit such activities." Loki blinked as the boy's blue-green eyes flared an eerie red and then black.
"There are some who fear Asgard," the young woman agreed. Mildy. She chuckled then, "Some
have nothing to lose and others are the rebels of the universe. Pirates and the like."

Loki closed his eyes and tried to remember what his father – *Odin – his father, yes*. What his father had said in the councils about the pirates who roamed freely through the Realms and galaxies. *A sickness*. That was how the Asgardians viewed the Marauders’ menace. *A sickness that had to be purged for the safety of all peaceable sentients. There were others. Other pirate bands as well. Midgard would be, to them, a forbidden fruit.*

A long silence ensued and a good half hour passed before Loki heaved a sigh, attempted to corral his wandering memories and focus on the issue at hand.

"So, there are others who live on this planet. You two are not humans then," he asked.
"Yeah, no. To the humans, Asgard is a fairy tale. A myth. To others in the know, Asgard is the Golden Realm, top dog of the Nine. Has proprietary interest in Midgard," the girl checked a small mirror in front of the broad fore-window and then the vehicle swayed a little as it appeared to veer a little to the right. "Other than that, we don't know much, really. We don't pay attention much to matters off-world. Unless they come to us."
"I see."

Pause. Another song on the vehicles comm started up softly and Loki followed a few lines of melody before realizing that someone had spoken up.

"I don't think he got it," Jace was saying. "Yo. Buddy."
"What?" Loki twitched away from the light touch of the boy's hand upon the blanket.
"Your brother, I assume, landed on Earth somewhere." Mildy repeated patiently.
"His name is Thor," Loki said softly. He closed his eyes, took several deep breaths before continuing. "Prince Thor of Asgard."
"Thor?" Jace glanced at the girl. "Mildy – you think it's Thor… that new blond superhero or mutant or whatever?"
"With the US government or whatever, right?"
"Yeah."
"Superhero?" Loki asked.
"Where's he at then?" Mildy mused. "New York?"
"Well, Iron Man's in New York. He'd know, eh."
"I don't like it. Going to them is…"
"We could drop him off and skedaddle," Jace suggested. "There's a company in New York where we could lay low – or we could just transport back here-"
"And show up on Stark's infernal radars?" snorted Mildy. "I think not."
"Stark?" Loki weakly glared at Jace, now thoroughly exasperated. "Who do you speak of?"

There was a short silence, allowing the rumble of the engine and the light vibration of the glass and the quiet whoosh of the heater to take over. Another vehicle whizzed past, honking loudly, and then night fell again as the vehicle's twin aft-lights faded in the distance. Loki's gaze darted from the boy to the dark head of the girl up front.

"Who…?"
"This is a new era," the girl, Mildy, finally said, voice soft. "It's a time of conflict and peace, a time of great evil and great good. It's all on the news nowadays – every day. Villains and superheroes duking it out."
"Duking…" Loki echoed, puzzled.
"Fighting for power, for dominance, for the people and the treasures of this planet."
"Thor is one of them," said the boy. "Appeared two years ago or so and every now and then, he
shows up on the news. Like Captain America and Iron Man."
"He-he is t-taking over the planet?" Loki asked, remembering the Thor of old – confident, powerful and headstrong.
"No, no," Mildy shook her head with a laugh. "Unless you count girls' hearts as the planet. No. He's one of the people that save it."
"Of course," Loki muttered to himself sourly. He turned away and stared morosely out the window to his right. "He would be."
"He doesn't have super powers, really," the boy said. "He's got… muscles though. Like, almost the size of my head! And he's never afraid – and he just does his job and he's gone. He's so cool."
"Hm."
"I suppose you guys had brotherly competition, huh," Mildy smiled sympathetically.
"You – you could s-say that," Loki glared out his window and watched the stark, empty trees lining the road recede behind them.

He could not hold onto the annoyance though. It was too great to carry and fatigue already tugged upon his eyelids. Sleep.

…sleep…
…little one…
…rest…

"Anyways," Mildy said, returning to their original topic, "Thor works for SHIELD, a government agency – and I'm sure that if we get you to Stark – the guy who is Iron Man – you could get to Thor no problem."
"Well, it'll be a hassle."
"But nothing to worry about," Mildy reassured Loki who nodded reluctantly. "You just rest. We'll drive you over the border and get you to New York at least."
"The border?" Loki asked slowly, feeling fatigue weigh even more heavily upon him than usual.
"You fell on the wrong end of the lake," Jace smiled then. "But it was a good place, in the end. They'll have gotten there by now, for sure… but there won't be any hint as to your arrival on Superior."
"Superior?" He was fighting to stay awake now. A losing battle, he feared.
"We'll talk more later," Mildy said softly. "Rest."
"Yeah and-"
"Jace."
"'Kay, 'kay," Jace's sigh was the last thing Loki heard.

[...Fate is coming…]

[...it is…]

[...coming…]

He dreamed.

[...it is…]

[...coming…]

Reverberating from the deep, from the abyss of the darkest parts of space, the voice of the Titan murmured whispered threats. All of his life he had heard voices. Now he understood after a fashion. The truth.
The truth is…

Thought was a coiling string which he could only tenuously cling to, following its steadily unraveling threads, hoping to find the logic in the moment. Memory was a jumble of painful shards only barely softened by time.

The truth is that He was there all along. He was there all along in the darkness – manipulating and taunting and drawing all things who could hear his voice to him. Within his presence, all that is good shrinks away and evil blossoms under his tender care. Anxieties, fears, ambitions and hatreds grow and take root.

And he, Loki, was one of them. Or could have been one of them.

Sometimes, he saw through the cracks and edges of the world and in the glistening starlight, caught glimpses of another life, another Loki. A dark Loki, alone and afraid and angry.

Was it him of the future? Or him in another time and space? It is frightening – but there is comfort as well. He knew the dangers and the pitfalls; now he understood where he stood – his role, his charge, his Fate – to stand on the edge and guard the borders of Reality and the Otherworlds. Loki, the one who haunted the Shadow-realms and straddled the worlds of grey.

There were, after all, other voices. The Voices of the Stars and those blessed (and cursed) to speak and act for them. Perhaps, in the end, this is what Odin and Frigga saw. Perhaps this is what Iormungand and Miot'vithr spoke of… Perhaps, it is what Jotunheim – and all of the Realms need.

Loki spun away, wrapped in golds and blues and plummeted, wingless, into the depths of cold dark waters.

Waters closed over his head, burying him in its icy arms, muffling all sound until all he could hear was the thrum-thrum of Life and the heartbeat of the world.

-Lake Huron rolls, Superior sings
In the rooms of her ice-water mansion
Old Michigan steams like a young man's dreams
The islands and bays are for sportsmen
And farther below, Lake Ontario
Takes in what Lake Erie can send her
And the iron boats go as the mariners all know
With the gales of November remembered-

"You said border," Loki managed to rasp out at some point in time.
"We're n-not in the same cou-cou-country as Thor?"
"There's no single world government in place," Mildy explained. "Not that you're stuck in one country, necessarily. You can travel other places with proper documentation."
"Yeah, Thor goes everywhere. Like Iron Man and Captain America, you know."
"Jace. How would he know?"
"Oh. Right."

-0-0-0-

"It's a light broth. It's probably gonna make you feel sick, but…"
"A chicken broth." Pause. "Mildy, does he know what a chicken is?"
"Jace."
"Uh. Sorry…"

"Never mind Jace," Mildy was saying. "He's a kid." A pause. "Well, I say kid, but he ought to know better, really."

"Where – where are we now?" Loki asked drowsily as his physical need for sleep waged war with his insomnia.

"Almost at a city – where we will get your papers. They'll be ready. We'll just need a photograph."

"We'll have to prop you up and make you look a bit more alive looking," Jace grinned. "You're pale."

Loki looked down at his skin. It was white. The usual white. Glancing over at the windows' faint reflection, he realized that his coloration was his usual Asgardian one – pale skin, brilliant green eyes and long, curling black hair slicked back. The spells he had placed upon himself were temporarily back in effect. But how long… if Thor sees this… His gut twisted and he turned abruptly away from his false reflection, trying to avoid Jace's knowing gaze.

"I look as though-" A pause. "As though I-I am at death's door," Loki finally said.

"Well, you were and if you're not careful, you will be," Mildy shook her head. "You're not out of the woods yet."

"Speaking of woods," Jace sighed. "Who else is tired of the same old winter tree landscape?"

"It's spring!" Mildy protested.

" Barely!"

As the two bickered, Loki leaned back and watched the obviously siblings banter back and forth good-naturedly. Once upon a time, Thor and he had argued similarly. There had been the usual jabs successfully wielded by himself. Sif had never been pleased by Loki’s wit and mischief although Thor had never taken umbrage at Loki’s antics. Thor himself could get up to his own brand of foolishness without encouragement from Loki.

How many years has it been since we last saw each other? That day – that day we went to Jotunheim… Has Thor changed? Has he grown? Has he kept to his usual heroic image? Has he learned to think before he speaks? Loki tried to image a grown up Thor. It made his head hurt to imagine it.

Perhaps not.

Or perhaps, you are just afraid to be the one left behind. The one who is worthless, the one who never learns. After all, throughout your entire life you were always the one who had the common sense, the worldly wisdom, the intelligence to keep out of trouble when necessary... and now. Perhaps... Thor has no need for you. Neither will Odin. Or Frigga.

Not Frigga, Loki told himself.

Fingers tightening on his blanket, Loki attempted to suppress his worries and fears, his rising inner panic and paranoia.

Even worse, his dark self whispered. What if your magick fails you and Thor sees you for what you truly are? Perhaps he will end your misery and carry out his promises so long ago…

-I will hunt them all down and slay them all-

No. Loki forced himself to breathe again. No. That will not happen. It will not. It will not... It must
not...

-Will you wait for me
Or will you run
Out of the darkness and into the sun
Innocent fools in the bed that we made
Frozen in shadows of sheets where we lay
I am a demon with you by my side
Can't bare my sight of myself and my blind-

With each passing hour, the empty wilderness began to fill with sporadic homesteads. Farms, villages and hamlets dotted their path and with it came more passing vehicles similar to theirs (some smaller, some larger), inns and wayside eateries. Loki did not leave the 'van' as Jace called it and his fare was relegated to light broth, water and the packets of nutrition which Jace deftly handled. Jace is, Loki thought, older than he looks and more experienced than he seems. However, no chance to ask Jace about his life and background arose. Mildy seemed equally close-mouthed on the subject. Loki understood. A race hiding behind another. He knew all too well the habits one adopted in order to make oneself a new life.

The clouds, on occasion, cleared away, revealing wide unhindered blue skies with a bright sun which drove Loki underneath the sheets. Eyes accustomed to dimmer lighting and darker rooms, the glinting of sunlight off remaining snow and the reflective surfaces about it gave him headaches.

In between the increasingly more frequent bouts of fever, dizziness and nausea, Loki watched a beautiful wilderness pass. It was spring after a hard winter, Mildy had said. Finally.

Then the cities began to come and go, building up from small groups of homes and a variety of marketplaces within vast concrete blocks ('malls', Jace called them, 'box stores'). There were many words spoken which Loki could barely comprehend. An entirely new lexicon to encompass an alien world – 'strip mall' (not to be confused with a 'strip joint'), 'suburbs' (also known as the 'burbs'), 'turn offs' (not related to 'turn ons', apparently) and other things.

Finally, Jace began to point out blue signs which heralded the arrival of the city which they had been aiming for. Loki allowed the increasingly concrete and stone world of a small metropolis pass by without comment, glad to be able to just lay back and watch the blinking lights, the occasional blaring horns, the accompanying curses on the part of Mildy and the cloudy worlds reflected in the tall glass buildings erected on either sides of the road down which they traveled.

'Sky-scrapers', Jace called them. Loki thought it fitting. He had, of course, seen taller, but there was something enchanting in the odd juxtaposition of the clear glass and metal bearing the reflections of the clouds and skies. This world, he mused, is purer than some.

Images swirled in then – memories of Sharda'aa and the mining colony he had visited with Nesta. Nesta. That brought back V'slozh'noi. V'slozh'noi, Nesta and Mal. It pained him to remember.

Loki closed his eyes.

Mal.

He had tried to reach out to her, but she as too distant from him and there was no sense of her anywhere.

Mal. He thought desperately. Do not go where I cannot follow…
- Today there's a mist on the river.
Tomorrow the sun's gonna shine.
Yesterday's gone and the dream that I had
Will be quietly mine…-

"Mildy's going in," Jace's voice sounded soft in the dark as the two waited in the van in the underground lot in which Mildly had parked the dark van. "Karl'll probably come down and check you over. Get you a fix if he thinks best."

"Karl?" Loki tested the foreign name upon his tongue slowly, feeling more confused and fatigued than ever. He sighed.

"Karl. He knows… he's an, uh, elder, I guess. I dunno what you'd call him, but he can help. Karl has everything."

"Th-th-the papers?"

"Those too."

Loki listened to the wind whistle past one of the cracked open windows, the far off plink-plink of dripping water, the crunching of tires as various cars passed them by, looking for places to park and the distant sound of honking. Time seemed to pass slowly and anxiety began to mount again as Jace glanced at his watch for the fourth time.

"She is – she is late." Loki shifted uneasily, glancing out of the misting windows.

"Well, he may not be in yet. It's not even breakfast time-"

"Sh-sh-she is in trouble-"

"No. She isn't."

"W-we should go-"

"Loki, dude. We can't go anywhere. Not like this anyways."

"Can you not d-drive?"

"Well," Jace hesitated before allowing, "Yeah. At a pinch, but hey – man – look. I'm kinda young looking and they'd pull me over in a heartbeat for joy-riding or whatever and then they'd see you and who knows what'd happen then."

"Joy-riding?"

"It means – it – never mind. Look. Here, I'll send her a quick text."

"Can you not call her?"

Jace gave Loki a look. Before Jace could flick on his phone, the little machine gave a harsh beeping sound, startling Loki. Flinching away from the seemingly loud tone, Loki found himself hard pressed to calm himself down, gasping for air as his unsettled nerves screamed in panic and pain.

"It's Mildy. She wants to know if I would like a cappuccino," Jace grinned then. "Karl's in. Just grabbing a cam and his stuff and he'll be here in a jiffy. It'll be over before you know it, Loki."

"They always say that."

"Yeah," nodded Jace ruefully. "I guess they do."

-0-0-0-

Loki.

He woke suddenly. Instantly alert and muscles tensing as he lay there in the dark and took stock of his surroundings, he slowly recalled where he was. With a short groan of frustration, Thor pulled himself up and propped himself on an elbow, turning to flick on the small light by his bed.

Thor, Crown Prince of Asgard and current employee of SHIELD, glanced around the Spartan room – at the nondescript grey-blue walls, the rough empty dark-blue carpeted floor, the half-open closet
doors revealing his neat stacks of uniforms, the narrow window which revealed only a small square of blue-pink sky. *Morning*, he realized. *Early morning*.

Sighing, he hoisted himself further upward, leaned against the simple black headboard of his bed and contemplated the grey-blue ceiling above him. Everything was indistinct in the early morning light, fuzzy-edged and shadowed like his thoughts. Thoughts he could barely collect.

*What...* Thor frowned. *What was that...*

His first impulse was to rise, to open his cabin's door and look down the hall, to peer out the window, but the young man stilled himself, forced himself to stay calm and think things through.

*It is morning*, Thor noted. *Morning, which means few will be out and about on SHIELD's flying fortress, The Helicarrier*, he corrected himself. *Security being what it is and since Natasha and Clint have not contacted me, nor has there been an alarm, it was not an intruder.*

*Stay calm and think things through.* That was what Adam had said. *Adam, the mind healer. Take deep breaths and consider all your options before taking action. Remember that haste can result in hurt. These are habits that are difficult to learn, but are necessary for maturity.*

Maturity. That was a topic upon which Odin had elaborated at length many times. Frigga had spoken of 'growing up' and 'making hard decisions' and even Loki had berated his older brother whenever Thor had followed his wilder instincts.

"Why had I not listened to them before?" Thor had wondered aloud once. "Why did it have to take me so long?"

"So," Jane raised an eyebrow, "you have it all figured out now?"

"Well," Thor allowed in chagrin, "not everything."

"I was going to say. You have a long ways to go." Jane tipped her head and smiled encouragingly up at him, her blue eyes meeting his. "But the first step to any solution is admitting you have a problem. It's a good start."

"Things will not get easier?"

"Hmmmm..."

A pause.

"Better in some ways, but it will never be easy. If I told you it was easy to change one's habits," Jane said slowly, "that would be a lie." Pause. "Do you want a lie?"

"No," Thor had replied softly.

*Growing up. Maturity. Looking before one leaped.* Hard lessons he had endured all his life and now, now it seemed to sink in little by little. There was listening and there was talking. There were Jane and Steve and Adam and Coulson. There were admissions and realizations.

*I am capable of mistakes but it is important not to make the same mistake twice. I was not ready. I cannot be everything my father wants me to be, nor must I be. I am my mother's son as much as I am my father's.*

So Thor sat in his room and listened to the quiet as his mother had advised him so long ago. He sat there and waited.

It was difficult to hear but the whispers murmured on the edges of his awareness. Frigga and Loki had mentioned them and Odin had once lectured on the Spirits of the Realms and their Voices. They spoke to many but were heard only by a few, those so named the Voices Corporeal – mages and
seers and kings. As a child, Thor had attempted a few times to hear what Frigga spoke of, but after a few failures, he had not tried again, dismissing it as fairy-tales or superstitions. Later, Thor recognized the power of the mages and, watching Loki do battle, Thor knew that there was something he was missing – something important. But it was not in his nature to ask for help, to admit weakness and so he had said nothing and so time had passed.

*I am capable of mistakes but it is important not to make the same mistake twice.*

Now Thor quieted his spirit, slowly cleared his mind and focused on the shaft of pale pinkish blue light filtering into his shadowy room. Focused on the feel of the crinkly white cotton sheets beneath his hands, his deep breaths…

…*he is…*
…*he…*
…*coming…*
…*he is coming…*
…*the…*
…*on the…*
…*before the…*
…*winds…*
…*wings…*
…*of the dark…*

*Gibberish. Garbled gibberish.* With a sigh of deep frustration, Thor groaned and banged his head on the head board once before leaning forward to rub his eyes in the palms of his hands. *This is impossible.*

*Someone is coming. Someone is coming on the winds – before the – winds or wings of something dark? What… What…*

Rising from his cross-legged position, Thor pulled on his white t-shirt, blue sweater, black jeans, socks, and well-polished boots. Grabbing his wallet, phone and security pass, the blonde-haired superhero left behind the haunting stillness of his room and wandered down the almost halls of the Helicarrier.

It was early morning. The red numbers on his alarm clock had put the time around five in the morning. In the final hours of their watch, the night security shift and the night crew were no doubt looking forward to being relieved. Cleaners and other maintenance crews also passed by, finishing their tasks for the day. Smiling as he made his way upward to the landing strips, Thor nodded at the crew members and guards he knew personally. No one spoke or stopped to talk with him, which suited Thor's mood just fine.

He had much to consider. *Who would he call? Coulson. That was an easy answer. What would he say? What could he say?*

"Thor."

Swinging around, Thor blinked down, nonplussed as the man he had just been thinking of appeared to materialize at his elbow.

"Coulson," Thor smiled then. "I did not see you there."
"You're deep in thought this morning."
"Yes, I… I was thinking," Thor ended lamely.
"I noticed." Coulson tipped his head. "Want to talk about it?"
"You are not busy?" asked Thor, noting that Coulson was in his usual suit.

Still, Thor's blue eye sharpened as he noticed that Coulson's dark tie was slightly loosened and askew. The top button of the man's collared shirt was undone as well. A rare sight for the seemingly everlastingly tidy man. Off duty then.

"Just got off a job," Coulson smiled. "I've got some time."
"Ahhh… well then, perhaps you will need some coffee?" Thor suggested. "I find that a cup of coffee is most necessary after a quest, uh, mission."
"Coffee sounds great."

As they made their way down to the cafeteria, Coulson related a few interesting tidbits about his trip – something related to a possible alien sighting, which turned out to be mutant hijinks.

"Midgard keeps a steady gaze outward," Thor mused, as he and Coulson took a seat in the cafeteria. "Searching for life elsewhere."
"We think it is there. We have reason to believe it's there. You are living proof."
"There are no doubt others on this planet who do not belong."
"They haven't come forward," Coulson frowned. "I don't blame them. Humans have a history of… intolerance towards each other. Goodness knows how they'd behave around aliens."
"I feel welcomed," Thor shrugged. "When I came before – when I was younger – I also felt welcomed. Midgard is a warm place."
"I'm glad you feel so.
"So, I feel as though it is my charge, to care for everyone here. Asgard has always kept an eye out for Midgard's well-being… and coming here and living amongst you, I feel… even more responsible than ever."
"We can take care of ourselves," Coulson pointed out mildly.
"Indeed," Thor quickly agreed. "Jane keeps reminding me of that as well. And Steve."
"And Steve."
"But, there are some things that Midgard is not yet prepared to face…" Thor shuddered. "Frost Giants and Fire Giants and space pirates and the Skrull and the Kree… Vast empires and Realms of barbarians who have no respect for other peoples' freedoms."
"Hmmm… Well, we'll take them on as they come." Coulson took another quick sip of his coffee.
"We have some things up our sleeve." His light eyes slid to the side and he added ruminatively. "Midgard has its own treasures…"
"Have care," Thor said. "My father has many treasures and weapons of great might in his vaults, but danger can come from possessing them…"

He remembered the dead guards encased in ice. The glittering, swirling blue of the Casket. Such feelings of violation and uncertainty… and fear. And in fear and wounded pride, I had lashed out… without thinking what effect it would have upon my Realm and my people.

"We're…" Coulson frowned. "We do not want to cause trouble where there is none. It's just a matter of readiness."
Thor nodded. "I understand that. And yet, I warn you still. Sometimes… sometimes… in the quiet of the night, I can feel it. I can hear it."
"Feel what?" Coulson leaned forward, eyes suddenly sharp like a hawk. "Hear what?"
"Things," Thor finally said, vaguely. "I know that Midgard hides many things that should not have been forgotten and I know that all Realms hold spirits who stand closely at the side of Fate and some say, they know His secrets."
"Thor… We aren't talking about some hoodoo-vooodoo are we?"
"Hoodoo-vooodoo?" Thor asked blankly. 
"Magic and stuff," Coulson waved a hand. "I know stuff exists but it's all energy fields, isn't it?"
"In a manner of speaking. Magick is the manipulation of forces, of energy, of the physical and the
non-physical world. That's what Loki said." A pause. "Magick is also the tether to the Unseen
Realms. Mjolnir is part of that. I am part of it as well. We are all within its framework."
"I see…"
"Perhaps you do, perhaps you do not." Thor sighed. "After all, not all are gifted to understand its
workings and not all are able to speak for the spirits. But they speak nonetheless, heard or no."
"And you hear… voices?" asked Coulson delicately, looking a little worried.
"More than before… and yet not enough," sighed Thor. "All I know is that there are things in this
Realm which hold great power and on Midgard no less. This morning… I woke. I woke suddenly. I
woke suddenly with a word on the tip of my tongue. Since then I have attempted to listen… but with
little success."
"What did you hear?"
"I only know one thing. Someone is coming. Someone perhaps bearing great evil."
"Great. That's just… great," sighed Coulson, reaching for his pager. "Anything else I should know?"
"Nothing else… except…" Thor paused and his gaze fell on one of the cafeteria's monitors. His
mind was clearly wandering elsewhere now. "I woke with one word in my thoughts."
"What was that?" A pause. "Thor. What was it?"
"Who was it," Thor corrected Coulson absently. His blue-eyed gaze hardened and, rubbing his brow
with a sigh, he met Coulson's worried look with a similarly matching one. "It was my brother. Loki."
A pause. "I think… I think… he is here."

Thor's voice tightened.

"And he's in trouble."

-0-0-0-

Karl was a tall, grey-haired, brown-eyed man with tan skin and a firm yet gentle touch. As he talked,
his rough voice was lowered and hushed but calm and in control. Clearly, he was a man who knew
what to do in a crisis. After a cursory examination, Karl gave Loki a few potions which he claimed
would ease Loki's magickal fever a little, for a while. Fighting fear and watching Mildy nod in
agreement, Loki grudgingly took the medicine.

"The de-tox is… well… inevitable." Karl shook a small capsule and held up the clear liquid as it
turned a sickly shade of yellow. "He was on that Fire-Mind shit, for starters."
"Fiero," Loki groaned.
"Yes. That's what some call it. But note the color. There's something else with it – korm, I should
imagine. If you're lucky, that's all they gave you."
"So what can we expect?" asked Mildy apprehensively.
"Well, in words you'll understand," Karl put away his doctor's bag and pulled forward a dark leather
satchel. "He's coming off a long period of drug use. Drugs like LSD – and other kinds of uppers and
downers. Uppers to make him talk, downers to keep him sedate afterwards. Not the best kind of crap
to be taking on a regular basis, but at least it's not crack."
"Things are going to get worse before they get better, basically," Mildy said.
"Yes, unfortunately, yes."
"This sucks," sighed Jace.
"Well, don't do drugs," Karl shook his head, looking grim. "That's what we tell kids these days,
right?"
"But he'll be OK in the long run, right?"
"He'll… live," Karl said. "If he keeps fighting his impulses to take drugs and if he keeps his nutrition
levels up… Our friend here has as good a chance as any. Even better if his magick comes back and
he allows himself to project."
"I think his magick comes and goes erratically. He said at one point that it was gone for a longer period of time but it's back now."
"Hm. So he's probably experiencing nerve damage. How many signs of haywire magick have you guys seen?"
"Flares and the like – mostly invisible to the human eye..." Mildy said. "Nothing too serious...yet."
"I dunno, some of it's totally creepy," Jace shuddered. "At night, when I'm trying to sleep, he whispers to people."
"I do not," Loki grumbled from his makeshift bed. "Liar."
"Well," Karl gave both young men a look. "Our friend, uh, Loki, will do just fine, talking or not. Who have you been talking to, Loki?"
"No one," Loki turned away, rubbing the side of his temple. His now purple-red temple. Or maybe that was a lie too. "My-my mother. Sometimes. I-I-I miss her."
"Does she speak back?"
"Some-s-sometimes."
"Hm." Karl glanced at Mildy. "He might be talking to Her."
"That's fine, right?" Mildy asked apprehensively. "He's not going to be crazy forever."
"Well, it's hard to say. Those who speak with Her on a regular basis aren't always known for their... rationality." Karl mused. "Still, we don't know for sure – and besides, that's what drugs do in the end. They open the mind to worlds we can only imagine. Who knows where he has been. Anyways, you two have been taking good care of him. I'm giving you three potions – one for mild relief of pain, one for nutritional balance and the other for his magick, stabilizing it and enabling him to keep his form. Very little, I imagine. Other than that, we have a few things to prepare."

With that, conversation turned to other topics and Loki allowed himself to relax a little, letting the conversation continue on with little to no interruption from him. Strength, apparently, was illusory and his mind could only take so much information before rebelling. Karl, at any rate, seemed trustworthy and the small breeze which circulated the lot whispered only comforting things.

*I am in good hands*, Loki reassured himself for the tenth time. *Fear is the drugs. Or the lack of drugs. It is a matter of the mind. Reality is not what you see it to be...* 

Envelopes appeared and reappeared as Karl discussed with the three travelers what to do upon arrival at the border. There were pictures taken – Loki was propped up by Mildy while Jace held up a white backdrop behind his head and shoulders – and printed off elsewhere (which Jace ended up retrieving). While waiting for Jace to return and the final signatures to be properly added, information about the roads, the border guards and traffic was touched upon, which relieved Loki no end. Obviously this venture was not entirely doomed to failure. The word 'safe house' passed into the conversation and out just as quickly. For Mildy and Jace, apparently. Loki was bound for a tower. A tower called Stark Tower. A great building in the center of the metropolis, owned by an incredibly wealthy and intelligent ex-weapons manufacturer who currently moonlighted as a savior for the humans. A friend of his brother, apparently. Or at least an acquaintance.

When Jace arrived, Karl finished up the paperwork while simultaneously giving warnings and advice about Mr. Tony Stark and his enterprises and SHIELD, the shadowy organization with whom he had been known to consort.

"We've a few folk in there, keeping an eye on things," the older man said, "but they won't be able to help Loki if things go awry."
"Things won't go awry," Mildy said quickly, watching Loki as he twitched at the words, hands beginning to shake just a little. Again.
"Things won't go awry," Karl said, "because Fury is in charge – but he is a soldier and takes his..."
orders from the Faceless Council, whom I do not trust. With those jackasses around, things could go to hell in a hand basket in a few secs."
"I thought that stuff was just nutty conspiracy talk," Jace blinked.
"They don't control the world," Karl said quietly, "but they might as well. Watch your step. New York is their throne room, so you will be walking in their territory."
"OK," Mildy nodded. "We'll do it quietly and quickly. Drop him off and skedaddle. I'll memorize the address to the safe house and get Jace and I stowed away quickly before Loki talks."
"Loki will tell the truth or he may not," Karl glanced at the glittering green-eyed, dark-haired alien who stared back at him suspiciously. "I hope he will leave you two out of it. Even if he doesn't, they won't find you again. We'll have new identities ready for you. Regardless of Loki's actions."
"Here we go again," sighed Jace. "Fine. This better be worth it though."
"Jace!" Mildy jabbed her younger brother in the ribs and giving him a glare. "Of course..." Here, she glanced at Karl. "It's worth it."

Karl glanced over at Loki then, his gaze unreadable before slowly nodding.

"Loki is worth it. He has to be."
"What-"

Before Loki could get out his question, Karl continued onward, unstoppable.

"Now, you said Loki mentioned a brother called Thor. We have record of that. Landed in New Mexico with a hammer which is unmovable. It's still there – a new site for the SHIELD organization and the headquarters for their operations."
"Like Roswell, all over again."
"Roswell and the truth about the universe has long since been buried... This is something else," Karl sighed. "Now, the truth is out. Aliens exist, et cetera, et cetera. And of course with the hereding of the unknown, there is the usual reaction of fear. Fear drives all in a heedless, headlong race to war."
"Wow. Depressing much," Mildy made a face.
"At any rate, Thor of Asgard, as he is known, has allied himself with SHIELD and works for the protection of Earth and humanity. I do not know if he is aware of what SHIELD stands for, but he works for them nonetheless."
"It is here, isn't it..." Loki whispered.
"What is?"
"The Tesseract. It is on Midgard... it is here and the Voice of the Void is coming for it..." Loki closed his eyes. "I saw... I s-s-saw..."
"The Voice of the Void – the Mad Titan has arisen?" Karl leaned forward. "You are certain."
"On a dead planet, or a m-moon, or a graveyard of stone... it is called Sanctuary and he sits there, in the darkness and draws all who would heed him..." Loki's ramble hitched, voice rising as panic set in. His green eyes darkened at the memory as a mirthless smile crossed his face momentarily.
"He-He is coming."
"Coming," Karl echoed. "And you wish to warn Thor."
"He is coming. F-f-for it. Through it."
"The Tesseract."

Loki nodded wordlessly. Karl rubbed his eyes.

"Earth isn't ready for this. Telling Thor... I understand." He turned to Mildy and Jace. "You two need to get him to New York. Now."
"We're ready," Mildy said, voice a little unsteady.
"I'm glad you came to me," Karl said, "but there is no time to lose. I must go to the Elders and tell them the news. You must go onward."
"Well," Jace climbed in, shifting the new bags and packages of food Mildy and Karl had brought as
well as the envelopes holding Loki's forged paperwork and Mildy and his identification. "I'm ready. Let's get this show on the road."
"Ride well and hard," Karl nodded. "May the stars shine on you and show you a clear path." He turned to Loki and nodded his head. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Loki."
"Th-tha-"
"Just relax," Karl said patting Loki's blanketed foot. "You're in good hands."

With that, Mildy closed the van's doors and got in the front seat.
"You guys ready?"
"As ready as we're ever gonna be," Jace said. "Loki?"

Loki smiled painfully as his gut twisted again and his world spun around him slowly, painted in the colors of the rainbow. He could already see it — a vista of grey and metal and glass, a metropolis on the edge of the ocean. Overhead, the skies were grey and blue and filled with clouds and smoke and beyond the stars shone down unseen, day and night. In the center, there was a tall tower, curved and grand as any other, a monument to a man's genius.

And shooting upward to the sky in a blaze of pure white energy, a light shot upward. A door opened to a dark world, an empty moon and a swarming army. Thrumming with energy, the Tesseract sang.

Twisting away, Loki closed his eyes to the vision and told himself again as the world spiraled and whirled. He knew that as the claws of sickness sank in deeper into his already weak flesh he would find it even more difficult to achieve what he sought, but there was no choice. Loki smiled crookedly.

_I am no hero_, he mused, _never saw myself as one... I was always the smart one, the self-preserving one, the manipulative trickster who carved his own path, found his own way to achieve his desires and protect the ones he learned to love. This is different... in some ways, but no less necessary._

_There will be time._

"I – I," he managed to get out be slipping back to the worlds beyond the stars, "I am ready."

[…listen to the silences…]

[…heed the still, small voice…]

[…it is calling…]

There would be time. He had to make it so.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there you go. The crappiest, craptastic chapter of all time. This story is a first draft so there are parts that are weaker than others. This is one part which will get a major edit, I think. I dunno. Sigh. I just don't know what to think. But sometimes you just need to write and let it be.

SIGH.

Let me have at it. Tell me what you think. If you see plot holes or have questions, feel
Information on Levels of Mage/Magical Abilities

Level 1 – Eno'sa
Level 2 – Eno'tho – Thanos
Level 3 – Eno'frei
Level 4 – Eno'ah – Elven Mages/Odin
Level 5 – Eno'ko – Asgard/Jotun/Any Other Healthy Realm Mage/Prince Loki before Odin caps him
Level 6 – Eno'yul – Sharda'aa/Regular Mage
Level 7 – Eno'vee – Uncollared Kol'la/Current Prince Loki post-Fall (past Sleen & Jela)
Level 8 – Eno'mah – Collared Kol'la/Current Prince Loki post-Fall (up until Sleen)
Level 9 – Eno'lei
Level 10 – Eno'sanai

Alien Glossary:

'auzha – fucker
bollen - boulders/monoliths
chi'iano – a radioactive piece of rock similar to uranium
cho'ai - lover
Dou'ma – idiot
Eno'Kesh'i'ko – the system of Eno, a type of magical level measurements
Fen'chi Galaxy – Andromeda Galaxy
gan'ga'war – steel balls
gan'ko - ganka'jya chon, a steel beetle
iz'kyr – a kind of frozen stone powder which is used as a narcotic for some species
Janah – similar to dammit
Ka'autha'ndarna - Reality
kalo – a kind of purple-red fruit, similar to a pomegranate or dragonfruit
Kholathan – Safety Belt/Protected Zone
kol-sava'atha – a titanium-rich ore
kolm (sniffer) - a kind of drug like weed
kon'bi – short for konji'bifu, space bat
ku'sha – "fuck"
lasu – space rat
l'gon – storyteller
lifeljos – life light/signature
Morning-star - a mace
myech'myena - shape-shifting
Mye'hyoi Peyt – Milky Way
n'ch'nka – a kind of cow
Nord-Stjarna – north star
Nyr'Fjor - Jotunn's original name for V'slozh'noi
oma'auzha – mother-effer
oto'oa - big sister
pu'lotni – plutonium
pye'nee - a kind of bird
Ra'ska'yeh o Phyllo'xia – Tales of Phylloxia
roobyn – a red stone
r'senk'ne – a kind of deer/cow hybrid
Shen'grid – the Protected Zone, the zone in which habitable planets orbit around a sun
Shi'nuwu – Reality/Yggdrasil
sigan – short for yan'sigan, rock-worm
So'shah – Earth/Midgard
syem'fyerma – family/community farm
Tai'shu – The Void
tro'watal – perseverance
udji'oo – a drug, like opium
whota – wheat
Inspirational Music: Assassin's Creed OST, The Village OST, Machinarium OST, Enigma, Monument Valley OST

Thanks to all reviewers who are so patient and encouraging in their comments towards myself. This story is far from perfect and feels like its far from over, so thanks for hanging in there guys! I so appreciate you all!

Thanks to: lemomina, Dragonanzar, miravisu, Everfew, Elaine_du_Lac, halska, Kai_Maciel, Korilian, thaliaarche, iBlameGlobalWarming, MissyZ, not_overjoyed, cbc2v

Over 10K of words... I hope you guys like! Please review after with questions/comments if you wanna encourage the writer~!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Distortions In Time
Chapter 78
Revelations

They never made it to New York.

-0-0-0-

It took the better part of a day and a half but eventually the small van approached the border of the two countries, turned itself into a more innocuous family vehicle bound for holidays and passed the guards, passport checks and light questioning that always accompanied them before finally continuing onward into the neighboring country. *Good ol' America*, Jace had called it but Loki, as he descended further into fevered dreams, wondered if that was indeed the actual name or some form of sarcasm on Jace's part.

Mildy, noticing that their patient's condition was worsening, kept her voice light and focused on keeping the small group of travelers calm. Explaining in her usual steady way, Mildy rambled on about the relationship between the two neighboring countries – one large in size with a much smaller population and one a little smaller in size with a much larger population, how their relationship was defined within the world of trade and commerce and politics, and how their history was more or less characterized by a peaceful interdependence. Compared to other countries, the two got on pretty well.

*Other countries.* Loki got a whole discourse from Mildy on how the entire planet held over six billion beings, human and non-human and an awesome variety of flora and fauna. Interwoven with dreams of the Stars and Asgard falling to dust, Mildy's voice filtered into Loki's thoughts, bringing with her soft patter memories of wars and empire building and migrations and great deeds of unknown heroes.

Loki said nothing but drifted on the vibrations of the vehicle and Mildy's gentle chatter, sometimes
falling into restless sleep. The rest of the time, he stared dazedly out onto the passing landscape of grey rocks and stark, splintering, naked trees and muddied ground with swampy puddles. *The remnants*, he thought idly, *of snow or great rains. The beginning of spring.*

Like Asgard, but not. Asgard was golden and pure and sweet; its colors more vivid, its odors more pungent, its sounds more vibrant. Midgard was a different world all together – like Jela, yet busier, teeming with life. It was a blur of grime and sweat and smoke and green things and life and death. Such a medley of sights and sounds and smells made it unique in its own way. Boisterous, naive and confident, Midgard was a young world.

A red barn passed by and with it, its usual accompanying white and grey home for the farmer – wide and welcoming and at the end of a long, narrow and rather rutted, unpaved muddy lane. White fencing met the road and edged it and the fields were the usual mixture of mud and dead grass and new patches of green. Several horses huddled in the center of the field, looking rather disenchanted with the world about them. Loki imagined them galloping free across the fields until they met the horizon.

*That is the order of things.* He pressed his forehead against the comfortingly cool glass of the vehicle which carried him closer and closer to his destination. *That is how all creatures ought to be. Wild and free...*

The car drove onward and Jace, glancing out the back window of the van blinked in surprise at the sight of a suddenly missing white fence.

"Oh shit..."
"What?" Mildy stopped at Jace's interjection. "Everything okay back there?"
"It's... uh... good. Keep going, keep, uh, keep driving."

Loki glanced at Jace. The young man had been changing colors over the past hour, but then so had Loki. *Illusions*, he knew. *Illusions with little connection to reality.* He hoped. That was what he told himself as he watched Jace. Jace, who smiled as his skin slowly peeled away revealing blue skin and unfamiliar yet familiar dark blue lines of the Lesser Kindred. The young man raised a dark eyebrow.

"I saw what you did there."

The young man grinned secretively and Loki found himself hard put not to recoil in horror. The face of a monster.

*No*, Mal said, sitting down beside him and taking his hand, the face of a friend. *Your own. Nothing to fear... nothing to hate...*

"Un-unrealistic optimi-optimism," Loki snorted and then twitched as her similarly blue fingers ran over his cheekbone, past his sweat-coated temples and into his long, tangled hair.

The truth, Mal replied with a smile, smoothing back his hair. *A beautiful truth, for there is beauty everywhere if one is willing to find it. Have you forgotten so quickly?*

"You-you are ss-special."

*I am but one of many*, Mal assured him. *One of many who stand invisibly behind you, who support you, who carry you onward to where your destiny lies.*

"You are not – not invisible t-t-to me," Loki shivered.

She took his hand and grinned then. *I should think not – not after all the work I have put in to*
"Is th-that what you c-c-call it?" Loki chuckled painfully and found himself shuddering with aching pain from the exertion.

You are not well. You should rest, Mal gave Loki a stern look. You have a long way to go before you reach home – and the road you must take has many twists and turns.

"That – that would b-b-be my luck," sighed Loki in the barest of whispers.

You will reach the end, Mal repeated, you will reach the end. She leaned forward and kissed him on the brow. We are waiting.

We are waiting.

[...what secrets do the stars hold...]
[...what treasures do they hide...]
[...across time and space...]
[...lost to history...]

"He's not gonna make it in time."
"When was the last time you gave him Karl's meds?"
"Half an hour ago," Jace's voice was tight. "It's not the detox. That's... it's – it's his magick. Burning him up. Detox is the last thing he's feeling right now." Pause. "Probably."
"Probably...?"
"Well, you heard him. Talking to who knows what. Creeping me out, seriously."
"Hallucinations?" Mildy asked.
"Or something else..." Jace suggested darkly.
"There's not much we can do to control it." Mildy sighed. "Except to watch his progress."
"And run." Catching Mildy's look, Jace blinked, "What?"

Mildy adjusted the rear-view mirror downwards sharply and watched the dark head on the small pillows move restlessly. The now pale skin of their guest was flushed and sweaty and his eyelids fluttered intermittently. A sure sign of dreaming. She sighed.

"Karl was pretty certain we weren't going to make it," she finally admitted. "New York was a bad idea."
"Why didn't Karl say so before?" grumbled Jace.
"He did. Just to me."
"So that's what you two were up to for so long. He – uh – Loki thought you were plotting."
"We weren't plotting," Mildy said testily. "Just making some back up plans."
"What was the backup plan?"
"Well," Mildy glanced back again before readjusting her mirror. "He awake at the moment?"
"He's out. Well, as out as he can be."
"Kay, well, there's Plan D."
"We had a Plan D?" asked Jace in disbelief.
"When don't I have a few back up plans?"
"Fine, so what's Plan D?"
"Well," Mildy sighed. "There are groups all spread throughout this area, as you know."
"Yeah..." Jace gave her a look. "I remember Tanna. Our second cousin somewhere in Ohio, right?"
"Uh, yeahhhh-"
"The snooty Starbucks girl."
"No, wait," Mildy frowned as she attempted to recollect her cousin. "I thought it was some kind of
family diner."
"I was sure she was at Starbucks."
"Maybe she moved."

"Who would move from Starbucks?" Jace raised an eyebrow. "Free frappes."
"I'm pretty sure you don't get stuff for free just 'cause you work there, Jace," Mildy rolled her eyes.
"Never mind. The important thing is that there are other Kindred about. Karl told me they are more than likely friendlies."

"No clan wars in this area for some time," Jace agreed.
"Not since the early eighteen hundreds anyways," Mildy corrected her younger brother. "At any rate, Karl told me that some are in law enforcement." The young woman double-checked the lane before moving over and settling down at an easy pace. *Speeding at this point won't help us*, she thought grimly. *We'll have to play things by ear.* "If anything were to happen-"

"Which it will-"
"If anything were to happen, then they'll help us out. Karl's already sent word ahead."
"Huh. I don't suppose they'd turn a blind eye to ambulance hijacking or something?"

"We're trying to stay under the radar, Jace." Mildy shook her head and exhaled a gusty sigh. "Just let me know when his levels go over the fourth bar. As soon as that happens, we stop the vehicle and run for it."

"I think I mentioned running earlier in this conversation."
"Well, we aren't going to ditch him unless we know he'll end up in friendly hands."
"Or SHIELD." Jace shuddered. "Sort of friendly hands."
"They aren't that bad," Mildy said uncertainly.
"Torq told me-"

"Don't believe everything coming out of Torq's mouth, idiot. He's a misogynist perv and has the IQ of a maggot. SHIELD has its problems – who doesn't? Even the Council has its own factions and conspiracies. The key is vigilance-"

"I swear, Mil," Jace said seriously, eyes focused on the small grey box in his hands with its flickering screen – the magick counter which Karl had given them. "Sometimes you sound just like Dad."
"Hey now," Mildy found herself hard put to suppress a smile. "No need to be mean!"

[...across time and space...]
[...lost to history...]

Like a ship lost in a tumultuous storm, Loki drifted through a world of fire, an ocean of green and blue flames which broke, wave after wave, over him. *Drowning him.* There was no end to the horizon of the empty world surrounding him. There was only a steel grey and black sky and the overwhelming sensation of sinking.

*Drowning him.* As he fought to keep afloat, as he fought for control, Loki choked back a cry of agony. *Was he screaming? Were they listening? Was anyone there to hear?*

*Was anyone there to hear...*

[...lost...]
[...so lost...]

Loki could feel it building up from within again – a new wave of power rising upward and out. It burned along his nerves, dancing like wildfire and like wildfire it exploded outward uncontrollably. He turned, hand stretching out in warning, entreaty -

*Run. Run.*

But there was only light and wind and a crashing, roaring sound as the entire world ripped apart.
Despite Karl's device, Mildy and Jace had only three minutes to exit the vehicle. One minute, Jace was yelling at his sister to stop the van. The other two minutes the two whipped open their doors and raced to the far ditch, throwing themselves down the steep incline just as the entire thing went up in green and blue flames and an ear-deafening BOOM reverberated through the clear, crisp countryside air.

For a moment, the two young people sat there huddled, arms tight around their knees as they watched pieces of leather and metal fly over their heads.

Jace with his head on his knees attempted to get his breathing under control as he remembered the last image of his patient. Not patient. Loki, the mage. The Voice. A mage whose eyes had caught fire and the entire air about him had quivered as tendrils of blue and green had slowly emanated from his skin.

"All our lives, Mum and Dad talked about mages and I just..." Jace's voice trailed off as he tried to recall what he saw again, trying to remind himself that this was not some kind of dream. "This is real, isn't it? It's happening to us?"

"Yeah."

Mildy's voice sounded small and her face, Jace saw, was wrung with worry and sadness. She angrily scrubbed away at her face with the heel of her hand buried in her black hoodie. This was no time for tears.

"There's no way he could have survived that..."

"Maybe... maybe he'll be OK. Karl said that Loki would make it," Jace didn't sound too convinced. "How?"

"It's magick, isn't it? Mum and Dad always said Voices were special."

"You think he's actually a Voice?" Mildy asked curiously.

"Well," Jace hesitated. "You said he was."

Loki's eyes had been blue and green flame and the power which had flared out from within him had bent the world about him, had oscillated the very reality, the very particles of space about him. He had seen it with his own eyes and Jace knew for the first time in a long time, with utmost certainty, that he would remember that moment to his dying days.

"He tried to warn us." Jace finally said, staring straight ahead at the rising green and brown wall of the ditch. "He tried." "Voices aren't evil," Mildy said finally. "They are blessed and they are cursed. They are dangerous. That's all." A pause. "When you speak for the Stars, when you speak for Fate... you go deeper into... into that world and sometimes you can't go back. Sometimes... it's too much for you to handle."

"Unless he was able to channel it somehow." Jace shivered. "He could have expended it somewhere... Hey, I'm cold."

"It's shock."

"No. I mean. I'm really, really cold. Don't feel that?"
Mildy raised her head and glanced up at the grey sky from which now fell large white snowflakes. Reaching out, her hand caught a few. They paused there for a moment before finally melting, the only sign for her lower internal body temperature.

"It's snowing."
"It's quiet," Mildy said, turned – and then paused and pointed at the edge of the ditch now coated in thick ice. "Something happened. I'm going to go up and look."
"Me too."
"We'll have to give the local police a call. There's no way to hide this."

The two of them stood up, automatically (and fruitlessly) brushed at the mud now caked on their backsides before turning and making their slippery way back up the incline.

"What's the official story? Did Karl make a back up story?" asked Jace.
"We were passing by on our way to relatives. We saw a man on the side of the road, administered first aid and put him in our vehicle. Upon which he exploded. Keep it simple, keep it as close to the truth as possible."
"Let's hope there's a friendly on the force."
"There should be." Mildy stopped at the sight of her vehicle. "Karl says Michigan all the way to Maine are stomping grounds of several clans."
"Let's hope they're friendly..." Jace's voice trailed away as he finally focused on what lay before them. As the reality of what happened hit him once again.

It was a wreck. The entire top of the black van had blown away and the only remnants of the windows were small jagged triangles of glass at the edges of the now charcoal flaked metal frames from which lines of melted rubber and plastic now ran. At first glance, everything inside that was flammable was now black and the thinner plastic appeared to have melted into lumps.

Getting to it would be difficult as well. Somehow the explosion had created a thick field of ice along the road for several meters, which then dissipated into a thinner veneer of ice for as far as the eye could see. Closer to the "ground zero" as it were, spiking upward, the frozen water formed tiny sharp-edged waves which glistened weakly under the grey light.

"Holy shit."
"Yeah."
"Crap."
"Yeah," Mildy agreed again.
"My phone's gone," sighed Jace.
"I've got mine," Mildy reassured her brother.
"Yeah, that's nice for you," Jace grumped, voice tight as he slowly turned and looked around for any onlookers and finding none. "What am I going to say to Dad? This'll be the third one I've messed this year."
"Glad to see your priorities are straight," Mildy stepped forward carefully and nearly ended up on her face. "Is he... there...?"
"Uhhh..." Jace edged forward, his feet never leaving the ice, making his careful way around the spikes. "Here, hold my hand. Wait – what – you can't walk and call at the same time! Wait until we get to the van at least."
"I'm scared," admitted Mildy, pocketing her phone temporarily.
"Join the club."

The two made their slow way over and cautiously peered in. As Mildy had guessed, the entire inside of the vehicle was blackened by the flames. Their papers, their plans, their pillows and cushions and blankets and first aid kit were entirely or mostly burnt. An arid scent drifted upward – charcoal and...
melted plastic.

"He's – he's..." Jace slowly peeked in and glanced over at Mildy, stunned. "He's – alive!"
"And naked," observed Mildy, also following her brother's gaze.

Half curled up on the twisted van seat, Loki appeared to be unconscious among the debris.

"And blue. Again. Got some nasty burns by the looks of it... Surprise, surprise."
"Hm," Mildy pulled off her coat.
"How we're going to explain it..."
"We won't. We're stupidly helpful kids who just wanted to help the guy. It's not our fault he's a
"Oh, right, right. Backup Plan B." Jace tugged on her coat. "This side is all melty. I'll go round and
wrap up his man parts. You call it in."

Giving each other one last nod, the two separated to their self-assigned tasks. Within fifteen minutes
the local sheriff had come out, accompanied by a very small ambulance. It was not as confidence
inspiring as Jace would have hoped, but the young man held his tongue and watched from his place
at Loki's side as his sister approached the men.

The sheriff, a tall, lanky, dour-faced, dark-haired man, gestured at the paramedic who immediately
made his way over the ice. Flicking his hat brim up, the sheriff approached carefully around the
treacherously slippery ice. On reaching Mal, the officer tipped his hat in greeting and said laconically,
"Sheriff Robson."

"Mildy Kantor."
"Heard you had an accident... an explosion?"
"Something like that."
"Let's see then."

With that, the man slowly circled around the vehicle, giving the paramedic space and ignoring the
odd blue skin of the victim before returning to Mal's side. Together they stood there, looking over the
burned vehicle calmly. Hands on his hips, the sheriff sighed.

"Well..." He scratched his chin. "Karl did warn us."
"Karl?" Mildy asked innocently.
"Ah, it's been a while since..." the sheriff turned to look Mildy up and down with new-found respect
before adding, "Many have fallen to the shadowed lands."
"But we will return to the Realm of the Cold Suns." The barely perceptible trace of tension
disappeared from the girl's posture and Mildy smiled back cautiously. "Karl told you."
"He did. Thorough and cautious. That's Karl." A smile crossed over the sheriff's face and
disappeared. "I see that he has raised his clan well. Not like some of the others. How's Canada these
days?"
"Clement."
"Heard it's getting warmer."
"Some winters more than most," agreed Mildy, "but it's still nice. Quiet, for the most part."
"Yeah, yeah," Sheriff Robson turned to look over the vehicle. "Except for recently. Heard you guys
got yourselves a tidy present from the Great Council. Some spaceship or something."
"It's a Sarcofagi and it's not ours," Mildy said carefully remembering Karl's whispered warnings.

The inter-clan politics have always been a minefield, Mildy reminded herself. Now's not the time to
make things worse.

"It's everyone's," Mildy shrugged. "It just happened to land on our side of the lake. Really, the most
important issue is warning the humans about what's coming. Non-interference, that's the basic tenet we have all held to. Successfully... but... the size of the threat..."
"The grapevine says it's a Titan."
"Yeah... that's what the info said..."
"I thought Titans were just a -- a story," the sheriff sighed. "Guess not, huh."
"I hear you."
"Karl and the Council are convening."
"I figured," Mildy shrugged. "He's got the black box." She glanced sharply at the sheriff. "You didn't think he'd sit on the info?"
"Well... I suppose not..."
"And let the world burn?"
"That's kinda... melodramatic." Sheriff Robson turned to the young girl. "You really believe in this Titan stuff, huh. I thought all that tradition craziness was just that... craziness."
"I suppose you are much more hip these days. Probably got yourself a Warm-blood wife and all," Mildy retorted and then stopped, sighed and shook her head. "It's neither here nor there. It doesn't matter what you believe or what you think will or won't happen. It doesn't matter what I believe either. There is only what lies before us -- what task you have been given."
"Call in the Feds, in SHIELD, whatever," Sheriff Robson sighed. "Yeah, I can do that. It's gonna be interesting, that's for sure. Hopefully all of our stories will sound okay on paper. I'll get all the paperwork ready -- we'll have to go back to the office and make it all official. We'll get your witness statements down and have it signed and send you off packing sooner than later. If everything turns out alright."
"You'll make sure they're going to treat him well?" Mildy asked, voice tight.
"I know they don't have a bad track record, but they are the Feds. Not HYDRA. We've got people in SHIELD. He should be fine." Sheriff Robson glanced over at the paramedic who looked up and shook his head. "He's not doing well, either. Still blue."
"Detox and magickal restraint backlash."
"Damn. What are they doing out there?"
Mildy said nothing. There was nothing to say -- only conjecture and such kinds of conjecture, she knew, if she spoke of her thoughts, would pass through the rumor mill within the day, spreading throughout the clans. *Prisoner of war, possibly. That would be the best bet -- but without proof... I can only talk about what I know for sure, what I have seen with my own eyes.*

"He's a Star-Walker. A Voice," Mildy finally said. "And Karl treated him like... someone very important."
"So he's an actual Mage who sees mumbo-jumbo stuff..." Sheriff Robson sighed again. "Well, I'll add something about magic into the report..."
"Well, how else would you explain the ice on the road and the localized snowstorm? And the explosion? And the shape-shifting? And the blue skin?" Mildy asked sarcastically. "Coincidence?"
"If only we were that lucky. Unfortunately, SHIELD isn't most folks..."

A pause.

"I'll need to get on the radio." Sheriff Robson watched as Jace and the paramedic carefully pushed the stretcher to the edge of the worse ice coverage, where it slowly flattened into smaller bumps and the two vehicles waited. Lifting the now securely strapped and bundled patient into the small ambulance, the paramedic and Jace disappeared inside for a few moments before the paramedic emerged and shut the doors.
"Mike will take care of your, uh, friend. We'll have him on his way and out to SHIELD in no time."
"Loki." Mildy said quietly. "His name is Loki."

*Loki. That name... a fairy tale, a myth. But she is...* The sheriff, reaching for his walkie-talkie, froze,
glanced over to the waiting ambulance and then looked back at the dark-haired, muddy-looking girl who stared back at him. A fairly normal looking young woman who looked like one of those outdoorsy kind of university students – plaid shirt and jeans and dark hoodie, yet her eyes were old. Older than me, or perhaps she had experienced more than me– or perhaps she had Seen something... Sheriff Robson twitched. Creepy traditionalists. Just... creepy...

"Loki," he repeated. "Well, that's..."

Just dandy. Creepy. Great. That's just great. Sheriff Robson stifled a shiver and jerked his head toward his waiting SUV.

"You can hitch a ride with me back into town. I'll get Dan – he's the local mechanic, a Warm-blood but a good guy – out here to retrieve your, uh, van. You can fill out the insurance stuff and the witness reports in my office... and your brother too. And we'll keep the, uh, patient, um, Loki, as stabilized as we can."

With that, the sheriff made his way back to his vehicle, muttering about the long task ahead of him. He did not check to see if the girl was following him. He did not look back at the blackened van and the swirls of ice and the slowly thickening blanket of snow. He did not look back.

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"Where did they find him?"

"On the side of some road," Coulson said quietly, looking down at the security camera video feed of the restlessly twitching and jerking prone figure of their most recent captive as he was being loaded into SHIELD's fastest helicopter.

Not a captive, but not quite a guest, Coulson mused. A quandary. A problem. Problems can be fixed, even difficult ones. It is merely a question of time. Time which we may not have.

"On the side of the damn road," Nick Fury, chief officer of SHIELD and the captain of SHIELD's highly secretive and incredibly technologically advanced Helicarrier. The dark-skinned, one-eyed man eyed the screen again with disfavour and incredulity.

"Apparently." Coulson held up a thick stack of papers. "I've got the statements here and a USB with the video interviews. Two kids driving by on their way to a cousin in New York saw a man lying on the road. They stopped, saw that he looked injured, tried to get him in the vehicle."

"Who does that these days?" Hill's dark eyebrow rose as she flipped through her copy of the accounts.

"Young Samaritans are out there." Coulson said dryly.

"Not cynical about the youth of our nation, huh."

"I'd like to believe people have it still in them to do the right thing," Coulson replied mildly. "Even with all the evidence is to the contrary?" Fury asked. "So, he doesn't look good."

"To say the least," Coulson nodded. "Blew up the vehicle somehow. His powers or whatever people like to call them nowadays seem to be out of control. Multiple reasons for that kind of thing... but in this case, it's fairly obvious. Torture and drugs. He's clearly delusional. Whoever he is."

"But he's emitting the same radiation."

"The remnants of radiation on Lake Superior's water's edge were difficult to pick up but the match to this explosion is too much of a coincidence to overlook. Our scanners picked his signature up--"

"His?"

"Long hair, blue-skinned with strange scars, but it, or he I should say, he's an, uh, he. So far as we can tell," Coulson gestured at the screen again as the bed was rolled into the elevator. "Scans will tell us more information as to what we've got on our hands."

"And he's alien? Not a mutant?"
"Hard to say, sir," Hill flipped through the pages. "He's not saying anything now – nothing coherent anyway – but when he was picked up, apparently he asked for Thor."

"Thor." Fury turned to Coulson. "When were you going to tell me this? I needed to know that yesterday, dammit."

"We can't be certain," Hill pointed out. "It might be coincidence."

"Uh, well, let's see, around four days ago," Coulson gave Hill a disbelieving look, "Thor comes to me with a feeling that his brother is coming. Soon after, we get signals of a radiation burst and lights over Lake Superior which resulted in a fruitless scan of the area, revealing only that something had been there and has since then disappeared."

"It's suspicious," allowed Hill.

"Dammed unnerving is what it is," Fury snapped. "How could an entire spaceship disappear off the face of the earth overnight?"

"It was small?" Hill suggested.

"It was far away and there was that hour spent dealing with the RCMP," Coulson shook his head. "We don't want to mess relations with our friends over the border..." A pause. "Then," here, he frowned, "we got the Tesseract—"

"It's been acting up for a while now," Hill said. "Selvig is certain something – or someone – is interfering with it."

"How?"

"Well," Coulson shrugged, "he said something about it potentially being an object used as a door... maybe someone is knocking."

An uncomfortable silence ensued as the three of them stood there considering the implications of what Coulson had just suggested.

"All in all," Coulson continued, seemingly unperturbed, "things look odd – and this explosion on a back road in upstate New York does beg several questions."

"Such as," Fury said scathingly, "how the hell the passenger of the missing spacecraft got onto American soil?"

"No papers, nothing," Coulson quickly scanned the reports further. "Very strange. The Sheriff took some notes... thinks that most of the paperwork if there was anything went up in the fire. Or he swam... it's all conjecture."

"Yeah, conjecture is one way to put it... Who the hell would believe he swam across the Lake?"

Fury glared irritably at the screen.

"Unless it landed closer to the American side and then drifted..." Hill suggested bravely.

"He's not saying?"

"He's out of his mind, showing all the signs of withdrawal. Preliminary reports point to torture, physical abuse, recent attempts at self-administered aid as well as odd radiation signatures." Coulson shook his head. "Whoever he is and whatever he's here for, we won't know for a little while. Agent May and four others for security have flown him straight to DC, where we've got a secure hospital room for him."

"Not a cell?" asked Hill with surprise.

"Not yet," Coulson shook his head. "We have the usual security parameters in place, of course. A host of suppressors and such-like based off of our initial tests with the Hulk a while back... That should suffice. If we get Thor in there, if our, uh, guest is in fact related to Thor, it'd be better if we look like we aren't the bad guys in the situation. Besides, it's not as though our guest is in prime fighting condition."

"Well, at least I know one person is thinking straight," Fury nodded, his broad shoulders relaxing a little underneath his ubiquitous leather coat. "He's in our hands, he's not resisting, he's not going anywhere and he will provide us with some kind of information eventually, if Thor's premonitions are correct... I've got a few things to spin for the Council at least. Half of the battle is knowing your plan."
"Let's hope it's the right plan," Coulson turned away from the screen, wondering yet again why the silent replay of those dark-blue lips moving in muted entreaty gave him such feelings of unquiet.

It was raining in Washington, DC when Coulson landed. Gloomy, dark-grey skies lowered overhead and short gusts of wind brought heavier torrents of rain underneath his umbrella which didn't provide much coverage as a result from the wet. By the time Coulson had made his way down the long sidewalk in through the purposefully unimportant side entrance to SHIELD's Washington, DC headquarters, it felt like the bottom half of his suit and his shoes were entirely flooded with water. Squelching in a rather unimpressive kind way down the hallways, Coulson briefly considered changing before dismissing the thought and making his way straight to the elevators.

A few minutes later, the short-haired, soft-spoken agent was on the other side of the glass looking across a bare, sterile room at their newly acquired guest. There were no windows other than the one-way glass window through which he now observed the scene. Even the door was solid metal. The walls, empty of any decoration, were a pale blue-white, giving everything a hospital-like feel.

Hospitals, Coulson grimaced. We've all been there... but it's never fun. He glanced over at the two doctors who stood and watched the patient – guest – before them. A tall, wispy-haired man wearing dark glasses and a shorter, Asian woman, both wearing blank expressions. Dr. Slane and Dr. Wang. Coulson wondered if they had any comprehension of bedside manners, before he reminded himself that the guest more than likely had no realization of where he actually was and no doubt did not have the cognizance to care. Judging by the twitching and jerking, by the incoherent speech broken by intermittent groans and soft cries emanating from a speaker somewhere, the patient had reached breaking point and was thoroughly submerged in a private world of agony.

Not so private, Coulson mused, as his eyes wandered over the small room in which he now stood. It was full of blinking machines – various monitors and computer screens scrolling rapidly with incomprehensible data. Useful information, he hoped. Information Fury likes would even be better.

"What's his status?"
"Well, he's in withdrawal. Or something we would call withdrawal or detox. More or less," Doctor Wang passed over her clipboard. "You probably won't get the jargon, but in layman's terms, he's working through some kind of drug detox at an alarming rate. I've never seen anything like it."
"Alien," interjected Doctor Slane. "We've typed up our reports and submitted them – but we've got the copies here..." He handed over a small sheaf. "Our initial scans suggest a kind of hermaphroditic species. Age indicators are way off, but if you put the numbers in relation to Thor's genetic code, quite close in age – younger even. Alien, as I said, of course. The, ah, blue skin comes and goes, which points toward a shape-shifting kind of creature. An actual biological ability, apparently. Very interesting."
"Like a mutant," Wang explained helpfully.
"As opposed to...?" Coulson blinked.
"Well, there's always..." here, Wang shrugged uncertainly, "there are some who suggest that some creatures have abilities that enable them to bend reality on a molecular or sub-atomic level which results in the appearance of change or-
"You're talking about magic?" Coulson asked, an eyebrow rising.
"It's possible..."
"But you don't think this shape-shifting is magic."
"A bit of both, according to him," Slane added."
"He's talking."
"Sometimes," the woman frowned. "As his personal doctor I do not allow in-depth interrogation, but some light questioning has yielded some answers and created more questions – and some of the
information he volunteered on his own."
"Whatever he is, whoever he is, wherever he actually came from," Slane caught Coulson's eye and
gave him a solemn nod, "Agent, he's not here to harm us."
"That is for the Director to decide, but I will bear your opinions and judgments along with your
reports to him personally and we will consider our next steps carefully."
"Loki has continued to ask for his brother -"
"Loki?"
"That's his name. It's in the report," Wang replied stiffly. "Apparently, he can... feel... his brother."
"This is where you are getting your discussion on magic from, I see," Coulson flipped through the
sheets quickly, feeling damper and unhappier with each passing minute. He could feel a headache
coming on already from the small type. *So much to read, so little time.*
"We've seen things... it's all on the security tapes – although the tapes fuzz out sometimes," Slane
added, his voice suddenly gaining scholarly excitement which apparently couldn't be dampened by
Wang's look of dislike. "Loki says he's not able to control it because of a recent removal of limitation
– and the detox."
"I think we need to take everything with a grain of salt here," Coulson had to point out. "He is, after
all, not in the best of health – and coming off of drugs and, if I'm reading your charts correctly,
Doctor Wang, there are definite signs of torture... He's probably out of his mind."
"In regards to his mental status, I'm not sure myself," sighed Wang, tucking a long black lock of hair
behind her ear. "However, what we've seen, we've seen. He's got something up his sleeve – magic
or some hidden technology and he's scared, scared and desperate. He talks about his brother – but he
doesn't want Thor – his brother – to see him. Considering how nervous and crazy he is, it's best to
appear as though we are going along with his wishes, if temporarily."
"He's mentioning Asgard and doom," Coulson's eyebrows rose. "That's not good. I thought Thor
said his family were all up in Asgard... how did Loki end up down here – coming off of drugs and
being tortured... did Loki say?"
"Not yet. He just..." Wang glanced at Slane who shook his head. "Closes up."
"There's something out there, Agent Coulson," Slane said somberly. "And it's not pretty."
"Okay..." Coulson took a deep breath, rubbed his eyes, feeling his years more than usual and sighed.
"I think you two need to give yourselves a rest – I think we all need a rest. How long have you been
watching him – for a day or two, right? Let's regroup tomorrow and see what's what. I don't know if
we are all thinking straight at this point in time."
"What do we tell Thor?" asked Wang.
"We don't tell him anything. Yet," Coulson said quickly. "We'll bring him in when Loki's feeling
better and, uh, more stable. If they are actually brothers..."
"Thor isn't related to Loki," Slane interjected.
"Adopted."
"Adopted, right. Yes. Same difference," Coulson shook his head. "Long night. If they are actually
connected, then we'll bring in Thor to ease the questioning."
"He's in no state to be questioned-" Wang protested.
"Not now," Coulson repeated, "but it will happen. We will be watching and we will wait until Loki
is good and ready. Obviously, from how Thor talks, Asgardians have hangups about appearing weak
and I'm pretty sure that royalty even in other dimensions has issues with adopted kin coming off of
drugs. Let Loki have his privacy and we'll pull in Thor in a week or so."
"You don't believe him," Slane said.
"No," Coulson replied bluntly. "Not yet, but maybe I will. He's talking doom, he's talking Asgard,
he's asking for Thor... it's obvious whoever he is, he's worried about something. If we combine it
with a few other facts-"
"Like the missing craft which crashed into Lake Superior-" Slane interjected.
"Oh... that happened?" Wang asked, eyebrows rising.
"It happened – insofar the signals and computer data says it happened but eyewitness reports are
vague and there are no remnants of the spaceship if there was one-"
"He was there though, because of the radiation match," Slane continued. "We think so," Coulson turned to look at the patient who was now shouting at someone called Korvath. "If there is any connection between these events, it looks as though our patient has all the answers."

"We'll do our best." Slane promised. "Seems like there's a lot more questions that need answering that I knew of."

"I trust you to keep an eye on things, Slane. Doctor Wang, great work so far. I appreciate it – Director Fury, as well. I'll be back in the morning... maybe try to chat with him a bit – no interrogation, I promise."

"We'll see you tomorrow then, Agent," Wang smiled stiffly, her dark eyes filled with worry. "You take care of yourself as well. We'll all need each other working as team the top of our form if we are to solve any of this."

"I'll get some zees in," promised Coulson.

With that, he left behind the dim room, the steady mechanical beeps and the unnerving whispers of the half-conscious patient. Whispers of a dark threat, a never ending Void, a nameless horror, the lure of great, silver-white power and the call of the unseen. It was calling.

[...]power encapsulated in treasure long buried [...] 
[...]power of ancient races long submerged [...] 
[...]guarded secrets of deep memories [...] 
[...]the lost peoples of the icy realm [...] 
[...]for once...]

"She's misbehaving, Director," Selvig's voice crackled over the phone through rising static. "We've had a real time of it today, collecting all sorts of data. The gamma ray index has been steadily rising with each energy spike, not only increasing in power but also in duration, which leads me to believe that at some point in time, there may be some kind of."

"To the point, Doctor," Fury interjected, "we don't have all day."

"It may achieve critical peak function-"

"Are we talking about explosions?"

"A massive explosion, Director, but we are certain we can give you a fairly close prediction as to the mass and power output as well as-"

"Will your calculations give us a time frame? Will we be warned in enough time for an evacuation? We'll want to evacuate everyone before it blows," Fury said clearly and slowly, since the scientist seemed to be, as usual, beside himself with excitement over the progress of his experimentation.

"Oh, yes, yes," Selvig paused and seemed to collect himself. "Of course."

"I'll be sending an agent over. Barton." The Director paused to let that sink in. "He'll keep me apprised of the situation."

"Right, yes. We'll, ah, we'll look forward to his coming."

"I am sure you will," Fury turned about to look at the busy command room of the Helicarrier. Heads bent over screens and various staff and personnel were coming and going, bearing clipboards and tablets and files. Overlooking the controlled chaos, Hill, wearing her usual dark, neat uniform, walked about and gave advice and more specific commands as needed. "Security will be increased."

"Problems, Director?" Selvig asked.

"Doctor Dormer's initial scans were correct. The Tesseract did in fact respond to an incoming vessel."

"Ah. Yes, the resonance of the incoming gamma rays – ah, the flares had spiked in response to something like a wormhole. You found the aircraft or whatever it was that came through?" Selvig, if possible, sounded even more excited. "I would very much like to see what would set off the Tesseract..."

"No, I'm afraid Lake Superior has as yet to yield results," the Director rubbed his forehead. "That
remains a mystery, but we appear to have recovered the passenger... and he seems to be connected to Thor and possibly the Tesseract."
"The, uh, alien mentioned her?"
"The Tesseract was referred to, we think."
"Well, I talked with Jane."
"That would be Doctor Foster?" Fury asked carefully, a frown creasing his forehead.
"I didn't say anything about the Tesseract, of course, but I mentioned the signal we picked up and she said that her people in Arizona picked up some signals which indicated massive amounts of gamma radiation combined with the usual gravitational warping found in wormhole phenomenon. Which was rather odd since Einstein-Rosen Bridges, ah, wormholes, are theoretically-"
"Theoretically?"
"It's theoretical physics, Director, excepting the, ah, Bifrost, which appears to function in its own... special way... there has been no real observation achieved for wormholes."
"Of course."
"Right, yes, but theoretically, wormholes are accompanied by high levels of radiation. What kinds of radiation is as yet uncertain, but I am pretty sure no one was expecting such high levels of gamma radiation... So Jane, she said that it couldn't have been the Bifrost. The energy signature and wave signals aren't the same as what happened the other night. More like a standard wormhole – except for the part where it wasn't so standard what with the high level gamma radiation and a few other particles of matter even we aren't certain of. Perhaps what our sensors picked up were the first actual detection of dark matter at work. Who knows?"

Fury rolled his eyes, feeling once again as though he had gone down some strange, unpractical rabbit hole with the physicist yet again. Not for the first time he wondered how such people sprang into existence – eyes on the stars and their feet wandering into every pothole known to mankind. If you let them, they'll jabber on for hours, he sighed.

"Well, whatever happened that night out on Lake Superior," Fury said, cutting off Selvig from further babbling on about radiation and particles and atomic whatnot. That's for another day. Another day when we don't have the Tesseract acting up and strange aircraft landing and disappearing and aliens exploding on back roads in upstate New York. "We want to know. Our guest will hopefully shed some light on the matter. While we get that information, we are putting the Tesseract under high security. Please keep a close eye on it. It's key for the operation. You know what I mean."
"Yes, of course," Selvig's voice fuzzed in and out. "Look. She's spiking again. I really should go."
"Do and let me know when things get critical."

Fury hung up and leaned back in his favoured black leather chair. The Council would need to be updated. Of late, they had been breathing down his neck more than usual. Hill needed his newest notes from Selvig, as did Coulson. And there were other things to consider. The one-eyed Director swiftly considered the worst case situations which came to mind first hand. Barton to Selvig. Coulson to Rogers and Thor. Romanov to... Stark? Did they want to bring Stark into this mess. He could make it worse. On the other hand... If something goes wrong with the Tesseract, Stark could help... so could Banner. Banner. Fury shook his head. That path led to madness. But, he mused, at least I have options.

So much to achieve...

[...what secrets do the stars hold...]
[...what treasures do they hide...]
[...across time and space...]
[...lost to history...]

There was another time, another space, another Loki. A Loki who had grown up in a golden world.
A golden life, filled with love and uncertainties and as fragile as a glass. When truth revealed himself, the mirror cracked and all that he had known about himself seemed so fruitless. A lie. An illusion.

What was he really? What was inside?

There was nothing. Nothing but a monster.

And he had ran and ran and ran until only the darkness could find him and he lost his way home.

"You are an idiot," Loki told him. "You had it all and you threw it away."

Like you were any better, the other told him with a bitter smile.

"I was doing it for my people."

So was I.

"You were also doing it for yourself, for your ambition, for a game."

And you were not?

"No..." Loki said. "No. No, I wasn't." A pause. "Yet, here we are."

The two of them were standing on the edge of a tall grey block-like building, looking down at the expanse of a great city. A Terran city. A great metropolis fo Midgard. Swarming with Chitauri aircraft and various armed Midgardian aircraft, the air hummed with energy and tension. Explosions rocked a couple buildings as one of the great Chitauri creatures crashed into the buildings. On the ground, small dots spread out across the street. Helpless, like ants.

"What happens next?" Loki asked, turning away from the pathetic sight.

Odin is right. The Midgardians have no real way of protecting themselves. The Realm Eternally Sheltered indeed.

The other pointed upwards to the sky. Clouds swirled about a massive hole in the sky. A form of Muth'a'Ginnung, a tunnel between space-time, supported by the steady injection of power from a mechanical object.

"The Tesseract? It is here after all."

So many things, the others smile was sharp like broken glass and as hard and glittering as obsidian.


Indeed. Power for those willing to grasp it. Those who show no fear.

"Power..." Loki reminded the shrieking of the Bifrost and the thrum of energy filling the air as he attempted to destroy his birthplace. Not his home. Never his home. No. "Power... without responsibility, it destroys all of us."

He stared back at himself, baffled.

"It destroys all of us – until there is nothing left but regret."

The other did not move, but the blue-stoned scepter in his hand lowered.
"You have not learned that yet," Loki said softly. "You will never truly know until you lose it all. Lose what you hold most dear. And you will know the truth..."

Truth? What truth? He hissed back, green eyes glistening with tears.

"That power can never bring it back... it's a lie. An illusion..."

An illusion? This is all an illusion-

With that Loki fell back into the dark.

[...guarded secrets of deep memories...]

As a young child, he had been afraid of the dark, had hidden beneath his sheets or his bed and watched the shifting shadows with wide green eyes.

No.

More often than not with his imagination running wild, Loki had ended up slipping into Thor's bedroom and curling up on the wide settee before his older brother's fireplace.

No. No.

If dreams ran too deep, delved into dark memories of black towers starkly rising to cold stars on a wind-swept world. If dark whispers preyed upon his fears, speaking of the twilight, of hate, of a death-filled hate. If Loki could not stave off the night, he would hide within the arms of his mother.

No. No. That was not how it was.

And she would sing, whisper-sing, soft lullabies and her warmth would surround him and for a night or two, there would be hope that everything would be fine, that it was all but a dream or an illusion born out of a fevered imagination.

That was not how it was...

Frigga sang to him now. And yet...

And yet...

Underneath her soft voice brewed such great power and her face as it turned toward him, blurred and shifted. Who – Loki's thoughts halted as unfamiliar lips turned upward.

...Fear not, dear heart...
...you are at the door...
...just open it...
...open...
...and you will be free...
...free...

[...for once...]
[...catch whispers of a long-forgotten flames of hope renewed...]
[...flames of hope renewed in the fires of exploding stars...]
[...in the steady signals...]
[...in the surge of power...]
He was free. Spent, yet free; free, yet spent. He just was.

Loki. Loki of Asgard. Loki of Asgard on Earth seeking his brother. His brother, Thor.

Loki's pale blue eye-lids slowly fluttered open as he whispered yet again that name.
"Thor."

But not yet. His magick had as yet to return with his illusions. Soon, Loki told himself. Soon.

-On-0-0-0-

On the other side of the window, Coulson shared a look with Doctor Wang and then nodded. A week had passed and with that quiet whisper, they now knew that their patient had returned.

Loki was now on the mend. It was time to call Thor.

-On-0-0-0-

"Thor," Coulson rose from his seat behind his desk. Bringing a file folder with him, he drew the tall, muscled, blond-haired alien-turned-man down into the sofa opposite.

"You have news of Loki?"
"Loki?"
"My brother."
"Yes," Coulson nodded. "I didn't forget... Have your premonitions about Loki faded?"
"No," Thor shook his head, blue eyes worried. "I still worry. Of course," here, the ex-god forced a smile. "Worry is the duty of all older brothers."
"Of course," Coulson agreed. "Well, I've got good news and bad news."

"Loki has come? He is safe, well?"

"Yes and no." As Thor half rose to his feet, Coulson quickly waved a hand, moving quickly over to the sofa couch closer to Thor. Laying a hand on the thick forearm of his newest employee, Coulson smiled reassuringly. "Hear me out, Thor. Just, hear me out, OK? Then you'll see what I mean. It's a very... sensitive matter."

"Has Loki done something wrong? If so, he that was not his intention, for Loki has no concept of Midgardian laws and expectations – and as a rule, Loki is very careful, so if-"
"No, no, no. Loki has done nothing wrong. Your brother..." Coulson said slowly and carefully. "He was very ill when we found him. Hurt and, ah, very, very sick." A pause. "Has your brother ever shown signs of mental... illness?"

"Mental illness? He is sick in the mind?"
"Well, he's not entirely... he was not entirely coherent... talking about doom and darkness and a shadow and he made reference to the... to other things. Things only classified officers of SHIELD and our government know about."

"Loki has abilities of Sight and he has mentioned hearing the Stars before," Thor frowned. "It is entirely possible that Loki has Seen such things. I have come to grips with the fact that perhaps I was always a little jealous of those magickal abilities which came to him so easily... But," here Thor gave Coulson a serious look, "Father always told me such giftings came with a price and I have seen Loki push himself to the edge before. It is painful and disorienting, he told me, but he always..." Thor trailed off his voice smaller and more painful. "He always came back."

"Well, he's getting better," Coulson reassured Thor. "The doctors tell me that there were signs that he was tortured-"

"Tortured?!"
"You said there was a war going on back on Asgard between your Realm and another one?"
"Yes, Jotunheim! How did they capture Loki?"
"I don't know. We haven't asked Loki any questions – not many anyways. He asked after you and he spoke with us a little, but never really coherently." Coulson shook his head. "I thought perhaps you could talk with him. We would listen in, of course, but perhaps he would be more comfortable... with you finding out what's going on."
"You think he came to warn us?"
"Well, he seems to think he came to warn us – but from what? He says things that are not clear and he was coming off of... well... more on that later, but yes, your brother was clearly trying to communicate but until yesterday, he wasn't able to communicate coherently."
"Why not?" Thor's blue eyes were now stormy with worry and his broad shoulders were tight with tension underneath his red and brown leather bomber jacket.
"Well, I know that in Asgard, weakness isn't... good. Physical or mental illness doesn't happen so much and I suppose people who take drugs are rare..."
"Drugs?"
"Medicines or plants or powders that alter your consciousness."
"Ahhh... yes, we do have some who try such things," Thor looked troubled. "Some men who wish to see what the Mages see, some Mages who wish to see more than what is given to them naturally..." A pause and then he added in a lower voice. "They exist in Midgard, but it never ends well."
"Yes, well, you know that here on Earth we have similar stuff. Drugs and we know that with the will of the addict and the aid of doctors, drug reliance can be diminished or removed entirely."
"Darcy told me about such drugs and things she calls rehab." Thor frowned. "I do not know what this has to – Loki has been taking drugs?"
"He appears to have been forcibly injected... Yes. Appears. Whether he wanted it or not, that isn't certain," Coulson sighed. "Although I think it was probably under force since drugs are often used as methods for interrogation. Still, there is so much we are uncertain about – and your brother seemed very upset about you seeing him in his detox state, so we waited a week before telling you."

Thor glared down at his hands before looking up, tears in his eyes.

"He will... live, won't he?"
"Oh, yes, yes," Coulson hastened to reassure the ex-god. "He's fine! In fact, it's nothing short of a miracle, really. It's like nothing we've seen before. Most addicts take up to a month to get through detox properly, but for some reason, your brother appears to have burned everything out of his system... Literally. Truly fascinating."
"So he is well," Thor gave Coulson a shaky smile. "I was worried. Do not tell him that – he will never let me live it down."
"I'm sorry to worry you, Thor, but we just had to wait. Now that Loki's worst is over, he's weak but he is no doubt ready for you to come and meet him. He needs encouragement and... support. He doesn't look a hundred percent – his magick is wonky and fluctuates."
"Ah, yes, that has happened before," Thor mused. "Loki went on a mission for Father once and came back very wearied and... ah... I suppose you would say 'burnt out'."
"Yes, so, he, um, looks like he's been through the wars, no doubt literally he has been through one, but don't worry because he has the best of care. And don't talk too much about the drugs since he has hang ups about that – and apparently his shape-shifting is on the fritz, so not much of that's going on for him right now. But never mind that... What's important is that you are there for him and we find out what's up."

Coulson watched Thor's emotions war for dominance – sadness, happiness, relief and anger. It was easy to read the prince and Coulson, despite his many years of experience on the field, felt a twinge
of worry. Training kept his voice steady and his face a neutral expression of sympathy. *After all, the guy has a lot to process, Coulson told himself, and he's not the quickest on the uptake.*

"So, Thor," he said quietly. "How about we give your brother a visit?"

[...for once...]
[...catch whispers of a long-forgotten flames of hope renewed...]
[...flames of hope renewed in the fires of exploding stars...]
[...and that which goes round in full circle...]
[...returns yet again...]

Loki's hospital room, Coulson told him, was very bare and white and not super hospitable, but it wasn't a cell. There were barriers and a small security detail allotted to the room – only for Loki's safety, to keep his presence secret and to protect the rest from the various explosions which Loki had apparently been emitting. *He had,* Coulson said, *destroyed a vehicle somewhere on a back road in America where he had been found, apparently attempting to make his way to Thor.*

*The explosions,* Thor mused, *must be his magick, but the humans wouldn't understand Loki's abilities.* Remembering Jane's off-handed mention of humanity’s inability to appreciate the alien and the different, Thor fought down a new surge of anxiety and anger. *Getting angry at SHIELD for their secrecy and tactics will not help Loki,* he reminded himself. *If I must extricate my brother, I can – but it must be done carefully. We are only two...*

Now they stood before the door.

"We'll be watching on the other side," Coulson patted Thor on the shoulder. "He's been told that someone will be around to talk with him – so this should be a nice surprise."

"Loki has always been the trickster," Thor smiled fondly. "Now it is my turn."

With that, Coulson signaled to the soldiers, they passed into a small antechamber with two doors. Coulson turned to the one on the right and motioned Thor toward the door straight ahead.

"He's just past there. Good luck!"

With that Thor opened the door and walked through. The room was large, windowless, white and spartan, just as Coulson had said. There were machines and various other medical devices, just as he had expected. And there was the bed in the middle – but Thor barely noticed his surroundings as his gaze fixed on the only being in the room.


*A Jotunn.*

The room fell into silence as red eyes met blue – wide with shock. There was only the sharp intake of breath and for the barest second Thor was back on Jotunheim, back in the Vault. Memory piled upon memory – his father's rhetoric on the last wars, his tutors' lectures, his friends' jokes, the old wives' tales – until it was all but a white blur.

The moment passed and he was Thor again. Thor on Earth, facing someone he knew.

He recognized the high, proud brow, the slender nose, spare mouth and sharp chin. He recognized the quizzical brows which often tilted upward in remonstrance or pleading or knit together in gentle frowns. He recognized the spare frame, the narrower shoulders and long thin hands.
It was Loki. *Loki*...

Thor sighed with relief.

"Loki. I didn't... I didn't recognize you," Thor tentatively approached the bed and took a seat. "Coulson said that your magick was not working as it should. I had no idea that it would affect your form in such a way. How did this happen? How long..."

**How long will you remain in Jotunn form?**

At the unspoken question, Loki looked down at his hands and then up. His eyes darted to the large glass which was set in the wall opposite them. After a few moments, his dark lips parted, opened and then shut. Thor watched with rising alarm as his younger brother sagged back in defeat against the white pillows piled up behind his head.

"Loki-"

"You weren't," Loki finally said softly, voice cracking. "You weren't supposed to come... it's too early." A pause. "Too early."

"Loki. What are you talking about?" Thor frowned. "Agent Coulson said that you were better and that the drugs had passed from your system. You look well to me – other than the," here he gestured vaguely, "magickal mishap."

"It is no mishap," Loki finally whispered. "Have they not told you?"

"Told me..."

"It is no mishap," Loki repeated softly.

Agonized red eyes slowly met blue.

"This is me," Loki finally added, slowly and clearly. "What I truly am. The truth I never wished you to face."

Like a great stone, the truth, for Thor saw from Loki's barely concealed fear that it was the truth, dropped like a heavy stone into a still pond. The two sat there in silence unable to break the spell which now lay between them.

[...]can you hear it?]
[...it is even here... in the silence...]

Chapter End Notes

EMO-NESS AHEAD! . THOR struggling with facts of life and Loki struggling with his ultimate fears... YAYYYYYY!

Author's Note 1: Concerning Mildy, Jace and Karl. For some who were worried about the deus ex machine of these charas, I hope this chapter clears most of it all up. If anyone has questions/isn't clear as to who they all are, then be sure to PM me. XD

Author's Note 2: Concerning Sigyn, the foundation of my issues lie with this fact: If I were to make her act the way I wanted to she would no longer be Sigyn - just someone who has Sigyn's name. I dislike it when I read an MCU-Loki fic and discover it's merely a myth or comic Loki masquerading under the MCU name and tags... I assume there are others out there who are happy I'm not reinventing Sigyn entirely. HOWEVER... I'm
gonna discuss with my substantive editor and discuss Loki's permanent partner (or whether he'll have one and if he has one who it will be, since I've not decided on her yet) and whoever she is (Sigyn or not) I may (may!) add her into the second edit of the book. I hope this makes sense!

Thanks so much to you guys for the encouragement and comments and discussion! Keep them coming - I seriously appreciate the dialogue! It helps me question myself and hopefully we will all help me on my road to professional writing! Thanks a ton!

-KI
The Truth

Chapter Notes

Inspirational Music: Assassin's Creed OST, The Village OST, Machinarium OST, Enigma, Monument Valley OST

Thanks to all reviewers who are so patient and encouraging in their comments towards myself. There are times when I wonder what I was thinking, starting this - and I get frustrated with myself, since I know that I have deviated with the story, adding details and chapters here and there which have lengthened the whole thing abominably... but I hope you guys can hang in there, because the Avengers is coming! We are getting to the part wherein Loki is almost an Avenger but not quite. LOL

Thanks to: lemomina, Elaine_du_Lac, halszka, thaliaarche, MissyZ, Dragonanzar, Kai_Maciel, Ophite, not_overjoyed, Skywinder, iBlameGlobalWarming

I hope you guys will enjoy the Thor emo and what he's working through! Please review after with questions/comments - it's a great encouragement to me~!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time

Chapter 78
The Truth

What I truly am. The truth I never wished you to face.

The words replayed over and over in Thor's head as he stared back at the creature, the being before him, the one he had known as Loki. It is Loki, he repeated to himself mentally, it is Loki. Just Loki.

That was the truth after all. Loki was Jotunn.

A Jotun. He remembered the long, bloody tales told him by Guardsman Eriksson before the old warrior fell in battle against a dread beast on Vanaheim. Long, bloody tales of horrific atrocities, how the Jotunn killed their own, their weak, how they had laid waste to Midgard, how they had turned their backs and fled like the cowards they had been to Jotunheim. He remembered the long lectures given him by his tutors on the various Realms. Always interested in battle and the chance to be like All-Father himself, Thor had always listened with fascination to what the Asgardians had learned over the years of war concerning the Jotunn. How they worshiped their ancestors, invisible beings and prayed to earth, sacrificing even their children to the Void if need be.

Mother. Mother, he now recalled, had disapproved. Odin and Frigga had fought and Thor was swiftly ushered from his angry, arguing parents – Odin, loud and rough, and Frigga, soft but insistent.

"-It may be truth but only half of it-" The door was then shut and their words were muffled. He could hear one of his books being thrown down on the table heavily. "Old wives' tales! I would not have my son be raised on a lie."
Thor had not understood then. He understood now. Or rather, he didn’t – but he did.

He was finding it hard to breathe.

Placing his hands on his knees, Thor inhaled and exhaled carefully as his doctor had taught him. Under stress, she had said, you can gain clarity when you take a moment, take a deep breath – in – out – in-

Loki was small for a Jotun. Jotun were giants; everyone knew that – so this was... unexpected. A runt? Runts were often killed at birth-

In – out – in – out-

When he had first met Loki, the slave known as Kol'la had not understood the idea of familial loyalty, hand not understood what it meant to have friends... Perhaps that was not merely his experiences as a slave which had formed him so, Thor thought disjointedly, perhaps he survived an attempt on his life and was abandoned as a babe and grew without his family and so was stolen -

In – out – in-

Why had he not told me? Thor wondered and then paused as another small voice within him, the one which sounded more like Frigga replied, 'You know why'.

In – out-

Loki was not speaking. Neither was he. He was supposed to be talking. He was supposed to be finding out what had gone wrong. Had he been captured in the war with the Jotunn and tortured? Had he betrayed Asgard and Odin had exiled his adopted second son?

The House of Odin is full of traitors.

That was what Laufey of Jotunheim had said.

For a moment, Thor's vision blanked out and all he saw was red.

In-

He felt sick.

Getting to his feet blindly, Thor looked down at his brother, at his not-brother, at the one who had called himself brother and perhaps was not, or perhaps he was... It was getting too hard to think.

He looked down at his brother but his vision, blurred and disjointed, would not allow him focus. Barely meeting those strange, those blank crimson eyes, Thor nodded, mumbled something, made his way to the door, fumbled at the strange knob and fled.

He did not look back.

-0-0-0-

"Thor – Thor."

Coulson, careful not to touch his obviously tense employee, could barely match Thor's stride as the ex-god made his way out of the second room and into the hall. Thor's unseeing blue eyes looked a little lost and oddly blank. It looked strange on man who normally showed his emotion, but at the moment, Thor looked as though he were holding back a torrent of emotion – just barely. It reminded
the SHIELD agent of the still figure in the white room the ex-god had just left.

As if on autopilot, unstoppable, Thor made his way out of the building and sagged against the building wall, drawing in deep, ragged breaths as though he had been suffocating.

"Thor, you alright?" Coulson asked.

He knew the answer. Thor is not alright, but these questions, the experienced field agent knew, have to be asked. Otherwise they just stew and try to carry their burdens alone...

"Coulson," Thor blinked down at the man by his side as though noticing him for the first time.

What else had he been seeing? Coulson wondered.

"Hey, what – what happened?"
"What happened?" Thor asked and then looked away, tensing up again as memory washed over him again.
"In there... you guys... Wasn't that Loki?"
"Yes. Yes," Thor finally said. "That was... Loki." Then he added in a quiet voice and his blue eyes, meeting Coulson's, were full of anger, confusion and fear. "But not the Loki I knew."

Coulson nodded slowly, trying to sort out the implications of Thor's words. Was the guest-captive a fake? Or had he switched sides? Was Loki brainwashed? He frowned as he processed Thor's words.

"Not the Loki you knew?"
"Loki is Jotunn."
"Ahhh..." Coulson paused, noticed his phone was vibrating, ignored it and continued. "Those would be the rivals of Asgard?"
"Yes. Rivals. That is... one way to call them," Thor shook his head. "Mother never – she never agreed with what my tutors and friends and what the guards in the palace and the soldiers told me. Old wives' tales, she said."
"OK."
"Now I see why..."
"She might have been right."
"Mother is often right." A pause. "And yet..."

Thor turned and punched the wall behind him two times. Coulson made a mental note to have his agent's hand looked at. And the slightly damaged brick as well.

"They must have known."
"Who?"
"Mother and Father." Thor paused and reiterated, voice hard. "They surely must have known."
"You will have to ask Loki that." Coulson sighed at the angry look on Thor's face. "Or I can do it."
"She was always... soft on him. Mother had a special place in her heart for Loki. I knew that, accepted that, but what if it was because... of what he was?"

The two men stared out at the almost empty car park before them, lit only by the lights. Overhead, the night sky scudded with thick clouds promising more rain. April showers bring May flowers, Coulson mused.

[...in the silences...]

[...you can hear...]
"I thought it was the fact that I was never as... skilled as she was in magick. Loki was the magickal child she had always wanted. And Loki had never had a mother. She wished to be the mother he had never had..." Thor leaned back against the wall again, ignoring the blood on his hand. "Perhaps she knew and wished to shelter him. They knew."

"Hm."

"It explains much." Thor shook his head. "So much."

Loki's inability to deal with Asgard's sun. His penchant for ice and fire magicks. His love of chilled food. His wild emotions which on rare occasions flared and ran wild. _Mother had sent Loki the mint ices and had campaigned for Loki's acceptance into the Academy... Somehow, she must have known... but how?_

"I'll have someone take you back to your rooms," Coulson broke the silence and, glancing over at Thor, he gave the quiet ex-god a reassuring, small smile. "We'll work it out another way."

"I just..." Thor gestured lamely and looked away. "I just need time."

Coulson just nodded and after a moment walked away, talking quickly and in a low voice on his phone no doubt to one of his superiors, Director Fury more than likely. _Or one of his numerous agents at his beck and call. I am only one cog in a very large, well-oiled machine, he knew. Loki, for better or for worse, has become another._

_Loki._ That brought on a whole new slew of emotions and thoughts – and when Thor raised his head the next time, it was to find that a quiet young man in a dark suit and accompanying dark car had come to take him to some rooms already set aside for him. Coulson was nowhere to be seen, but his words hung in the air.

_We'll work it out another way._

_And if Loki proves to be obstinate, if his usual wariness is mistaken for recalcitrance, Thor shifted uneasily. What then... _I just need more time_, he had said._

..._more time?_ Thor slid into the back seat of the car and watched as the back door disappear as they rounded the corner and pulled out onto the road. _Perhaps we do not have any._

 [...]silence fell...]

 [...]the wall...]

 [...]the chasm...]

 [...]of separation...]

"So..."

Loki looked up as another man took Thor's empty seat. The chair which had looked so small bearing Thor's frame now held a familiar face. _Coulson_, Loki recalled. He had come and gone during his illness. _His illness._ That was Loki called it. At the memory of his vomiting and raving, Loki twitched.
"It wasn't the drug thing after all."

Leaning back on his pillows and turning his gaze away and downward, Loki stared at the white tiled flooring of his room. Under the tension of the silence, he could feel the fidgets coming on, the anxiety. He fought to keep his fingers still as they lay in the folds of the blankets pulled up to his chest.

*It has been so long since I have had such luxuries, he thought miserably. I suppose they will come to an end soon enough. Midgard may not remember the Jotunn, but Thor...*

*Surely Thor would not abandon me to the tender mercies of the Midgardians.* He tried to tell himself that over and over and over again, yet the well of fear, the gnawing fears which had chased him since the first day he had pulled on the disguise of Aleiko rose within him. Always his dark dreams had dogged his steps, anxiety clawing at his gut deep deep down. *They would find out. Odin and Frigga, Thor and Sif and the Warriors Three, Asgard and the Mages Council... One day, he had supposed, they would all discover his dark secret. And he would be alone. Again... Or not.*

*What would they do?*

*It depended, he had thought, upon his usefulness, on his loyalty, on those who cared enough to protect him.*

And then, he had discovered the truth. *They had always known. Odin and Frigga and Mage Agaeti and a few others.* A secret held for his protection. Caught up in preparing for a war, carrying on in Odin's and Thor's stead, Loki had had no real time to process the implications, but there had been time afterward. On the Tro'watal, on V'lozh'noi, on Jela to fully grasp what had truly been revealed.

*Frigga had known... and she had accepted me with the open arms of a mother. Odin had known and had used my fear as best he could to his advantage – and he had seen within me a great prize. Something Laufey had never done... and the two or three Mages who had known had still offered me respect.*

*And now, Loki thought, I must relive it over again – and this time, I am in no position to protect myself. I must... win them to my cause, persuade them to believe what I speak is the truth... or we are all doomed...*

"No," he finally whispered.

"Still," Coulson tried to start the flagging conversation again. "It could have gone worse."

"He didn't touch me," Loki finally managed, voice small.

He looked down at his hands, still scarred, still healing. Then, his glistening red eyes rose to meet Coulson's, wide and anxious and filled with sorrow. Biting his lip, fighting back tears and glancing away again, Loki swallowed, willing his cheeks to stiffen and his face to remain still.

"He said he needed... time."

"All of his life, our – the Jotunn have been monsters to him. That cannot change in a day."

"I think," Coulson said carefully, "you underestimate your brother. He has... changed. Changed, but you know it's one thing to change in your head and another thing to change through experience."

"I thought that... I had always worried that this day would come. I had always hoped it would never – he would never," Loki paused. His voice wavered a little as he continued, "In recent days, I had been given hope that it could be different. I had thought that perhaps there would be some good to come out of my... situation... who I am."

*Frigga. Odin. Mal.* Loki blinked away unshed tears, which now fringed slightly on his lashes and his
narrow, bony face hardened.

"I was mistaken."

Coulson said nothing for a while.

"He said that you are Jotunn. From what we have gathered over the past few years, the Jotunn are the mortal enemies of Asgard?"

"Yes."

"And Thor's father, the king of Asgard adopted you, I take it."

"Yes."

"Did they..." Coulson hesitated a millisecond before continuing. "Do they know?"

"Yes," Loki shook his head, closing his eyes and his brow furrowed. "I – I was so worried that they would find out, but in the end, Mother and Father – the king and queen – they – they knew. And a few others."

"But not Thor."

"Not Thor," Loki looked down. "I myself did not know that they knew until a short while ago. It came as a... as a shock to me."

"He'll be angry about being kept in the dark," Coulson said. "And who wouldn't be?"

"Mother said there should be no secrets in the family." Loki gave Coulson a twisted smile before shrugging. "She was right. As always. He should have been told. We should have been told. I should have – I should have said something... I just... I was so afraid. And now, it has all come to nothing."

"Give your brother some time," Coulson smiled. "He will come around. I think he will remember and will come to understand. If you two were as close as he has told us, he will come around. Thor just needs time."

"Time..." Loki murmured, green eyes bleak. "There is no time..."

[...silence fell...]

[...in the silence...]

[...there is only doom...]

[...heavy-weighted and inevitable...]

Half an hour later after several phone calls and two swift conferences, Coulson got on the phone again.

"We need the Captain in Washington DC by tomorrow morning. We need Steve."

-0-0-0-

Early the next morning after a morning run around the block (twenty-five times), Steve found Thor in the gym set aside for agents. However, the usual thud and bam of punch-bag boxing and the monotonous slap of running feet could not be heard. The room was empty excepting his friend but the quiet room was filled with unspoken thought. Standing and staring at the red and blue punching bag before him, Thor seemed the very picture of indecision.

"Morning, Thor," Steve said, conversationally.

"Steve," Thor turned then and, looking his friend up and down. "You are in town!"

"Arrived late last night," Steve nodded. "Coulson needed to speak with me."

"You have already finished your morning exercises?"

"Yeah. You?"
Thor shrugged, "My heart is not in it today. No doubt Coulson told you already."

"Your brother, right? I heard."
"Did Coulson send you to speak with me?"
"Well," Steve ran his fingers nervously through his hair before taking a seat on a nearby bench. "Not really. More like listen. I'm just... here to listen, if you need it."
"There is nothing much to say." Thor turned back to the punching bag with a frown. "I spoke of my worries and anger to Coulson already."
"Hm... So you feel better now?"
"I am upset," Thor admitted with a gusty sigh.
"Your brother is a Gotunn – Jotan, right?"
"Jotunn," corrected Thor absently, slumping down beside Steve. He leaned forward, head in his hands, palms digging into his eye sockets. "Yes."
"The ancient race of people who fought Asgard, from what I remember you telling me before."
"Yes. They were at war with us when I was... exiled."
"This is the war which you started."
"I had a part in it," Thor finally said after a long moment. "Perhaps. But they also invaded my land. What was I to do?"
"Perhaps the invaders were only a small rebellious minority," Steve said carefully.
"That is what Father suggested." Thor sighed. "I was raised – everyone about me had told me all my life that... they had told me the one thing, that Jotunn are savage beasts who live for conquering. Thinking of Loki in that way... it is hard."
"Very upsetting."
"And he hadn't told me!" Thor's voice rose, his head jerking up and he jumped to his feet as the feelings of affront which had risen within him the night before once again came to the fore. "Mother and Father probably knew as well – and they hadn't told me either! What did they think of me? That I was unready? Or unwilling to accept him? That I was stupid and would never need to discover the truth of the matter?!"
"Well," Steve said carefully, "this is your chance to prove them wrong."

Thor paused and nodded, but Steve could tell by the way Thor's hands rubbed his face, the way his fingers jerked and pulled on the edge of his sweatshirt, the way he paced back and forth across the gym room that Thor was by no means at peace with the situation – or the truth of his adopted brother's heritage. *It is, after all, one thing to forgive, Steve thought, but another thing to forget and move on and build on top of the old foundations of broken trust and hate.*

"How do you feel about Loki being a Jotun?" Steve asked. "Forget the fact that people haven't been up front with you or honest. Just looking what lies before you... How do you feel?"
"I don't..." Thor frowned. "I don't know," he repeated, his voice small and bewildered. "I am – I am angry and afraid... and disappointed. I can hear the voices of my friends and my teachers and my father's stories. And I can hear the words of King Laufey... and I can see the dead bodies of the guards in the vault. It feels so easy to dwell in those moments. That is all so familiar to me. But there are other things to remember as well. All of our times together..."
"You are torn."
"My heart is torn," Thor said in soft anguish. "I do not know what I can do if I am to be truthful to Loki... and myself."

For a few minutes, the two men said nothing. Suddenly, Steve jumped to his feet and smiled at Thor. "Hey, wanna join me for a ride around town? I don't think you've seen much of the capital, right? I think there are a few things you should see."

-0-0-0-
Twenty minutes later, Thor was on the back of a large motorcycle – a hardy machine with amazing horsepower, modern design and the high quality leather Steve had been used to in his younger days. Black and silver, it was a far cry from Steve's usual ride, but it was the best motorcycle in SHIELD's lot. Steve grumbled a little bit about the handle's curvature. It was, apparently, lower than he would have liked.

_Long ago, Thor remembered, Steve lived on Midgard when the entire world had been at war. Now, he works in a new world, a new paradigm. A man torn between two worlds. Perhaps, he will understand my problem after all._

When Steve brought the bike to a halt, parked it and took off his helmet, Thor, following suit with his own helmet, looked about. The Captain had parked by a very square, rather unadorned building. *Unadorned by Asgardian standards, Thor chastised himself. Never judge a building by its exterior. Understated architecture is a sign of power in Midgard ofentimes._

"This is a museum," Steve nodded. "It's... not a place I am very fond of visiting, to be honest. But," here, the tall, blonde American sighed, "it's the best place to remember. A warning for all of us."

As they entered, Thor caught a glimpse of the building's name. One word stood out: Holocaust. *Holocaust,* Thor blinked. Once again, the All-Speak, which had seemed to be defective since his first arrival on the planet, did not help.

"This museum is a memory of the many deaths we have seen in the past centuries," Steve explained. "Genocide. The Holocaust was a time when many people were killed simply because of their race or their sexual identity – or because they spoke out against the atrocities they had seen."

"So this place condemns killing?"

"Yes, well... in a way. It's so we can remember and make sure it won't happen again."

"This is the war which you fought in – and now the countries who were the enemy live in relative peace with everyone else today," Thor recalled. "I remember."

"You've lived a long time, Thor. You've seen a lot, experienced a lot – and maybe you think that the wars and the deaths I talk about are nothing compared to what Asgard experienced..." Steve cocked his head.

"I suppose..."

"But let's just take a short walk through and see if anything looks familiar to you. If you can understand that when I talk about letting the past go, letting it be, I am not saying that lightly."

Thor nodded, watched as Steve procured tickets for them and the two entered the building. Still early in the morning, the museum seemed a little quiet. There were a few small groups of people moving around slowly from room to room. Steve's voice, respectfully lowered, also fit in with the general somber atmosphere.

Given his space, Thor was allowed to wander as he pleased, taking time to look at, to read the writing of the plaques and the various words and names on the walls. He did not know how much time passed in that place, but Steve's hand on his shoulder roused Thor from deep meditation as he stood before a stark white room filled with a large pile of shoes. The shoes – large and small, twisted and dirty and tattered – spoke of hundreds, perhaps thousands of people who no longer wore them. *Empty testaments to the dead.*

"They were not just soldiers," Thor said, voice muted. "There are small shoes. Children."

"Yes," Steve sighed.

"I have seen children killed in battle. It always – it always seemed a waste."

"Do you think Asgardians killed Jotunn children?"

"I..." Thor frowned, suddenly uncertain. "I do not know. I think not. My father, for certain, would..."
not approve. Mother would be... She would be furious. But, I have seen – I have heard of the death of innocents in battle. That is something no honourable man would wish for."
"Agreed," Steve nodded. "More often than not, however, these people died in camps, men, women and children... and other families who lived around the camps, the locals, the neighbors, would turn their eyes away, would ignore what was going on. To survive."
"They are complicit also, through their inaction, do you think?"
"Some people think so," Steve shrugged. "I don't want to judge them. But those who stood by and watched and those who took part in those kinds of atrocities, spies and informers... in the end, many of them were freed... and their children live among us today."
"They are not their ancestors," Thor said. "That is what you are going to say."
"Yes... the mistakes of your parents, grand-parents – that can't determine character entirely."
"Loki is not defined only by his race."
"What do you think?"

Thor stared at the shoes for a moment longer before turning away.
"He is cultured, intelligent, skilled in magicks and knowledge..." Thor shook his head. "When I remember the tales I was told... and I think of Loki, I know he is not defined by what – by who he is."
"Let's go," Steve gave Thor a small smile. "We'll grab a quick lunch at a deli Coulson suggested. Then, we can go for another ride. There's something else I think you'd like."

After three sandwiches at the deli and two bottles of coke (the old style which Steve enjoyed best), Thor and Steve took to the road again. This time, Steve appeared to drive a little ways away from the centre of the city. Passing by various monuments, he talked about how each one was a memory of something or someone, an event or a battle. Thor could not help but compare the monuments to the ones his father and his forefathers had raised. Monuments of the great heroes, past kings and the victorious battles in which Asgard has taken part. In some ways, Midgard is the same, Thor mused, but in some ways... they are different.

Crossing over the river, they came to an area where many Midgardian warriors – soldiers – had been buried. Arlington, Steve called it, but he did not enter. He did speak of a memorial to the unknown soldier which surprised Thor for a few seconds. So even Midgard would remember the common warrior, Thor marveled and he felt a smile creeping across his face. He gave a short laugh. Midgardians are always so surprising.

It was not very long before Steve brought his bike to a stop and the two men, stowing away their helmets, strolled across the early spring grass and inhaled the sharp cool air. Overhead, the clouds had pulled away, allowing a little warmth from the sun. Thor, looking about, nodded in approval. Just what I needed, he thought. A time to think, to get away from it all... He paused as he took note of Steve. The soldier was standing at respectful attention for a few seconds before relaxing his stance before a powerful piece of sculpture.

Another monument set in stone: a group of men, dressed in very old-fashioned uniforms and round hats, appeared to be struggling to raise the American flag. The entire endeavor appeared to take everything out of them as they reached for the pole, as they supported each other in the great task. Thor was immediately transported to the battlefield. He could imagine it in his mind, for it seemed to him like a scene cut out of Asgardian legend.

I dreamed of moments like these as a child and a young man, Thor smiled. There would be a glorious day of battle and Sif and Volstagg and Hogun and Fandral and... and Loki would be there at my side. Together, we would do great deeds and save our Realm from the darkest of evils.
"I have never seen war in Asgard," Thor admitted aloud, his eyes following the flap-flapping blue, white and red flag above. "I have gone to the aid of others and have gained much respect and renown and glory on the battlefields of other lands and realms, but war has not haunted our lands since I was a babe."

"Why do you think I showed you this?" Steve asked, circling about the monument slowly. "I do not know. Perhaps you wish to talk about how war is difficult? It is a team effort? We must all work together? Maybe not. That is something Coulson would say, I think."

"Haha. Yeah, that sounds like Coulson, doesn't it?"

"So, what is your reason?"

"Hayes, Sousley, Bradley, Block, Strank and Gagnon."

"You knew the men?"

"No." Steve smiled briefly. "Not where I was stationed. This was Iwo Jima and only three survived the war... more or less."

"But they were heroes."

"Yes," Steve said. "Everyday men. Some of them from farms, from small towns... Some days, I am worried about this world. I wonder if we are going to be alright. If we are going to make it... This picture is an encouragement, really. It just reminds me that there is bravery and honour in everyone. Sometimes less than you would like, but it's there – if you look for it."

"Even in the Jotunn, you think?" asked Thor skeptically.

"Do you think Loki is brave? Has his own honour code? Would he stand at your side to raise the flag?"

Thor thought of the Kol'la he had met in the House of Shax – a bitter, aloof young man who had fought with courage, who had battled with great tenacity and who had looked out for Thor without fail. He had protected Thor despite Thor's race... A Jotun protected an Asgardian that day. He could have so easily given into hatred, but there had been nothing but annoyance. Thor found himself smiling over that. There was that time on Gaia, and that other time with the dragon... and that other time looking for herbs for mother on Vanheim... and that other time...

"Sometimes we look at guys like these and think that they are the epitome of heroism," Steve's even voice broke into Thor's thoughts. "We think – they are the guys to be – and don't get me wrong, they are! But you know... heroism comes in many forms."

"Other than fighting evil and defending the weak?"

"Well, being able to see look at something from another person's point of view. That's a great ability. Being able to forgive – that can be heroic. Walking away from an unnecessary fight. Yeah, there are other kinds of ways to be a hero. It's not just about looking good and getting the praise and going on the circuit and impressing all the girls... It's being there for people, the people who you love and who love you, the people who need your support."

Thor didn't respond. He could only see Loki lying in the bed. Loki's blue skin and the blue lines upon his face and hands and arms. Loki's red eyes had been filled with fear and sorrow.

And I walked away. Thor looked down at his feet and then away at the grey horizon which blurred suspiciously. I let him down... I could not see past the colour of his skin – and if what Steve says is right, then for a moment, I failed the test. I was no hero.

"If Loki is not his race, if he is not his ancestors, then... perhaps your moment has come to think about what you have known now for some time to be the truth..." Steve laid a hand on Thor's back and then said softly. "Heroism is putting your beliefs into action – even if other people don't understand, even if you are hurt as a result. It is one thing to know, it is another thing to do. I'll be at the motorcycle waiting for whenever you are ready."

Then, Steve was gone, leaving Thor with only the silence.
When Thor returned to the motorcycle, he said nothing and when Steve dropped him off by the Potomac River close to their HQ, saying that Coulson would be around to pick him up in half an hour, the ex-god only nodded, keeping his silence. Steve, moving away from the curb, looked back. Thor, wearing his navy-blue sweatshirt and blue jeans, long blond hair pulled back in a loose ponytail, looked odd beneath the pink-white blossoming sakura trees around him. The man did not move from his seat, nor did he appear to have noticed that Steve was gone.

Shaking his head and hoping that he had been at least a little successful in setting Thor off on the right path, Steve returned back to HQ to let Coulson know what had happened.

They had done what they could do. Now it was up to Thor. It was a matter of time.

Thor did not notice the night sky darkening. When a small white and pink petal drifted down and landed on the back of his clasped hand, he stared at it a while. Gently turning his hand, Thor caught the fragile thing and looked at it curiously. A piece of a blossom from the trees, he supposed. A thing easily crushed and soon it would rot and fade – but in this moment, it was a thing of delicate beauty.

It reminded him of Jane. Jane, who would not be able to stand at his side forever. Jane who was smart and kind and beautiful, yet ephemeral as the flower he held in his hand. Our time, he knew, is limited and already he could hear his father's voice counseling him to forget her. I want to call her, Thor realized with a smile, talk to her, tell her about my problem. She would give me sound advice... but talking to her, what would that achieve, really?

I already know.

'Heroism is putting your beliefs into action – even if other people don't understand, even if you are hurt as a result.' That was what Steve had said. 'It is one thing to know, it is another thing to do.'

It is one thing to know...

Loki is a Jotun, but he is also my brother. My only brother. A brother I can never let go.

...it is another thing to do.

Things will be difficult as the old gives way to the new... We can never go back. It will be hard this new path we must tread together.

Thor raised his head, his face a picture of determination and trepidation intermixed. Coulson, he saw, was emerging from the usual dark vehicle, looking cautious. The ex-god forced a smile which Coulson returned with a nod.

"Can I..." Thor hesitated before finding his voice and repeating his question more firmly. "Can I try again?"

"That is the best thing I could have heard all day," Coulson patted Thor on the shoulder as his agent rose to his feet. "We were going to have to go ahead with the questioning without you – but this way is much better."

"You would have risen to the occasion," Thor chuckled then, "if I had failed you."

"But you didn't. So, we can get this show on the road."

"Yes," Thor forced down his uneasiness and took a seat inside the vehicle with Coulson. "I have wasted enough time sulking. Now, I am ready for the truth."

"It won't be easy," Coulson reminded Thor, "but I know you and Loki can figure it out. The fact that
you returned will be miracle enough for him. If you two don't give up and keep on talking, things will... make more sense as time goes on. That's the way of family."
"Family," Thor thought of his mother and father alone in Asgard fighting the Jotunn. Forcing his fears down, he focused on the task at hand. Loki and the fear and sadness and despair within him.

Loki, he thought, I am coming.

[...reaching out...]

[...together we may face the future...]

[...and the future...]

[...and the secrets of the stars...]

[...and the treasure they hide...]

[...across time and space...]

[...lost to history...]

When the Realms were created, the overflowing energies of the Realms had been formed into the gems known as the Infinity Stones. Hidden and watched over with great care, in the event that an evil entity such as a Mad Titan were to gain control of them, the Stones were kept in great secrecy. Some were placed in Vaults, others were slowly collected, yet others were buried in Asgard's greatest Vault, the Vault within the Realm Eternally Sheltered. Eternally Sheltered and Eternally Watched, the world of Midgard turned and spun about its sun. Within its teeming, joyous breast, many treasures were hidden.

Yet a new age dawned and with it, great power was sought and discovered. Fate decreed the wheels of power would turn once again – and the Tesseract was found. Once found, the white cube was wielded with limited knowledge but great ingenuity.

So it sat within its nested metal throne and reached across the spaces, across the Void, calling out to those who would listen, to those who could hear the voices of the stars, those connected to magicks and the realm of the unseen.

It sang out and flared with the power of a mighty star. If only there was one worthy enough to wield it... but the echoes, ringing out, returned, holding dark promise.

He was coming.

Chapter End Notes

There we go! It's finished. These Thor chapters kill me to be frank, but it needs to be done or we just have a hole in Thor's emotional and mental timeline. Hopefully this will make sense as to his actions later on.

Next chapter: The Tesseract blows. Loki tries to warn people. Things start to go full-throttle.
Off-topic: I saw Hobbit #3. OMG. THRANDUIL! WUT! Where did you come from, sexy beast!? I love Thranduil. Now we see where the awesome of Legolas comes from. Just saying.
Sooo... Once again, sorry about the wait. I've been writing DIT quite a bit while I was on vacay in Thailand with my friends. Thailand - it was my first time - but it was exciting. A manicure, pedicure, two massages, shopping... so awesome. It's great going with friends who've been there before and know what they are doing. I watched Kingsmen, the most funny B-movie I've seen in a long while. (drools over Colin Firth and Jack Davenport - which just shows my age)

Yep, and here we are. I'm probably finishing up two chapters worth now... which is good. So we know there will be an update after this one sooner than later! And now we are firmly in Avengers Assemble. Finally. I know some of you guys are thinking it! I'm feeling it's about time... I'll prolly be done this fic in 10 chapters or so! Maybe 15 if we're unlucky.

This chapter was written with the help of Assassin's Creed I OST. I love "Acre Underworld". So gorg.

Thanks to... lemomina, miravisu, Fandancer, halszka, thalialarche, Skywinder, not_overjoyed, Kai_Maciel, cbc2v.

Plz note my thoughts at the bottom of the chapter if you wanna get to hear some pro-Loki complaints.

Distortions In Time

Chapter 79

Opening Salvo I

The metal door opened and Loki, turning over, paused at the sight of Thor as his older sibling – not sibling, Loki corrected himself – entered the room. Prying himself into a more upright position, Loki faced the man he had called friend and brother for so long. As he battled his once again rising anxiety, Loki squared his shoulders and rallied his thoughts.

I need Thor to listen. I need him to understand. He has to believe me. We have little time as it is to flee or prepare for war... Knowing Thor, he will no doubt have fallen in love with Midgard again and will want to stay in defense it.

"Thor-"

"Loki," Thor sat down in the small metal chair again, stopped, rose a little, edged the chair forward and eyed his brother. His hand hovered over Loki's for a moment before carefully covering Loki's fingers as they curled around the bed's small white metal railing. Loki froze momentarily at the warm touch of Thor's broad palm. The blonde ex-god frowned, staring at their clasped hands in shock.
"You are not icy cold even when blue."

"No," Loki blinked. "That is-" He struggled for a moment before continuing on with an even voice.
"That is matter of the will."
"I see." Thor's smile was smaller and a little strained, but it was there. He looked up then. "But you are still cooler than most. As always."

Loki did not know what to say. He looked away, down and then back up at Thor, confusion now written on his face.

"In the end." Thor went on with an uneasy, awkward shrug, "I guess you really are the same." He shook his head and tried again. "Yesterday, Loki... I-I was a fool. Today, I hope I can be a better man and I hope you will forgive me..."
"Forgive-" Loki bristled then as Thor's honest confession and apology sank in. "You – already you think bygones can be bygones?"
"I know it will take a little while for - for the both of us - and it'll take time perhaps for you to forgive my impoliteness and-
"No, I mean-"

Pause.

"I meant," Loki finally said slowly. "You can so easily forgive what – what I am?"
"You are my brother, first and foremost. My friend." Thor looked down at his hand which now covered Loki's bonier one. "That is the most important thing. It – it is difficult to comprehend – and I am still angry that everyone kept this secret from me... Still, I hope I can be the older brother I was meant to be and I know that I will disappoint you at times... but not – not today."
"So... that's it," Loki sank back in his pillows, eyes shut and voice tight.

For a second, Thor fancied he could see a glisten of tears at the corners of his younger brother's eyes. Loki had always worked hard to hide his emotion and remain the rational, clever prince everyone had come to take for granted. Yet, Thor knew better. Loki's annoyed retorts, his flares of temper, his headstrong nature – these were clues to what existed just below the surface.

_Loki is fire, he mused, wild fire, untamed and uncontrollable. That is why the Mages fear him, why the Court gives him respectful distance... and no doubt, that is why Father reached out to him and why Mother shelters him. Below everything, there is a tender, broken, now slowly healing heart..._

"Is it so hard to believe?" Thor asked.
"What do you think?" Loki opened his eyes then and gave Thor a dark, bitter smile. "All my life, I feared this day... and now it has come without fanfare, and you ignore all those years of training and tutelage, and you just accept – acce-" He couldn't finish his sentence.
"'All my life?'
"What?"
"'ALL my life?" Thor repeated in disbelief. "That is what you said – 'all my life'."
"Well, you have to allow me some poetic license," Loki finally allowed, offering Thor a crooked if watery grin, a dark violet blush rising to his thin cheeks. His red eyes flashed with usual brotherly annoyance. "Some times I do feel like I have spent an lifetime getting you out of trouble."
"And what about the trouble you cause yourself?"
"That," Loki said with put-on hauteur, "is entirely different."
"Indeed," Thor gave Loki a sharp look. "And it looks like you have fallen afoul of some scheme of your own making. Again."

At Thor's half-jest, half-reprimand, at the unspoken question, Loki stilled and for a moment seemed to be in another time, another place. His red eyes darkened to an even deeper shade of crimson and Thor instinctively squeezed his brother's hand in unspoken sympathy as a terrible blankness spread over Loki's face.

"They said you spoke of Thanos," Thor prompted Loki again. "Father and Mother used to tell me
tales of a Mad Titan – but I was never certain if they were more than that – just tales."
"Such dark dreams," Loki murmured. "All my life – and I mean all – all my life, I have heard the melody of magick, heard the Voices of the Realms, heard the songs of the stars... and beneath them all... the mutterings of doom."
"You've spoken of this before. The Stars... and the Void, I think you called it."
"Yes. And I have... I have seen the heart of such darkness." Loki turned to Thor and thor, meeting his gaze saw the lingering fear. Pain. His hand. Thor, glancing down, realized that Loki's dark fingernails now dug into his own tanned skin, nearly drawing blood. "It is a Titan, Thor. A relic of when time was not... A Mad Titan who has returned..." Loki added softly and hoarsely. "He... he is coming."
"Here?" Thor clarified, alarm and shock growing.
"Yes. Yes – we have no time – he is coming.'
"Wait – no – why here?"
"Midgard. 'The Realm of Midgard is eternally sheltered, eternally watched and protected, for it is the treasure house of Asgard-'" Loki paused. "That is the truth. What all mages know... There are treasures buried in Midgard – long lost to time and, if found, could be wielded to the ruin of all the Realms. Particularly if Thanos were to – were to successfully attain them."
"The Infinity Gem."
"Among others."
"There is one here?" Thor asked.
"One, two... three?" Loki shook his head. "Who can say?"
"Do you know where they lie?"
"No," Loki eyed Thor calculatingly. "I could attempt to divine the whereabouts of such artifacts, if the Norns were on our side. But..." Loki smiled grimly, "I fancy your allies may know a thing or two already."
"My-" Thor frowned as Loki's implications sank in. His voice lowered and his serious gaze flitted to the two-way window which currently mirrored their side of the rooms. "SHIELD?"
"SHIELD. That is what it is called..."
"SHIELD would never-"
"Would it not?" Loki leaned back then and gave Thor a meaningful look. "Great power changes a man. Midgardians are no different. They have hid the Tesseract from you – what else may they be hiding?"
"The Director is a good man," Thor insisted in a harsh whisper. "He would never allow for-"
"The Director is only one man in control of many and controlled himself by a few. The Space Stone is willful. I have heard it, Thor. I have heard – heard it calling out across the Realm. It's beacon flares brightly and it cares not for any creature, being or man. Any man," repeated Loki. "It is a wild thing and has a mind of its own. To do great things, terrible things, that is why it was created – a repository of the magick of creation... And the Midgardians think they can harness it for some menial task as creating power and weapons-"
"Weapons?" Coulson's quiet voice broke into Loki's rant sharply.

Thor turned and raised an eyebrow as he realized Coulson now stood at his elbow. The look on the agent's face was one of mild interest, incredulity and curiosity. Thor could not exactly define what lay beneath the surface – but he knew better. Coulson should never be taken at face value. Thor sighed and then turned back to Loki. Loki's red gaze, now half-lidded, was a banked fire. Fire against stone.

"I have seen it," Loki finally said. "He is coming. He will be here any minute – and when he comes it will begin with the Infinity Gem – the Space Stone."
"Space Stone."
"The Tesseract as you call it," Loki smiled faintly then at Coulson as though he had seen something.
Thor glanced back to Coulson, then to Loki.

"I heard it, a great distance from here and I followed its call easily enough. Norns know what else is on its way. Thanos, for certain. Thanos is coming with an army of ships – manned by the Chitauri and a small contingent of mercenaries."

"Chitauri?" Thor's voice tightened.

"Chitauri?" Coulson echoed.

"A race of creatures – reptilian-humanoid. Related to the Kree genetically, yet very different in politics and – other things," Thor battled down a rising need to pace. Loki still clung to his hand. Obviously terrified. Something I have never seen him exhibit before...

"We will have to ready the defenses-" Thor said immediately.

"Now, Thor-" Coulson interjected mildly.

"Defenses?" Loki was looking at Thor as though he had grown two heads.

"Your brother has been very ill-"

"I do not see what illness has to do with anything," Loki interrupted coldly. "I am not crazy, Thor. We need to go-"

"Go? Why?"

"Go? How – where could you go?" Coulson asked. "Asgard?"

"Father and Heimdall can be alerted," Thor said reasonably. "They will come to Asgard's aid – and they will defend it easily enough-"

"How – how -" Loki's voice cracked as frustration and panic began to rise to the fore. His fingernails dug into Thor's skin and somewhere a monitor's signal began to increase. Coulson glanced at one of the monitors and raised an eyebrow. "They cannot come – it is – it is my fault – I-"

"They cannot come?"

"The Bifrost-"

"The bridge." Coulson interjected, feeling a little as though he was some repetitive, unnecessary extras in a film.

"It was destroyed."

"The Bifrost was destroyed?" Thor's voice rose in disbelief. "You destroyed the Bifrost?"

"Well, no," Loki paused. "Father – the All-father – he destroyed it to save Jotunheim."

"Woah, woah, woah – guys," Coulson's interruption was ignored.

"This sounds like a long tale," Thor finally said, voice heavy.

"It is-" Loki closed his eyes.

Gugnir rising and falling. The Heimsrsal screeching. The Bridge shattering, spinning, battering, splintering. Light and sound and force erupting. The Observatory tearing away and plunging downward and disappearing into the Void and blasting magick upward into the sky.

Asgard falling silent.

"The All-Father fell into Odinsleep... Mother – she put me in charge of the war effort as she dealt with the diplomatic affairs-"

"And..."

"And I sought to end the war with no bloodshed on our part. A bloodless yet victorious strategy – or so I thought. That was the best course of action... one I researched and considered deeply. Well, as deeply as one could in a matter of days." Loki looked down at Thor and his entwined hands and, realizing for the first time the strength of his grip, released Thor's hand a little. "I was wrong."

"They did not accept your course of action."

"No." A pause. "In a nutshell, no."

"Mother would not be pleased," Thor nodded.

"She was not." Loki's voice sank into a small whisper. "She was so – so disappointed. And... sad." He looked away and then down again. "We said farewell and she cried – but sometimes I wonder... If I return..."
"If I return, will there be any welcome for me?"

"When we return," Thor smiled at Loki then. "Not if – when – when we return, she will scold us, embrace us, scold us again and stuff our faces with her own handmade dishes. You know that will be so." Thor chuckled then. "I can hear her already. 'Loki, you are too thin! Get another helping of that mint pudding!'"

"And she will pester you about Jane," Loki grinned impishly.

"How did he-?" Coulson frowned.

"Ah. You saw that, did you?" Thor looked a little proud of himself. "She is fair, is she not?"

"And intelligent," Loki added.

"Well, someone has to be," Thor replied good naturally.

"Sorry," Coulson louder voice caught the two brothers' attention. "How did Loki know about everything!"

"Loki is a warrior-mage," Thor said matter of factly as though that explained everything.

"Mage as in magic?"

"Yes. He... is skilled in many workings and is gifted in many abilities, one of which being the ability of Sight." Thor shrugged. "When I was younger and less wiser, I had no interest in or respect for the Arts, since most honor is given in battle to those who wield the sword. Or in my case, the hammer. Yet now... after a year on Earth, living among humans... things look differently."

"One of the side effects of the drugs forced upon me for interrogation was heightened perception, particularly in regards to Sight. I... Saw many things..." Loki added and his face sobered immediately.

When his red eyes met Coulson's, the agent of SHIELD felt as though Loki were looking through him – or into him. Coulson stifled a shiver.

"There were dreams and visions and things that are, were... and other things that should never come to pass... I saw Thanos. I saw his army. I saw Midgard – Earth, as you call it. I saw Thor and Jane and a world that was in another time and space. I saw the Space Gem, the Tesseract. I saw what it could bring to Earth."

"But Father cannot come to Midgard's defense, all the more reason to stay," Thor reasoned.

"Thanos comes for the Tesseract."

"Why the Tesseract?" Coulson asked curiously. "Why that Gem specifically? I mean, it sounds like this Mad Titan is all-powerful and has an army and all the weaponry he needs."

Loki laughed mirthlessly, "Ah... You humans and your visions of what can be – how limited."

"Now, Loki, they are a young race," Thor said mildly. "They appear weak and fearful, but they are resourceful – and thinking of weapons isn't so unusual."

"I suppose," Loki allowed reluctantly.

"Weak?" Coulson asked, trying to process Thor's and Loki's apparent disregard for the capabilities of Earth and humans.

"The Mad Titan is indeed powerful – but to travel across great distances is taxing on anyone, including Thanos," Thor explained. "Furthermore, there are many other powerful empires and peoples and races spread throughout the Realms who would interfere were he to stir from his bonds."

"The Tesseract is powerful but ultimately un-tameable," Loki turned his crimson gaze on the agent – wise beyond the years he appeared to be. "What power does Midgard hold?"

Coulson's mouth tightened. Immortals. He looked over at Thor who was now talking about the 'Midgardian's current technological status'. Apparently it needed to be updated. Nuclear weapons were mentioned in passing and labeled as crude devices. Coulson found himself once again viewing Thor with new eyes. Thor is an immortal as well, after all. With the way he behaves, however, it's often hard to remember who – and what – he is...

"Thor," Loki was saying now, "we already established that the ability to weaponize a planet does not
equal capability and responsibility to handle something like an Infinity Gem."
"What can the Space Stone do – exactly?” asked Coulson.
"It is... for lack of a better term, a door."
"A door,” Coulson murmured, remembering Fury’s words, Selvig’s reports and his comment. "A door."
"A door between spaces,” Loki explained a little slowly and a bit more sharply. "A welcome power for any who wish to reach any place they desire." 
"Wormholes?” Coulson hazarded.
"Indeed."
"Not everyone has a Bifrost,” Thor added. "Some who wish to reach another Realm could use such an artifact to their advantage... Beings trapped in one Realm, such as Midgard, could successfully stage an attack on another, such as Asgard."
"Exactly,” Loki nodded tiredly.
"But wouldn't someone on our end have to use the Tesseract? I mean, if it could be operated both ways, this guy would’ve been here already, right?”
"Yes. One will come first. It is easy to send one. All-Father used the Bifrost to send Thor here, but he has spoken of Dark Energy – the Farn’a’Dath – wherein he might at a pinch be able to draw one of us to his side. Or send someone. There are other races--"

A blue-skinned race trapped in coffins, powering great colonizing ships. The crazed and the untainted young, the ones closest to the heartbeat of the Realms. The Jotunn mages.

And there are others...

"There are others who can with time, ability, chance or Fate achieve such travel. Not only through space, but also time."
"Like you?” Coulson gave Loki an evaluating look.
"Me? I-"
"Loki is a powerful mage,” Thor clapped his brother on the shoulder heartily. "He could channel such power and cross the distances of time and space... but to use an Infinity Stone, brother... Not even you could wield such power to bring us home. It would tear you apart."

Loki looked thoughtfully at the window-mirror before him.

"But you would still try if you could," Thor snorted. "Idiot."
"I would place the Tesseract in a device,” Loki quickly reassured his brother with a roll of his eyes. "That is the easiest way in which to use it, I would think."
"No one is using the Tesseract-"

Coulson's calm reminder was over-ruled by Thor's quick, heated response: "Loki! We cannot leave them to face Thanos alone!"
"With the Tesseract gone,” Loki replied calmly, "the Titan will have neither means nor motive to come. The other half of the fleet may take awhile to arrive, by which time All-Father and the Mages will have been able to use the Space Gem-"
"We cannot risk Midgard-"
"You mean Jane."
"No!” Thor's voice roughened in angry protest. "Not Jane alone. Six billion people and more--"
"Six billion?"
"There are a lot of us."

Coulson was ignored. Again.

"There are many humans living on this planet."
"And some,” Loki sighed, closing his eyes and frowning. "By the Norns, they have multiplied. Like
insects." He opened his eyes wearily and met Thor's unmoved gaze. "You know what Father will think of Jane, thinks of Jane, assuming Heimdall has been watching you. This... this thing cannot..." Loki shook his head helplessly. "there can be nothing lasting between you, even if you were to save her. You must know that-

"I know," Thor said quietly. "But that is a problem for another day. Today we have another matter at hand – defending six billion people from an invasion."

"Thor," Coulson interjected. "We need to talk."

"There is no time," reiterated Loki with a groan. It was obvious that he had been pushed to the limits of his capability and with fatigue came the old fears. "He will be here. The mage they selected will be coming at any minute. Perhaps he is here already."

Not through the Tesseract he hasn't, Coulson thought. Although it has been behaving oddly...

"Loki." Thor leaned forward. "As far as I know, as far as we know... no one has come..."

"But – but-" Loki turned away then, eyes squeezed shut. "I – I saw – I thought I saw-"

"Loki."

"I – maybe, maybe I am-"

Crazy.

"Maybe I am still there-"

"Loki – Loki!" Thor rose now and gripped Loki's shoulder as his brother attempted to curl up, his thin wrists jerking at the restraints which lightly held him down to the bed. "No – no – you are here – you are here-"

Over and over, he repeated the refrain, clumsily drawing his brother close. Thor's left hand rose and clasped his brother's neck as was his habit, until Loki calmed down.

"You are here – with me-" Thor slowly drew back and gazed down at his shaking brother. Pressing Loki back against the raised bed and soft white pillows, Thor pushed Loki's dark hair away from his slightly sweaty forehead and tear-stained eyes where the dark strands had caught on his watery eyelashes. "Perhaps there is another reason... another reason for Thanos's lateness. Perhaps his allies were delayed-

"Or his ships malfunctioned," Coulson offered. "Or, you said you followed the Tesseract's call... and you can jump across space. Well, maybe this is crazy, but maybe you went back in time as well."

Simultaneously, both brothers turned to stare at Coulson. A broad smile wreathed Thor's face as the thought sunk in. Loki just looked thoughtfully into the distance and when he met Coulson's gaze, there was new-found respect in the Jotunn's eyes.

"We may never find out..."

"You'll calculate it on your return to Asgard and you will find Coulson is correct," Thor grinned affectionately at the two of them. "Loki – you are not crazy! Well, a little – but not more so than usual."

"I do not understand your joy," Loki said crossly, a blush rising to his cheeks as he remembered the scene he had just caused a few minutes before. "The Titan is still coming. The Tesseract is still calling and Time is still running out."

Thor gave Loki an affectionate smile, but his blue eyes grew solemn.

"We must laugh while we can, Loki," his heavy voice belied his worry. "I fear that before this quest is over, many lives will be lost."

"I am more worried about my life," Loki said wapsishly. "And yours," he added with a sniff. Thor shook his head and sighed. "Well, I thank you for your worry, Loki – but frankly I think you
should focus on yourself." He paused and flashed his younger brother another annoyingly impish grin. "You look like shit."

In the end, Thor left with Coulson to speak with the Director of SHIELD. Despite his reasoning, Loki's pleas to take the Tesseract and run were ignored. Watching his brother's broad back disappear beyond his sick room door, Loki fretted. Peevishly, he frowned at himself in the mirror.

*Thor is right. I look terrible.* His face was thin and pale and his frame looked equally skeletal. *Weak and vulnerable.* This did not sit well with Loki. Lightly restrained as he was, Loki looked more like an invalid captive than what he was – an invalid guest.

*Not that I am worried,* Loki told himself for the fifth time. *I am in good hands.*

Yet old habits of skepticism long-formed, brought into crystal clear focus with the drugs once forced on him and newly purged from his body, clung to the darker corners of his thoughts. The Voice which had haunted him since his childhood was silent – but Loki fancied he could hear it still.


Fatigue weighed down on his eyes, his bones like anchors. Dark slowly clouded his vision as sleep crept up on him. Attempting to corral his thoughts was futile. There were only mists of fear, uncertainty, suspicion – and suspense.

Voices muttered about him.

-**time**-
-**there is no time**-
-**time is running out**-
-**HE is coming**-

*What does it matter if Midgard is attacked – Asgard, with the Tesseract, could come to its aid quickly enough. Six billion. Six billion... They spawn and thrive in the luxury of Asgard's protection, unknowing, naive. Like a child – but less. A child can at least know danger when it is coming – they have no understanding. Like insects. Like ants... scurrying about...*

With that, Loki fell into uneasy sleep, dreaming of a dead planet swimming with the cruel-eyed, partially bionic race known as the Chitauri. Their boots were spiked metal and hard leather and crushed any sign of life before them. He was there as well – watching, helping - surrounded and trapped and unable to resist.

*I was never able to aid the ones I never wished to harm. I was never able to protect the ones I loved. *

...**FAILURE**...

*No, love.* Frigga took his hand. He gazed in shock as her slender, seemingly ageless hands wrapped around his own callused ones. *Not all is loss, nor all is failure. The appearance of weakness hides strength and the innocence of hope fuels passion. Have faith-

-**have**-
-**have faith**-
-**you have done your part, dear heart**-
-**you heard our call**-
A long, long time ago, when time was a young child and the worlds, the Realms, were young, great beings were born within the embrace of magick – the Asgardians, the Elves, the Celestials, the Jotunn to name a few. They were times of difficulties, hardship and the struggle to survive in the ever changing Realms which shifted slowly into being. Such times have long been forgotten, save by a few.

The truths are hidden in Asgardian annals now covered in dust, in ancient archive of the long-lost Arcona peoples, in the torn, worn pages of Jotunn scrolls. How the Jotunn built a city of snow and light out of magick. How the Celestials spread across the universes, one day to disappear, leaving only the shadows of their greatness. How Asgard rose on foundations of power and invention. How the Titans and the Dark Elves wrestled for power and a return to the dark.

All these tales now remain only in myth – remnants of truth scattered in children's stories and old wives' tales. Yet, sometimes, sometimes...

Sometimes the gods return to walk the Earth. Myths old and new come to life, in new permutations, warped through distortions of time. Yet even here, there is a semblance to tales long lost to time. These are the days of wonders. The God of Thunder stands to defend the defenseless. The God of Mischief, in another form, plots and plans.

And a Mad Titan, resurrected, rises once again and courts Death.

"You believe this?" Fury fixed Coulson with a hard stare as he looked up from his favorite agent's report.
"Yes."
"I also believe Loki speaks the truth," Thor put in. Despite the fact that Coulson had reminded him of the importance of keeping his peace, Thor could not help feel anxiety rise as Fury's inscrutable expression did not change after the crucial information given him. "I trust his judgment."
"Well, that's a matter for me to decide," Fury stared down Thor who merely set his jaw in return and glared stubbornly back. "You are obviously biased."
"He is afraid," Coulson gestured to the video monitor, which now showed Loki sleeping – twitching a little. *No sweet dreams for Loki.* "Something scared the crap outta him – so much so he's hoping to get Thor and him back home so their dad can take care of it. Frankly, if a god is scared, I'm kinda worried as well."
"A... Mad... Titan," Fury read the name aloud with a note of disbelief. "Dammit. This is crazy. I mean, how am I going to tell the Council this one? A crazy guy on drugs."
Thor tensed, obvious about to spring to his feet. Coulson, laying a placating hand on Thor's forearm sighed and not for the last time wished he could have left Thor behind with Loki. A crazy paranoia magician, a protective, hot-tempered super-being and an irate, quick-tempered Director. This isn't going to be easy...

"-shows up out of nowhere – literally – saying a Mad Titan is coming to wipe out humanity – and at the same time, the same crazy coming off drugs is admitting to attempted genocide," Fury paused for effect before continuing. "I know you guys don't think that genocide of Jotunn is all that big of a deal, but you have to admit this doesn't sound good. Damn insanity is what I call it. And even if I were to say, 'Okay, let's prepare for this' – what am I going to tell the Council or the heads of any national security organization?"
"The truth," Thor stated simply.
"They can't handle the fucking truth."
"He's right," Coulson sighed. "The reality of super-humans amongst us – and the mutant thing – was hard enough for governments to handle – and it's still a legislative mess..." He shook his head.. "It's not a simple problem, Thor. Without central government, the responses of the countries on this planet will be varied and often seemingly random and worse, reactive."
"Still – we must do something!" Thor protested.
"We will watch the Tesseract," Fury nodded. "Start clearing the base. We'll add more security. We'll call in our contracted help. We'll..." Fury rolled his eyes and sighed loudly as he added, "We will also ask your brother for specific things he may have... airquotes 'Seen'."
"And if the Tesseract is stolen or opens a door to an angry-"
"Mad," Thor corrected.
"Same difference," Fury shrugged.
"No. He is mad, as in..." Thor paused, searching for the word. "Crazed."
"Crazy."
"In the stories, he fell in love with Death-"
"Death is a woman?" Coulson asked curiously.
Fury gave Coulson his standard 'don't fuck with me' look. Coulson smiled, unfazed.

"Yes. They say Death is a woman. Thanos, the Mad Titan, fell in love with her."
"Okay," Fury eased back in his chair, looking more perturbed than ever. "That is just wrong."
"And he sends her gifts," Thor went on simply, calmly, but there was a note of horror beneath the matter of fact tone. "Gifts – magnificent offerings numbering in thousands and millions – and billions."

A short, thoughtful pause ensued.

"Or so the tales say," Thor shrugged. "Loki knows more. He has seen the Titan and has heard him – and... has seen him."
"'Seen' seen or... seen?" asked Coulson.
"Both. And the horror remains. It lingers and festers," Thor shivered. "If a mage wanders too long in the shadow, the shadow is all he becomes."
"'Gaze into the abyss and the abyss will gaze back into you?' quoted Coulson slowly.
"Something like that."
"And I'm assuming that when you say thousands, millions and billions of gifts, you aren't talking flowers," Coulson said dryly.
"No. Many races fell into the dark beneath the Mad Titan's... rampages. With the Infinity Gems, he wrecked havoc across the known Realms... It took many great mages and warriors to overcome him and cast him into the Void in which he has been caged... until now."

With that, Thor ended abruptly. If Loki was right – and he is right, Thor reassured himself, then Loki
had walked beneath Thanos's shadow all of his life, perhaps, as well as during his exile. Loki’s fears, Loki’s pleas had come from the recognition of suspicions long ignored now revealed as true. And when Loki is afraid...

Thor shivered.

...he knows no limits...

"Fucking hell," Fury said.

Chapter End Notes

I'm stopping the chapter here. I hope you guys enjoyed it. Next chapter introduces all of the Avengers. We'll be seeing the first 15 minutes or 20 minutes of Avengers. And find out which Mage from Asgard is the villain. LOL.

Well, that's about it. But here's a thought for those interested...

OK. Well that's it!

Please review and let me know what you think! I do read and greatly appreciate reviews even if I don't reply as often as I should!

Thanks for reading!
Working on Chapter 82 already! (!) Wow. First time in a long time that I feel ahead. Let's see how long this feeling stays with me. Hm. Yes. Well, here's another piece of the Avengers film. I hope you guys are enjoying it!

Many thanks again to those who review! I appreciate your words of encouragement muchly - and your concrit! I will be editing this monster of a piece at some point of time in the future so hearing input now is great.

Thanks to: Kai_Maciel, MissyZ, lemomina, Skywinder, thaliaarche, iBlameGlobalWarming, not_overjoyed

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
Chapter 80
Opening Salvo II

With each tick, the clock's dark hands moved forward, moved about the white face of the time piece. Time marched on inexorably. Marched onward to doom, Loki thought, like an unstoppable army vast and numberless... like the Chitauri.

Yet, time was not the only thing now set in motion.

A dark-grey and black fleet of ships slowly made its way to the edge of the galaxy and paused there on the edge of the Void. A decaying planet hanging before an ever hungry black hole swarmed busily and the air vibrated with tension and anticipation as the Dark Lord Thanos and his mages prepared for the sending of their emissary.

Tall, dark-suited with perfectly styled hair, another anonymous agent for SHIELD arrived at the sick room of Loki, clipboard in hand. Sitting down by Loki's bed, pen poised, the agent waited and, when Loki began to speak, took copious notes. Notes of what had happened, what could happen and what Loki hoped would never come to be.

In other rooms at SHIELD's HQ, calls were being made. Discreet calls between the Director and a select group of heads of state. Short orders and readjustments in staff positioning as the New Mexico base evacuation began. Loki's warnings, due to the specificity and level of classification of his information, had, Fury thought, merited a response. However, a skeleton crew of scientists and security were chosen to remain to watch over the Tesseract and continue to monitor its fluctuating readings.

-0-0-0-

Thor remained in Washington, DC, the better to reassure his brother. Loki needed him – that much was obvious – whether his young brother admitted it or not. As Loki spoke more freely, as fears abated, it became clear to Thor that America was not safe enough for his liking. Not safe enough for Jane, at any rate. His call to Jane, long, difficult and emotional ended with the astrophysicist
reluctantly acquiescing to his suggestion – an invitation (set up by Coulson) to an Observatory in Sweden.

"You needn't have told her," Loki pointed out blandly after Thor returned, looking and feeling older than ever. "She would have accepted the invitation regardless."

"A while ago, I would have done so," Thor admitted as he took firm grip of Loki's arm and helped his brother to ease off the bed's edge and stand, for the first time in a long while, on his own two feet. "But that would not be right. Not really." He caught Loki's knowing grin. "Shut it, you. I would have you know that Jane is a woman who knows her own mind and makes her own decisions." Thor sobered. "She would not be pleased to discover that I had manipulated her."

"Even if it was for her own good?"

"Jane would understand my motivations... She would, I think, forgive me. But," Thor said slowly. "I would rather build trust, even if it costs me some energy, takes some time... In the long run, it's better. For the both of us."

"In the long run?" Loki echoed. "You have picked up some odd colloquialisms here..."

"And you walk like a newborn colt – but you don't see me commenting on it."

"You just did."

"You commented first."

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

-0-0-0-

There were other meetings. Meetings among the teams of agents, soldiers and scientists under SHIELD's command. Meetings among command officers, tacticians and security personnel. Director Fury held several conferences not only with the Council but also his subordinating officers. A special conference was scheduled for those who stood apart from SHIELD's regular lines of duty: Steve Rogers, Thor, Romanov and Barton. Coulson said nothing of the failed project these particular agents represented and but contented himself with watching their faces at the short meeting.

Barton and Romanov, on the video screens (being in different locations they had had been unable to actually attend) appeared unmoved by the intel. Undoubtedly they would share their opinions or misgivings at another time, but Coulson could guess at what they thought beneath their cool, professional exteriors. As SHIELD professionals, they looked to the Director and Coulson for their orders, trusting in their judgment, but Coulson could see that both Barton and Romanov held some reservations about Loki's predictions. On hearing about the Tesseract and the possibility of brainwashing, Barton's eyebrows rose a few millimeters and he briefly muttered, "Damn."

Steve, as the Tesseract was discussed, began to pace. Still, he held his peace, allowing the rest of the information to sink in before voicing his concern. When Thor spoke of returning the Tesseract to Asgard, Steve was quick to agree. Fury, however, would not be moved. The Tesseract was to remain on the Earth.

As the meeting ended and Hill (with her new list of things to do in hand) and the other aides got up from the large round table and streamed out of the room, Thor distinctly remembered later Steve mumbling as the super-soldier made his way out of the room, "Should've left the damn thing in the ocean."

-0-0-0-

"Do you agree with him?" Fury asked Coulson, once everyone had left the Helicarrier's conference room, referring to Steve's quiet protests.

"Well, some days..." Coulson shrugged. "Yes."
"With the Tesseract," Fury pointed out, "the benefits for us are endless."
"I don't disagree," Coulson replied mildly, "the power outage alone will support SHIELD's energy needs for years to come – and other things."
"And other things," Fury repeated. "We are moving the special projects off base."
"Back to the carrier – or Washington?"
"The carrier, for now."

Coulson nodded.

"I sent the room designation to your mail. Just to be aware."
"Hm."
"Aware of your personnel, I mean," Fury elaborated.
"Yes. Well, I'm pretty certain Thor and Rogers won't roam about," Coulson said and then smiled.
"They'll be busy. As will be Barton and Romanov."
"Barton is still in New Mexico. I know you want him back here... but security needs his... particular skill set. And we can't risk everything on some crazy's star visions or whatever the hell he has going on."
"I know. Romanov is in New York, awaiting further orders. You are thinking of sending her to India, right?"
"If there was any time for that particular initiative to be tested-"
"Resuscitated, more like."
"Yeah, well, now's the time to prove its efficacy."
"You think Banner will accept our offer?" Coulson asked.
"Romanov is... persuasive."
"Those four will be enough? Barton. Romanov. Banner. Rogers... You realize Thor would be a great asset to the initiative as well."
"That goes without saying," grunted Fury.
"And the brother?" Coulson paused. "Loki?"
"Ah. That one's a wild card. Well, they are all wild cards in their own way, but he takes the damn cake. 'Mentally unbalanced... reckless... unsympathetic to human interests...'" Fury scrolled through a doctor's report, ticking off the keywords which seemed to jump right off the screen. "PTSD... uncontrollable... young... trust issues..." Screams fucking wild card. There's no way he'll be a team player."
"Hm, well, you are skipping the other stuff," Coulson corrected Fury, "'loyal, intelligent, powerful, insightful and innovative'. He's had experience working with Thor and as a member of the Royal family as well as a mage, Loki more than likely is as well-educated as Thor is in war. He could be a real asset."
"He's not well enough to walk on his own."
"He's working on that. Fear is a great motivator."
"Damn." Fury cursed briefly, then slowly nodded. "But I see your point. Bench him."
"Or try to."
"Tell him he's back up."
"I don't think Loki's the type to hang back... but Thor may be able to reason with him."
"I hope so," Fury said coolly. "The last thing we need is a crazy on the field fucking shit up."
"Hm," Coulson flicked through another pile of papers. "Speaking of wild cards, if we are serious about this... we'll have to put in a call to Malibu."
"Malibu, huh."
"That's his last known location as of half an hour ago."
"Malibu. Must be nice. I heard it's great this time of year," Fury smirked.
"Pity," agreed Coulson. "Who'll we send?"
"I think you should handle it personally." Fury grimaced and shook his head. "You know how these neurotic multi-billionaires get... They like personal treatment; they like the attention. I'll have a
package ready for you when we decide to rope him in. Just enough to get him interested."
"Good idea. I'll be in my quarters catching a few," Coulson shuffled together his stack of papers.
"You'll need it. I'll have someone come round and pick you up in five hours or so. The base will
need your special attention - to make certain things are getting done in a timely manner."
"Of course," Coulson said.

A long night? Coulson thought. More like a long weekend from hell.

-0-0-0-

Two days later, Loki was able to make his way with Thor's help outside. Now that his magick was
able to stabilize, Loki's healing sped along in astonishing rates bordering on the miraculous to the
onlooking team of physicians put in charge of his care.

And yet, Thor mused, he is still vulnerable – and Loki is painfully aware of that fact. It is frightening
to him. It is shaming... Thor's thoughts wandered monetarily to a muddy pit in which sat Mjolnir.
Both of us at this moment in time are weaponless – and are only at half-power...

"I know what you fear," Loki's tired whisper broke into Thor's thoughts as the two found a small
wood and iron park bench sheltered in the lee of the building, ensconced in a small potted plant area.
Judging by the amount of cigarette butts on the ground, Thor guessed it was more of a popular spot
for staff to have an illicit smoke. "Dying alone... dying helpless to save the ones you love."
"We will not die, Loki," Thor squeezed his brother on the shoulder and winced at how bony Loki
had remained despite the constant healthy meals offered him. "We will not die," he repeated. "You
are speaking out of fear-"
"Or knowledge of the inevitable."
"Someone wise once told me something I had forgotten and since remembered..."
"Hmmm..."
"Something about the fact that knowledge is power. I wonder who that was..." Thor's small joke fell
flat as Loki just stared at him woodenly, clearly unimpressed.
"It is only power if people wield it adequately. SHIELD is not taking our warnings seriously. Very
little has changed from what I saw happening. Soon we will move from neutral watchfulness to a
panicked defense. Hopefully the fail-safe will be in place."
"Fail-safe – the built-in self-destruct?"
"Yes." Pause. "Otherwise we will have a real problem on our hands."
"I am certain SHIELD will be ready for the attack." Thor leaned forward and gazed down at the
edges of his blue jeans rumpled along the edges of his black combat boots. Then over at Loki's
slippers which looked incongruously white-pink against his dark blue feet. "In your dreams... who
led the attack?"

There followed an eloquent silence. Loki's stare did not meet Thor's. Instead it chose to wander over
the small garden, the slender elms, square rows of hedges and rounded bushes and the small green
buds of the perennials now beginning to reach upward to the sun.

"Who was it, Loki?"

Thor was not going to let his suspicions remain unanswered.

"It was me," Loki finally admitted. His red eyes met Thor's in anguish. "But I would not do such a
thing – I -- I think I was -- I was confused and angry and alone and... empty, so empty. Easy prey for
Thanos and the machinations of the Mind Gem."
"The staff you spoke of... is another Infinity Stone?"
"But that was another time, another space, another me -- and you-"
"I think you ought to hold onto that thought," Thor tugged on Loki's shoulder, rising to his feet. "We
are ourselves and our future is unknown. Let us make the best of it."
"Well... I will just settle for better," Loki grumbled, joining Thor, stumbling a little as he moved forward. "Best might be asking too much."

[...so two are joined...]
[...the power of a dying star...]
[...preserved forever and mighty...]
[...and the Voice of the Stars...]
[...ever changeable and cunning...]
[...are joined...]

Watching his brother fall asleep for the usual prescribed afternoon nap, Thor clasped Loki’s hand and vowed revenge. Whoever did this to Loki, they will pay. Loki has always been the one who thought of a way out, but this is Kol'la, an enslaved Kol'la... the Kol'la I had met with defeated eyes. I want my brother back... Loki...

[...and the powers...]
[...dark and light...]
[...if they have forgotten...]
[...let them beware...]
[...let them see...]

One day later, a dark helicopter gently lit down on the waiting landing pad of the New Mexico base. The door, already half open and now slamming back fully, revealed a man in a black leather trench and a black eye-patch. Another man – shorter, rather anonymous in a suit usually worn by the lower ranks of federal employees – rushed forward.

"She's gonna blow!" yelled Coulson over the whoosh of the choppers.
"Evacuation status?!" hollered back Fury.
"Emptied five hours ago, excepting the skeleton staff you ordered – five technicians and two units."

With each step, the two left the overpowering sound of the rotors as the helicopter slowly shut down.

"I recommend," Coulson added, "that you keep the heli on standby, given the imminent collapse expected."

Fury nodded, jerked his head back, giving his single personal security detail a meaningful look. Without further words, the soldier fell back and returned to the heli, talking loudly over his earpiece.

"We don't have a lot of time," Hill appeared at Fury's other elbow as they moved toward the lift. "It has reached critical mass."
"If anyone were to come through," Coulson said as the lift doors opened and they stepped through, "it would be now."

The lift, a few seconds later, was rocketing downward.

"Well. This time we are prepared for whatever, whomever it is... Asgardians are tough – but I doubt they could walk away from a grenade to the face."

Coulson glanced at Hill, then looked away.

"We can hope," he said shortly.
"Have the other other projects been relocated?" Fury asked Hill.
"Yes, sir."
"And all staff evacuated?"
"Yes, sir," Coulson nodded.
"You two go ahead then," Fury came to a stop and turned to look the other two in the eyes. "The Doctor and I will try to shut down the Tesseract and join you. Hill, get to the transport lot and ensure everyone who should be out is out. I think there are two backup security teams down there. Let's get them out of the way. Make a perimeter around the base. Coulson, you get out of here. Take the other three units on the south end with you. I think they're escorting some last minute personnel off base. The less people around here, the better."

Hill stared unhappily at her superior before nodding tightly. Fury sighed. He could read her thoughts – safety in numbers. And she's right, the forbidding Director agreed, but if it were to blow... this place'll be nothing but a mass grave. A mass grave and a massive public scandal. Neither of which SHIELD can afford right now. Or at any time.

"Yes, sir," Hill dipped her chin in a tense nod.

Watching the tall, dark-haired uniformed woman walk away and beckon a security officer to accompany her, Coulson turned to Fury.

"The Tesseract has been increasing power output with each surge. Loki's predictions are correct," Coulson pointed out. "You will need more man power – backup – to deal with whomever comes through."
"Two squadrons and Barton are present," Fury said calmly. "Frankly, I need you ready out there – just in case. Losing you is not an option at this stage. Not worth the risk."
"So you do think brainwashing is a possibility."
"I think at this point of time, anything is a possibility," Fury gave Coulson a measured look. "Get yourself back outside. I'll either be out with the Tesseract in half an hour... or we'll be meeting on the carrier with the Avengers."
"I'll arrange a lift for Rogers and Thor just in case, then."
"Don't forget Loki," nodded Fury. "The last thing we need is some vigilante action by a crazy E.T. Besides... he may be a screw loose but at least he'll have a clue as to what the fuck is going on."

With that, the two parted.

-0-0-0-

Going down a long winding stairs which curved around the central room of the reactor they had built for their highly classified project, Fury ran through all the options in his mind. The atmosphere about him fit his pessimistic mood. The entire complex, built out of concrete several meters thick was a forbidding, gloomy-looking place, well-suited to the rather dangerous activities taking place. Metal girders, beams and pipes ran through and along the mazes of corridors and with each slight tremor, the bared blue-white fluorescent lights flickered.

Walking into the laboratory proper and the small testing site, Fury was greeted with a familiar sight. The skidrow (what he mentally called it) was empty of staff and neither was it filled with the Tesseract's beam which had been, on occasion, activated for energy production. Five tall black panels stood at the one end – making an empty circle. What the circle was for, Fury did not know precisely, but on the other end of the long metal walkway stood the circular, spiked titanium device of which he definitely knew the purpose. It held the Tesseract, the centerpiece of the room and the purpose for the entire research department in the reactor.

Past that lay an open path from which branched various stations – computers, monitors, mysterious-looking scientific equipment as well as the scientists themselves and the security detail he had
ordered. Barton was nowhere in sight.

"So, what's going on, Doctor?" Fury asked, voice echoing around the vaulted ceiling as he moved forward and past the Tesseract.

Selvig, emerging from behind a monitor, shook his head. The tall, older Swede, dressed incongruously in grey slacks and a blue plaid dress shirt, looked rather harassed. Even worried.

_Not good_, Fury thought.

"The Tesseract is misbehaving," Selvig shook his head. "We've been monitoring it all day long... but..."
"Misbehaving?" Fury quirked an eyebrow.
"Well, sounds funny – but," Selvig glanced at another monitor before leading Fury back to the Tesseract and its stand. "It's... behaving. And not in a good way."

Accompanying his words, the Tesseract sputtered, flared, flashed and white wisps of what looked like fog or steam drifted about it as one of the technicians delicately probed it. Hurriedly edging back, the scientist glanced at Selvig.

"I got a few reading," the young African-American said, "but they are far from complete..."
"Just see what you can do," sighed Selvig, leaning in gingerly.
"You can't just... turn it off?" Fury asked.
"She's a power source. We turn her or anything off, she turns it all back on."
"Hm," Fury noted Selvig's odd pronoun usage once again. _She_. Loki's words of warning flitted into his memory. _She_. He glanced around the room. "Where's Agent Barton?"
"The Hawk?" Selvig gave Fury an unreadable look.

_He was never entirely easy about the military nature of this organization_, Fury thought. _Now, more than ever, perhaps._

Selvig jerked his head. "Up in his nest. As usual."

Fury nodded and moved away, allowing Selvig return to his work, thumbed on his earpiece and called for Barton. Fifteen seconds later, Barton, looking his usual self with an all-black uniform, arrows and slung-over short bow, appeared at his side after descending with envious agility down a wire. Fury jerked his head in the direction of the Tesseract and the skidrow and the two took the long way around, surveying the room from another, quieter corner.

"I told you to keep a close eye on things," Fury said.
"I see things better from a distance," 'The Hawk' replied simply in answer to Fury's unspoken question.
"Any evidence of tampering?"
"None."
"No suspicious activity?"
"None," Barton repeated, shaking his head minutely.

As the two moved away from the scientists, Barton continued on, voice lowered, as he completed his report.

"Triple-checked the background checks on all of them. I even checked their communications and IMs. Selvig and the rest of his team are as clean as they come."
"Hm."
The two of them now stood before the Tesseract, watching the eerie wisps drifting from it.

"It does seem..." Fury paused. "Active."
"Low level radiation. A little gamma radiation. 'Nothing harmful', Selvig said," Barton shivered, "but it's unnerving to watch."

Fury stared down at the small white crystalline box before him. *It could fit in my hand*, he thought, *and it will power our operations and energize our weapons for hundreds of years to come. As long as we can keep our hands on it, keep it safe.* The one-eyed Director frowned. *But these things have a way of getting out of control. A double-edged sword.*

"Yep," Barton was saying, "nothing is messing with it on our end."
"Our end?"
"Coulson said it before, sir," Barton shrugged. "It's a door. Doors open two ways, right?"
"Well, I-"

Before Fury was able to complete his sentence, Selvig's voice rose from his station in a shout.

"Director! You may want to step back! She's sky-rocketing!"

With a crackle, a roar and a small explosion of light, the largest beam or energy Fury had ever seen shot out from the Tesseract. Power coalesced among the encircling five tall black panels, swirling and tearing away at the fabric of space, before expanding outward in a ball of light, energy and wind. For a few seconds, everyone staggered, hands and arms raised, shielding against the light. A larger wind buffeted the stations, nearly blowing Fury and Barton off their feet. Beneath, the ground quaked uneasily and dust hung in the air, falling from newly formed stress fractures in the grey concrete above.

When Fury found his footing and looked upward and forward, he noticed that the giant flames which had erupted along the beam's trajectory had extinguished quickly. At the far end, a hooded figure half knelt – steam, smoke and wisps of the Tesseract's power rolled off the bent shoulders and large hood, obscuring the face and identity momentarily. Nodding at Barton mutely, Fury unholstered his gun, readied it and brought it to bear.

"Just as he said, sir," Barton murmured.
"This time, we're prepared," Fury replied quietly.

The hooded figure rose, slowly and painfully, judging by the hitch in movement as he (or she) got to their feet. In their right hand curved a short, spear-like weapon which curved about to a point like a bird of prey's beak and nested in its crook, a soft light gleamed.

A pale wrinkled hand rose to pull back the hood – and at that simple gesture, twelve safety catches clicked in warning.

"Sir," Fury said in a slow, clear voice which rang throughout the room. "Please, put down the spear."

The figure continued, pulling back the hood and revealing the wrinkled features of an old face above a frizzed, long, white beard. As he shifted, he stood to his full height – tall despite his bent shoulders which gave hint to a broadness once, a long time ago during his youth when, perhaps, he had stood as strong and unmoving as Thor. When his cloak parted further back, the intruder's clothing was also reminiscent of the outfit Thor had worn upon his arrival on Earth – well-fitted with earthy hues of deep browns, greens and burnt siennas.
An old man. *An old man,* Fury thought, *who could be some kind of Merlin in Camelot.* A wizard, wise and ancient, looking about him with eyes that seemed to hold deep wells of knowledge and memory. Eyes that seemed to see through them – and laughed at what was hidden. Eyes that held no small amount of madness. Eyes that glinted with an inner fire of madness. Eyes that looked down at all of them as an exasperated parent or teacher might a naughty child or ignorant student. Fury felt himself bristling at the patronizing gaze. He felt his hope that this could be solved amicably evaporate as the intruder made no move.

"Well, I've never shot a senior citizen before," muttered Barton. "There's a first time for everything I suppose."
"Sir," Fury repeated again, a little louder, since the elderly man may have been hard of hearing, "please... put down... the spear."

The next thing Fury knew, he was flat on his back, pain shooting along his shoulders which had taken the brunt of his fall. He had been brought down by Barton as a blast of powerful energy blazed through the air where he had been standing. Rolling to their feet, Fury and Barton began to fire at the mage – only to discover that some kind of invisible shielding had been erected. Invisible shielding which easily deflected the bullets and grenades launched at it.

Despite the long, white beard, wrinkly, sun-spotted skin and the hunched posture, the elderly man, once moving, seemed unstoppable. Jumping to the left, spear raised, the cloaked attacker took down three men before the rest could react. After that, things became a little more chaotic. One female scientist was hit by a stray blast; two men died of ricocheting projectiles. Madness.

Fury, noticing the power still collecting and expanding in the domed vault ceiling, cursed. *There's not much time left – and to bring larger weapons to bear will kill us all... but the alternative-*

Emptying his second clip and watching with consternation as each of his shots hit the mark's face and chest and bounced right off, Fury sighed. He looked around the room.

It was in total shambles. All of the scientists and technicians, save Selvig who had ran to the fallen female technician's side, had fled. Barton and the others were now clearly on the defensive, fighting hand to hand against the as yet anonymous enemy and newly recruited agents who had mysteriously turned.

*Brainwashed,* Fury thought, feeling older and more tired than ever. Inching along, the Director crept around the edge of the station, snagging one of the more familiar cases, slipped over to the Tesseract, eased it out of its cradle and into the case. Wincing as the cold heat threatened to burn through his gloves, Fury quickly set it in and closed the cover, spinning the locks and then standing up.

Glancing around again, Fury noticed that the room had suddenly become silent.

Selvig also rose.

"Who are you?" the white-blond haired man called out, clearly upset. "Have you come from Asgard? We are friends of Thor!"
"I – I am a messenger who understands what lies before the Realms," replied the mage – suddenly appearing behind the doctor and spinning the man around. He gave Selvig a gentle look."There is only surrender and survival," here, the mage pressed the tip of the spear into Selvig's chest, "or death."

*Barton-*

Barton was walking toward him, eyes icy blue – gun raised and at the ready.
"I am afraid," a cultivated, formal, precise yet hoarse voice broke the ominous silence, "that artifact is not for you to keep."

"Neither is it yours," Fury replied coldly, reaching for his gun – and then hesitating as Barton's thumb flicked the safety catch on his own.

"You have no idea to whom you speak, presumptuous man," the brown-cloaked mage stepped forward. "And your – childish games are just that – childish. It is surprising – to meet such a welcome on Midgard, yet in the end, you can only recognize our power and your own impotence. Midgard has lived in peace too long – it has grown fat and ignorant, yet our Lord will come and teach the impudent a lesson well-learned and, having given up all of its treasures, this world will... burn."

With that Barton's gun fired, Fury felt momentary loss of breath as the bullet his Kevlar vest straight and true. He toppled back, lost his grip on the case and lay there stunned as Selvig, Barton and his agents marched past, swooped up the Tesseract and, with the hooded mage in tow, left.

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By the time Fury found power and breath to call and alert Hill, the group was pulling out the lot. Knowing Hill and her men would be in pursuit, Fury ran amidst the increasing tremors to his waiting helicopter.

As he rose into the night air, cracks appeared in the pavement beneath him and the concrete and metal fell away, fell in – an inevitable collapse. Fury watched as the base and surrounding campus slowly disappeared, gave way to furrows of metal and stone rubble as the mazes of hallways beneath filled with rubble.

Just before the entrance collapsed, three dark vehicles shot out and cut across the rough countryside, over gravel and sand and scrub.

"Follow them-"

Aiming at and successfully hitting moving vehicles while in an unsteady aircraft such as an helicopter is difficult at the best of times and Fury soon realized that many of his shots while hitting the mark were being deflected – again. As the mage returned fire from the back of the second truck, Fury cursed mages and magic – superior technology – and everything extraterrestrial. One of the mage's energy shots from his spear hit the heli's tail and as the pilot expertly brought the exploding vehicle round, the quiet agent yelled at Fury to jump.

Without argument, Fury leaped off, landed and rolled across sand and withered grass and turned to watch helplessly as the cavalcade of trucks disappeared with the Tesseract into the night. Behind him, the helicopter crashed into the ground, rotors chopping into the sand like mighty fins finding purchase in water, causing it to swing, flail and scud across the sand. Like a dying beast.

Agent Dunstan, Fury thought.

Then, a familiar reassuring voice came over the headset. Coulson's voice.

"I achieved the perimeter, sir. Should I still return to DC HQ?"
Fury thought for a few seconds before thumbing his walkie-talkie on. "Hill, do you copy?"
"I copy," Hill sounded frustrated and tired – and defeated. "I'm trapped down here – and a few more of our men."
"We'll get you and your men out," Fury said. "The one's with Coulson will stay and retrieve you. Coulson, do you copy?"
"I copy, sir."
"You will go to Malibu as planned. We will meet on the carrier," Fury paused before continuing his voice even. "The Tesseract is in enemy hands. This is a Level Seven. As of right now, we are at war."

Chapter End Notes

Dun, dun, dun. Well, now we are in Avengers proper. So that's... exciting... Well, maybe not. The differences aren't that big so far. Next chapter, things will start skewing, I promise.

As I promised a reader, I'm making Barton a little deaf - but I've not mentioned it yet b/c he's wearing an earpiece... so that kinda makes the whole thing moot. (I don't believe in throwing in massive amounts of character description until I actually have to. And randomly saying that someone is deaf is kinda odd.)

I hope you guys are enjoying it!

Let me know~~~!
Opening Salvo III

Chapter Notes

Summary: The war between Jotunheim and Asgard draws to a close, but thanks to a horrible twist of Fate (or perhaps not), the nameless runt of Laufey-King is not discovered by Odin and so begins a remarkable journey of life that should not have been. Jotun!Loki AU. Set pre-/during-/after Thor/Avengers Assemble. MCU-verse only.

Warnings: ANGST! Loki-whump! Language, adult situations, violence, child abuse, dub-con, sexual assault (also of a minor), substance abuse, one abortion scene (sort of), slavery, sex trade (maybe), some mild original character/Loki M/M pairings. Also F/M pairings.

Comments: This is not a slash fic. Sorry. It's Loki-centric, although I definitely show the rest of the Avengers and etc. Please review! Constructive criticism welcome.

Disclaimer: I do not own Avengers. Marvel owns it. I do not get paid for this piece of work. Sadly, but understandably. LOL.

Well, school has started now. I've got 4 months of work ahead of me or so! I was talking to a reviewer the other day and realized that two years ago in April I started this beast. Two years of writing - almost every week. I remember stumbling into a month of writer's block and feeling really bad... but looking back, it makes more sense as I realize that I've been writing this for almost two years. Hopefully, something will come of this piece of work because I do feel like I've put a lot of time and effort into it. It's not perfect by a long shot, but when I consider that I could've spent the last two years of my life writing something more original... I must confess I get worried. And now I'm getting enamored of Thranduil and wanna write something for him. (beats off plot bunnies) If I start a fanfiction after this one that's just as serious as this one - without working on the original pieces I've been promising myself to do, or the sequel to DIT, or the editing of DIT itself - I may have to go into hiding from my bestie and top editor. Le sigh.

Thanks to: Kai_Maciel, FrenchValkyrie, thaliaarche, lemomina, Skywinder. Your encouragement have been a real support!

You'll see the changes - starting now. XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
Chapter 81
Opening Salvo III

Now we are at war...

Fury's words resounding in his mind, Coulson switched his earpiece to standby, climbed out of his vehicle and walked to the edge of the crater, of what had been the New Mexico SHIELD base. Two years of history gone. Gone so quickly. It was built around the certain realization that we were not

Coulson turned to the men and women who had left the six trucks he had escorted to safety.

"Five men and Agent Hill are by the entrance and there will be other bodies to recover. Unit One and Two will remain to dig them out with the help of scanning equipment which the Carrier will send over." Coulson gave each unit leader a solemn look. "Unit Three will escort the remaining technicians and staff to the Carrier. Everything clear?"
"Understood," one of the unit captains said solemnly.

The third unit captain, a staid, broad, no-nonsense woman, gingerly peering over the edge, shook her head.

"This will be..." She trailed off. "Coulson, sir." The woman hesitated. "What about Mjolnir?"

Contemplating the vast field of destruction before them, Coulson, hands on hips, fought the urge to show his sudden fatigue, to show the burden of such an overwhelming task.

"Yeah, I was just thinking of that," he said. "Well..." He began again and then stopped, for the first time in a long time, uncertain. "Damn."

-0-0-0-

"You look..." Tony noted the bags under his CEO's eyes, the rumpled, navy tailored suit and red hair. "Wonderful."

Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries, sighed, gave her headache of a partner and lover her now very familiar 'don't-mess-with-me' look.

"You don't look much better yourself," she finally replied, letting Tony drag her small carry-on into the large airy foyer of the Malibu mansion to which Tony had retreated for the winter.
"Really?" Tony gave his girlfriend a wounded look with brown puppy eyes – but not before peering at himself in the mirror, posing and showing off his latest hard rock t-shirt purchase and grimy jogging suit pants. "I always look awesome. We always look awesome," he amended hastily.
"Hm. Well," Pepper rolled her eyes. "It was a not so awesome day in the boardroom arguing with a bunch of idiots who don't have a practical bone in their body, I swear."
"I don't know why you go to those meetings at all – I never did." Tony pressed Pepper into her favorite spot on the leather couch before the large screen TV. He frowned as his fingers found more than a few knots in the vicinity of her neck and shoulders. "JARVIS, relaxation music – and we'll go with Plan D tonight."
"Plan D?" She gave him a tired, yet amused look.
"A really awesome plan."
"Hm..."
"Drinks are in order," Tony said abruptly, noticing that Pepper wasn't even worried about what plans he had had in mind. Normally his girlfriend was up in arms to veto his crazy ideas.

Not that these particular plans are crazy, Tony told himself. Still...

Moving over to the large wide bar in the corner of the room (a must for all his residences), he poured a small glass of Pepper's favorite white wine.

"The program tonight includes a hot tub, massage by yours truly, this delicious white wine, JARVIS's latest creation in Italian gourmet and soft music. Followed by a long weekend of doing nothing. Absolutely nothing."
"Absolutely nothing sounds nice," murmured Pepper, accepting the proffered wine glass and sipping from it. "But impossible, I think."
"Nope," Tony said firmly. "JARVIS has everything on lock down – right, JARVIS?"
"Indeed, sir."
"Nothing is gonna get in – or out." Tony gave Pepper a look. "The world can go to hell as far as we are concerned."
"As far as you are concerned."
"As far as we are concerned," Tony repeated.
"Hmmm..." Pepper smiled then. "Sounds nice. Sounds too good to be true."

0-0-0-

The clinic was finally closed for the night. Dr. Banner, a quiet, unassuming man with cheaply framed glasses, an unruly mop of greying black hair and scruffy beard, made his way to his latest residence. The nearby river had flooded a few months back, washing away a good half of the community in which he had established himself. Now, he lived in a small shack at the edge of town – the bad edge.

Entering the small one-room house, he noted that the hole in his roof had been magically patched. Making a mental note to thank his neighbour Rajeed, the doctor dropped his bag onto the small bench by his kitchenette. On the small rickety metal table before the bench, two white take-out boxes sat, still hot and steaming. The spicy tang of curry drifted from it.

Bruce Banner's stomach growled but he ignored the call of the food and focused on putting away his laundry which had been hung up to dry that morning. Walking around back to the local public washroom, the slightly grimy doctor found himself day-dreaming nostalgically about long baths.

That was another time, another place, Bruce chastised himself. You don't belong there anymore... This is your world now – has been your world for a good three or four years now. And it's fine. Outhouses and public showers... you've a lot to be thankful for anyways. It could be worse.

As he passed each house and tent, Bruce could list off each inhabitant. Each family, he knew, had at least one member seriously ill or debilitated. The blind, the deaf, the mute, the crippled, the cancerous... They carry on with their lives as best as they can. They have little choice, in the end, but they eke out a life somehow – or die. There are few other options.

He quickened his pace as it – IT stirred within him uneasily.

We none of us have options.

0-0-0-

The mess hall of the Helicarrier now invisibly hovering over New York was a loud, cheerful place as crew members left their posts, having handed over their duties to the night crew, relaxed with their buddies. However, one corner of the room was quieter. Everyone gave the steely-eyed red-head a wide berth.

She sat behind her favored round table. The table Clint, Thor, Steve and she often sat at, ate and drank at after a mission. Close to the exit and offering the best view of the mess hall, she felt safe sitting there – watching the comings and goings of her fellow SHIELD members. But not really. She sipped on her Coke slowly. Clint is watching the damn stone, Thor is with his brother... Steve is probably somewhere training... or keeping his eye on Thor so the guy doesn't go vigilante on us.

There were others that she remembered. Hill. Fury. Coulson... So many high-ranking officers in the vicinity of a ticking time bomb, Natasha thought. Not the best idea. She hoped that good judgment
calls were being made. She frowned at the memory of what SHIELD's in-house psychologist had told her. *Trust issues.*

*Trust issues.* That brought Stark to mind. *Stark.* Here, she grimaced remembering that unfortunate mission of which she had been a part. *God knows where he's at. Well, it doesn't matter really, because when things go to shit, he'll get into the middle of it somehow...*

Her upcoming trip – possible trip – to India weighed heavily on her mind. She had seen the paperwork on Bruce Banner, heard the rumors and had seen a few classified files – but reality, she knew, is so often different from what we all expect. It'll be interesting to say the least.

*But... But. There was still the Tesseract. An open door, Coulson had said. An open door to what? No one could say. And Clint is the first line of defense.* Natasha frowned, swished the ice around her drink and sipped a bit more Coke.

*Coulson is there as well... but...*

It was official. Natasha Romanov was worried.

-0-0-0-

Washington, DC was quiet. *Too quiet,* Steve Rogers, better known to the world as the blue, red and white clad Captain America, thought. He had found the local agents' gym and was now pounding away at the bags which had been brought in specially for him.

With each set of punches, Steve visualized the sinister expression of Red Skull – Bucky falling away – and the small, flaring, misty white cube which had brought him a world of trouble. *An Infinity Gem, or Stone, Thor had called it. The Space Stone.* Whatever it was, Steve had recognized it as trouble materialized even without knowing what it truly was, what it was truly capable of it. *I had tried to bury it for all time...*

On dark days, he wished it had stayed down there. On very, very dark days, Steve, feeling like a man irreconcilably out of time, wished he had stayed down there as well. *Not really,* he told himself. *What is done is done. There is only one way – forward. No use crying over spilled milk.*

No, Steve wasn't the type to let his adverse circumstances overwhelm him. Exorcising his fears at the punching bags, the super-soldier mulled over the problem that was the Tesseract an the fact that it was in Research and not safely hidden in some unreachable vault.

*Somewhere upstairs, Thor is trying to pull his brother together. All because of the Tesseract. I was never into voodoo, superstitious stuff, but if anything was cursed, it was the Tesseract. It really does bring nothing but trouble.*

As another punching bag slowly came to a stand still before him, Steve shook his head, wiping away his sweat angrily.

*It should've stayed down there. We've not seen the end of it... and all the troubles it's gonna bring us. It's not over.*

-0-0-0-

It was so clear now. Up until then, Barton's world had been set in the here, the now – one foot in front of the other – mission followed by mission. A simple life shrouded by the thick skin of what he had thought of as reality.
Now, in a way, all that was gone. The superficial realities of his life and been peeled back, the shroud of the everyday had been lifted, the mask of the mundane, and it was all so clear now.

He remembered the SHIELD conference – and Thor's emphatic statement that his brother had Seen what would happen. Barton of old had been skeptical. He had grunted and rolled his eyes. He had not been able to See the Truth.

But now he knew, now he understood.

The Tesseract spoke of a great tapestry woven by Fate. It spoke of birth and death. It spoke of terrible deeds, yet great. It spoke of parts they all had to play – and Barton felt great comfort in knowing his place, in knowing his place, too, was important.

He would do anything. He was capable of everything.

And there were the others. Other voices in his head. The tug and call of his master to whom he was now bound in purpose and service.

And beneath it all...

Beneath it all, the whispers of doom, promising the ultimate peace, promising death.

Barton smiled, blue eyes glittering. Nothing mattered anymore. He was free.

...DEATH...

[...Time...]
[...Time is the cage-keeper...]
[...the cage of What Is...]
[...Past, Present and Future...]
[...immutable...]
[...there is no going but forward...]

Staring up at the endless vista of night sky, sentient races see a field of black, studded with the cold white light of the stars – and know then the truth of their existence: that they are specks of life in the spaces of the Cosmos, in the eons of Time. Drops of water in a vast ocean, they are born, they live, and they die, arriving and departing with seemingly no impact on the larger scale of Fate.

And yet...

[...there is no going but forward...]
[...there is only success and regret...]
[...and some...]
[...some...]
[...would turn back the sands of Time...]

Once upon a time, in a Golden Realm far away, a dying King passed his throne and the inheritance of his kingdom to his oldest and wisest son. The eldest, cunning and patient as an old fox, had survived the last echoing vestiges of strife and unrest between the Golden Realm and the land it had coveted, reached for and failed to grasp – Vanaheim. During a time of unrest and resentment, the politically savvy, handsome Crown Prince successfully courted and wooed the Princess of the Vanir and, having gained her hand in marriage as well as the Golden Realm's throne for which he had worked so diligently, the newly instated king began a new Golden Age. An age, he vowed, of peace.
It was not to be, thanks to the Frost Giants of Jotunheim. Yet the King persevered and in the end found a kind of peace. He drew about him many men of great repute, wisdom, knowledge and skill. Since his inauguration, the young King had chosen, upon the advice of his father and wife, and then sponsored a handful of close advisers, close friends from within the Council and the Mage's Court. Of the five, the young Mage was one of his favourites – Mage Agaeti – who, with the patronage of the king, attained the coveted position of High Mage.

In a world of such brilliance, men blazed with might like the stars themselves and battled for dominance and respect. A political and deadly pursuit for honour and long-lived glory... and power.

And those who watched Agaeti's star rise could not but marvel at its brilliance – and in the hearts of some... lay envy. For as a star's heart and light burn out and flare and then shrink, sometimes collapsing into nothingness, so the bitter hearts of jealous onlookers may turn to desperate measures and in an attempt to carve their own bright destinies wander down darker paths and so lose themselves entirely.

"Loki! LOKI!" Thor's voice was filled with worry – and beneath it a tone of happy vindication. "It happened! It is happening! Just as you said!" Nearly ripping the door off its hinges, Thor burst into the sick room. "Rogers just came in with the news. Coulson has arranged to take us to the Carrier where we will meet with the Director to strategize – and you will come as well, if you are-"

Thor stopped as the bed's curtains drew open, revealing his younger brother, sliding off the edge of the bed.

It was Loki. The Loki he knew, the Loki with whom he had grown, fought and played: pale, white skin, blazing green eyes and as slender and sharp as ever. Dressed in a black turtleneck, black pants and combat boots, Loki looked... ready.

There was a washed-out tone to his skin which made the usually pale god look even more corpse-like but the set to Loki's mouth, chin and eyes was one of determination. If he is to be trapped on the planet here with me, Thor thought, bound by my wishes to stay – I wager he will move the mountains and the sea to ensure nothing ill will come of our adventure. Even if he is not well and in truth cannot fight at his full strength... it will not be for lack of trying. As ever, Loki.

Answering Thor's unspoken question, Loki said quietly, "I know." A paused and, when Thor glanced about for sign of the doctors or agents and found now, the warrior-mage added cryptically, "She told me."

A heavy moment. Then: "I am ready."
BADUM.

OK. Uh. Short chapter... I'm sorry! The next one will be longer, I promise!

Let me know what you think! Even if it is criticism! Sometimes I'm a gruff bear, but I really do appreciate hearing people's opinions.

-KI
Unraveling

Chapter Notes

Well, here's another section of Avengers. I'm excited about writing this section, surprisingly. At the moment, I'm working on a massive group conversation and lots of snarky Iron Man vs. Captain America... and of course Loki. I hope I can write him OK. I want him to be just a tiny bit of a sh*t disturber. Heehee. We'll see what I can do. It's gonna be a challenge!

For those of you who are curious about who's come thru the wormhole and wanna guess for yourself, look up Chapter 42, I believe.

Thanks to: llfrozensunll, lemomina, Kai_Maciei, thaliaarche, Zafiro, Some new people commenting! Thanks for taking the time to support this fic! Thanks to everyone!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time

Chapter 82
Unraveling

[...Time...]
[...Time is the cage-keeper...]
[...there is no going but forward...]

Staring up at the endless vista of night sky, sentient races see a field of black, studded with the cold white light of the stars – and know then the truth of their existence: that they are specks of life in the spaces of the Cosmos, in the eons of Time. And yet...

[...there is no going but forward...]
[...there is only success and regret...]
[...and some would turn back the sands of Time...]

In a world of such brilliance, men blazed with might like the stars themselves and battled for dominance and respect. A political and deadly pursuit for honour and long-lived glory... and power. And those who watched Agaeti's star rise could not but marvel at its brilliance – and in the hearts of some... lay envy. For as a star's heart and light burn out and flare and then shrink, sometimes collapsing into nothingness, so the bitter hearts of jealous onlookers may turn to desperate measures and in an attempt to carve their own bright destinies wander down darker paths and so lose themselves entirely.

[...the ones who take on the burden...]
[...who stare into the abyss...]
[...and discover the truth...]
[...the Darkness is not empty...]
[...in shadows malevolence stirs...]
[...and dark things rise...]
"That is-"
"Yes."
"He – how-"
"Hm."
"How – I mean – why-?"
"Who knows?" Loki shrugged infinitesimally, but Thor could tell by the tightening of his mouth that something had sparked a memory within the young warrior-mage's memory. Perhaps.
"Why..." Thor trailed off, still confused.
"Sometimes," Loki paused and then continued carefully as the video flickered yet again, as static swarmed over the screen slowly before everything went black. The video loop began again.
"Sometimes... You live in the shadow of another's greatness – and you stand at their back and look into the dark. It is the only road before you – your fate. Your fate..."

Thor sat back on the edge of the table, his eyebrows furrowed as he processed Loki's quiet words. Coulson and Loki stirred uneasily on either side of him as the loop showed the cloaked figure whirl about and shoot the young female scientist. There was nothing one could say as the now familiar scene played out yet again. Fury sat silently, unmoved, hands folded as he watched Barton fire upon him.

Steve, pacing along the back end of the wall on the other side of the rectangular table in the middle of the grey and blue toned conference room, stopped to stare at the two Asgardians who once again picked up the dying threads of conversation. He found himself paying particular attention to the tall, scarecrow-like figure of Loki who stood on his own two feet yet seemed to favor leaning against the conference table more often than not. Judging by the waxy white skin of the man which stretched tightly across jutting cheekbones, a sharp chin and bony hands, Loki was not in the best of health. And there was Coulson's watchful gaze. The shorter agent, like Steve, questioned Loki's fitness, but no one spoke of it and Steve held his peace, uncertainly.

"Fate?" Thor finally asked.
"You would not understand it easily," Loki said tiredly.
"You always say such things," Thor frowned, arms folding and jaw set. "As though I have never felt as though my fate were not within my own hands."

Loki did not appear phased by the familiar appearance of Thor's annoyed look.

"It has not been?" Loki asked coolly.
"Do you see Mjolnir about?" Thor bristled. "Do you see me with my powers back? Returning to Asgard? No, Loki, you are not the only one who was faced with huge matters out of your control."
"You will get it back, however. You always believe it to be so."
"Optimism does not equate ability."
"I speak of feelings, not reality-"
"Okay, guys," Coulson interrupted quickly. "What do you mean about Fate?"
"There is the belief that our lives are controlled by the weaving of the Great Tapestry – that all of our lives hold some meaning within the hands of Fate."
"Kinda like prophecies?"
"In a manner of speaking," Loki quickly answered Coulson's question before Thor could continue, "and some are less happy with their fates than others."
"Obviously," Thor rolled his eyes. "I was about to say that, Loki."
"I was not certain how much you were paying attention in class," Loki shot back a little snidely. "I remember you skipping out on class quite a bit."
"I remember you shunting some of your stabling duties off on poor Haval more than once or twice-"
"That would have been your fault-"
"Ah! So it is my fault?" Thor protested.
"Never mind-" Loki waved a hand, catching glimpse of Fury's not so happy face.
"Never mind? So now you wish to change the subject-"
"Whatever the case," Loki explained hastily. "Some allow themselves to be defeated and succumb to despair. Others bravely face what lies before them. Others fight..."

A pause. Thor looked grimly as the video looped around again. The flash of steel, the glint of the blade, the shielding against the agents' bullets.

"Some take their stand on the edge of the darkness and in name of protecting their land, peer into the Void... and in the end... In the end," Loki's voice filled with dread and his green eyes darkened with memory. "In the end, the Void, their Fate... swallows them..."
"I would never have thought, it would be like this," Thor finally allowed.
"No one could," Loki stared down at the screen again.

He glanced up and met Fury's dark gaze.

"So you know who he is?" The Director's voice was hard.
"Of course," Thor and Loki's voices clashed.
"He is a Mage in the Mage's Court. A High Mage."
"High Mage," Steve said. "That sounds powerful."
"Powerful and wise and many-wintered," Thor said, glancing at Loki. "He taught Loki in many workings himself, did he not?"

"He is particularly well-gifted within mastery of the elements, particularly wind," Loki said. "He also has much experience in battle and worked alongside the other Mages during the wars... His ambitions were high. Perhaps, he thought once to take High Mage Agaeti's place at the side of Odin."
"Sometimes he would come and speak with me," Thor said slowly. "He had great taste in wine."
"That he did," Loki recalled sourly. "I was forever running about the southern farmlands filling up his requests before the holidays."
"A politician then," Fury said.
"A man with ambitions," Coulson suggested.
"Ambitious?" Thor mused.
"Ambitious," Loki nodded. "Yes. Rather. I suppose he imagined himself as the head of the High Mages once Thor came to the throne. There were rumors... but," here, he shrugged, "I never paid them much heed."
"Perhaps that was because you knew," Thor smiled over at his brother, giving him a friendly, rough shake and then stopping suddenly when he realized that Loki was still too weak to stand against rough horseplay.
"Knew what?" Loki blinked.
"Knew that I would choose you," Thor laughed then. "That must have really disappointed him, but Father and I had already discussed it and-"
"Pardon – what?"
"Father and I had already discussed it and it seemed rather obvious-"
"No, I mean," Loki suddenly found it rather hard to breath, to talk. "The – the part earlier... you said..."
"Uhh..." Thor looked at Loki sharply, suddenly wondering if the recovering invalid ought to be out of bed. "I said that you knew that I would choose you..." Pause. "You did not...?"

An awkward pause ensued as Thor realized that the suspicious blankness which had spread over Loki's face was in fact a clue in and of itself – a clue into the overwhelming emotions which Loki often tried to hide. Yet, Thor could read from the stiff way his brother's shoulders straightened, the way his arms tucked in at his sides and the small lift of his chin and tightening of his lips that Loki had been, in some way, deeply touched. Drawing his brother in with a quick embrace, Thor laughed.
"Idiot little brother," he finally said lightly, keeping his smile large in hopes of relaxing Loki. "It was always to be you – not because of Father. Father had all sorts of ideas, Norns know... but if I was to face my fate as king of Asgard, I knew that I would not be alone. Not fully alone at any rate. Was I wrong?"

"No," Loki finally said, eyes cast down as he struggled to find words to voice his appreciation. "You were not... wrong. I knew that I was to be an adviser, of course, but I had always assumed..." He petered off uncertainly.

"Adviser, yes, he thought, as younger prince, that would have been expected... but Thor was going to sponsor me – and I would have gained a position of respect... Regardless of the fact that I was not born Asgardian, regardless of tradition. Loki battled down a short disbelieving laugh. Just like Thor.

"Perhaps you will stand at my back sometimes as you have done in the past, but I would rather us stand shoulder to shoulder." Thor gave Loki a hard look. "I am not about to let you face the shadows alone."

"Well," Loki said finally, "that is..." He shrugged before adding lamely, "More than I expected."

"You expect too little."

"Bad habit, I suppose."

"Hope is never a bad thing, Loki."

"Well, we are going to need it," Loki looked back up at the video loop. "This will be difficult."

"What is even more difficult," Fury finally snapped, his already thin patience coming to an end, "is getting a piece of info out of the two of you. Can we put off the family reunion for the weekend? I don't know about you two, but I'd like to keep the damn planet together. If you two don't mind."

"Apologies," Loki said. "It is just that – It has been a while."

"And there is much to process," Thor added.

"His. Name."

"That would be High Mage Flarathir." Loki said, voice growing serious. "One of the five who rule the Mage's Court. An Asgardian warrior-mage with great powers against whom I have not been fully tested."

"Well. Now we have a name," Fury said sardonically.

"This is going to take a while," Coulson sighed and made his way to the door with the intent of getting more coffee.

It was going to be a long night.

-0-0-0-

In the end, the discussion was not as long as Coulson feared. Within two hours, all information on the High Mage and his abilities had been noted and recorded, motivations were dissected and modus operandi was calculated. Hill, at some point, arrived, went to bed and everyone was allowed a short amount of sleep, only to rise early and discover that Fury had set in motion a variety of smaller operations. Romanov had been dispatched to India, Coulson had flown to Malibu and Hill was calling in various units on standby.

Throughout the evening, the computers had whirled through countless pieces of security vid loops all around the world, searching for any sign of the intruder. Although there seemed to be glimpses of him here and there, nothing was definitive – and the appearances of the Mage Flarathir were brief and seemingly random.

Most of them seemed to be located in Europe. Two fighter jets were put on standby, ready to leave at a moment's notice.

It was not until early evening that Flarathir's image flared on a camera in Germany.
Loki, listening to Hill's short debriefing as they strapped into their seats in the back of the fighter jet, felt chilled within as he heard her short summary of their destination. A familiar place in another time, another space, he shivered, recalling his dreams.

Stuttgart, Germany.

[...and some...]
[...would rage...]

It was all going as planned. All as he had planned – all he had foreseen. *And those whose eyes are blind to what must be will find nothing but a path of death before them.* As the vision of the Other faded, as the connection with the commander faded, as the Mind Gem fell silent, Flarathir smiled painfully. *How long has the dark been my only friend?* He wondered. *How many eons of shadow has passed? And now... we shall all join in it together as one.*

Flarathir rose, quickly cast an illusion about himself, and looked about the underground tunnels through which his newly bonded followers bustled. A variety of white-coated humans, male and female, worked diligently under the supervision of "the Doctor". Selvigsson, Flarathir recalled. Other black-clothed and dark suited men moved cases, brought supplies, prepared for battle and patrolled the perimeters. The man known as Barton overlooked those activities well.

"Selvig needs iridium." It was Barton with blue glittering eyes which saw far too deeply for comfort at his elbow.
"Iridium?"
"A kind of rock is what he tells me."
"And where is this... rock to be found?"
"Well," Barton flipped around a tablet and held up the screen for Flarathir to see. "It's rare – but there's some under lock and key." He shrugged. "Like stealing candy from a baby."
"Hm. We shall need a diversion whilst you secure it, I suppose."
"Correct. And we'll need an eyeball." Barton smiled. "This would fit in well with your plan, right?"
"Indeed," Flarathir smoothed down his beard and smiled crookedly. "All falls into place. As it was meant to be..."

[...and some...]

As the ship swooped low over the open plaza, dropping Thor, Loki and Steve off, before returning to the skies and hovering with guns at the ready, it was obvious from the screaming and yelling panicked crowds that Flarathir had already begun attacking. Yet when Loki looked about for any sign of explosions or blasts, there were none. Nor was there the usual thrum of magick in the night air.

"He is coming out!" yelled Steve, battling against the onrush of tourists, dignitaries and locals as they streamed out of the white building.

The edifice, white and pillared, looked grand in its own kind of way. Loki, noticing the carvings, the vaulted roof and the odd juxtaposition it made of ancient glory against modern cleanliness, couldn't help but compare it to the golden halls of Odin Allfather's palace, the dark grandeur of Meerauk and Nyr-Meer and the graceful lines of Alfheim's summer palaces. He bumped into Thor suddenly.

*Thor is...* Loki paused as he watched his brother stoop down to pull a woman carrying a baby to her feet. A passerby no doubt. An unfortunate passerby.

"Run!" Thor was saying. "Get as far away as you can! Do not look back!"
Clutching her child, the dark-haired woman ran off, leaving behind an odd looking four-wheeled contraption which had no doubt earlier held the child. Watching the humans disappear down the street, Loki bit his lip and, at the sound of a dull clang, turned wide-eyed to find that Steve Rogers, whom others had referred to as 'the Captain', had engaged Flarathir.

Flarathir was a sight to behold. His armour, a light gold, flashed brightly beneath the lights, overlaying a light steel chain mail. Tempered, no doubt, by dwarves. The helm upon his head was rounded and open across the brow, allowing for sight as well as protecting the neck and head from potential blows. Beneath the armour and mail, the warrior-mage wore the usual uniform of all mages – the dark leggings, the blue and white tunic and dragon-hide.

Despite his age, Flarathir stood tall – and held his ground, batting away the Captain's white, blue and red shield easily. Ignoring the shield which now skittered across the grey concrete, Steve Rogers lunged forward, fists clenched and at the ready. However hard he hit though, the super-soldier did not seem able to phase his opponent who deflected each blow fluidly, whirling about with an elongated gold staff which seemed to be a longer version of the weapon he had carried earlier. Attempting an upper cut (which was blocked by a hand) followed by a series of blows which Loki identified as a form of boxing, Steve did not seem discouraged by his lack of success.

A broad shoulder jostled Loki and a familiar war cry sounded in his ear as Thor charged past, bounding forward to join the fray of battle.

Two humans versus an Asgardian. Loki's green eyes narrowed with annoyance. Granted they are... more than human – what can they hope to achieve? Thor must know. Or perhaps, Loki sighed, he knows the truth of it and thinks there is little choice but try... Though water breaks upon rocky cliffs-

Loki winced as the Captain went flying back, curling instinctively in reaction to a kick to his guts. Thor slammed Flarathir to the ground as the exiled Prince hooked the old mage's left foot and tripped him up. Flarathir rolled. Thor and Steve pounced. Flarathir gained footing and bent low, hands twisting in a familiar sigil. Loki's breath caught in his throat as Flarathir's dark eyes met his meaningfully, daring Loki to step forward. To engage.

Though water breaks upon rocky cliffs-

-yet the Earth, Loki thought, will not be moved.

"Back!" Loki yelled. "Get down! Get back!"

-0-0-0-

At Loki's shout of warning, Thor snagged Steve's arm, dragged his friend down and bent backward, narrowly avoiding a wide band of flame and a responding spray of white, cool ice.

"Get down and start crawling!" Thor yelled. "Flarathir-!" Steve protested.

Another clash of ice and fire ripped through the cement blocks around them, scattering rock and shards of ice and flaming bits of tree. A car which had careened off the road earlier exploded violently. Dogging bits of metal, shards of glass and melting chunks of plastic, the two men crawled to the edge of the newly shaped battlefield and turned round to look over the small circle of devastation.

From the edges of the battlefield, the jet was firing blasts at Flarathir, but the pounding that the warrior-mage took showed no signs of slowing him down. The only thing keeping him within the
slowly expanding circle of ice was the tall, lean figure of Loki. Hands twisting, lips rapidly moving for spell after spell, Loki edged round, step by careful step, meeting every blast of energy which Flarathir sent his way. Loki's long dark hair flew back as the atmosphere about them rose in tension, as clouds churned and a storm rumbled. Pale face set in determination and green eyes glowing with his inner fire, Thor sighed with relief. Loki is back, officially.

"Rule Number Three," Thor said, ducking to avoid a flying chunk of ice. "Never stand between two mages in battle."

"We can't leave Loki alone!"

Noticing the slight cast of blue tinging Loki's hands, Thor's heart beat faster.

"No," he allowed. "We cannot. Not for long at any rate."

"I don't like it one bit," Steve said uneasily and his blue eyes widened behind his mask as a particularly large blast hit the museum, destroying half of the front edifice. "They're out of control."

Thor didn't appear too concerned about the destruction of the environs. His eyes were only fixed on Loki and only then did the tall, tanned superhuman appear to be worried. Steve sighed.

"They'll tear the whole city apart at this rate before they're done!"

"Loki needs help," Thor finally said.

"Yes, well-"

"If he is to end it, it must be soon."

"Absolutely. The less damage the better – for all of us."

"He is restricting Flarathir's movements," Thor pointed at a variety of ice loops that were springing up and curving around the edges of the circle. "With chains. We cannot see them – but Loki can. They are represented by the ice. He told me once before about it... It has been a long time since I..."

Thor paused. "But this is a risk. He can only achieve each barrier and chain between attacks. Loki will not be able to keep up with the concentration and power required... Not in his current state."

"So we dive back in," Steve said. "Help with the attacks and distract the guy."

"Yes."

"And we'll have to be careful about how we attack, I suppose?"

"The long lines of ice at the edges and the field of ice below must not be hit," Thor pointed out the ever widening circle which crept along grass and ice and concrete in elaborate swirls. "It is a manifestation of will. That is what he told me once."

"He's building it through willpower?" Steve's voice rose a couple unmanly octaves in disbelief. "Yes. I have seen this before. On Gallei. It is a working of his own devising and suitable for multiple uses... or death."

"Death?"

"Hm. If Loki wills it, the bonds will tighten -"

"We don't want him dead. How else will we find the Tesseract?"

"Loki will not kill him," Thor said uncertainly. "Are you sure?"

Thor said nothing for a short moment before slowly shaking his head.

"I do not know... but once the working is set, we can intervene to prevent further harm to the mage."

"Alright. So how'll we go about this exactly?"

"We do what I did last time," Thor nodded. "Dart in, attack, provide bait and distraction, dart out – but always ensure the mage remains in the circle."

"Okay," Steve nodded. "I'll follow your lead. And keep out of the way of the ice."

"Yes."
Thor unsheathed the sword had finally commissioned for him a few months back. It was a long steel and black affair – and a good four feet long. A familiar weapon for Thor, the sword had come into good use on a variety of combat missions. Steve had swung it about a few times when Thor had agreed to teach him a few lessons in swordplay, but in the end, the super-soldier felt more comfortable relying on his fists and shield.

Steve glanced over to where his shield lay.

"I'll get my shield and jump in a minute after your attack. As soon as I go in, you jump out. We can tag team him."
"Good."

With that, Thor was gone. Steve, running down the now firmly ice-locked road to where his shield stuck out of a large hedge, looked about for any remaining civilians. None appeared to be around. He grabbed his shield, pulled it on and raced back to the battle zone. Thor was yelling and jumping over the foot high swirls of ice at the edge of circle and dodging blasts of fire suddenly turned his way. Above, the aircraft hummed – swooping in and back as Flarathir fired at Loki and it respectively. Listening to the howl of the wind, the explosion of each blast and the vibrating thrum of tension, Steve waited a few seconds to allow Thor to jump in first and demonstrate his previous instructions.

Thor despite the obvious danger to him showed no restraint nor fear as he leaped at the mage, slashing down with his sword. Steve's blond eyebrow rose as he noticed that although the sword cut through the cloth, it barely scraped the Asgardian's skin. Although no actual cut was made, Steve noticed that the the force of the blow had caused Flarathir to stagger and that was distraction enough. With a short prayer, Steve followed suit.

-0-0-0-

There was no thought. There was no strategy. There was nothing but instinct. There was nothing but reaction. There was power, there was light and there was the every shifting tension of emotion: desperation, fear, anger and confidence. There was only him. There was only Flarathir. There was only the battle and the howl of a mother's rage.

The spirit of the Earth rose in complaint and sadness and rage as her world was desecrated by the darkness broiling in the heart of the battle. From far away, Loki could hear the others – the chanting of the stars, the whispers of the Void – everything brought so close to the surface of What Was, he could almost taste the purity and the power upon his tongue.

It reminded him of darker memories when the only hiding place left for him was within the Unseen. With each enchantment, with each spell, with each working, Loki could feel the pull in his gut. Every step, every sigil brought him that much closer to the brink.

He was going to be sick. But I can not, Loki whispered to himself fiercely. I cannot. I cannot.

He grit his teeth and he snarled and his vision narrowed to only what was before him.

...fear not...

...you are not alone...

Stars are poor company.

Was that a thought? It seemed impossible at a time like this. Yet Loki unconsciously knew that the
force of his emotions – his fears and rage – protected him. They protected him against the pull of the Void, buffered him against the whispers of the Dark...

...fear and anger...

...double-edged swords...

Be silent, Loki cursed.

...cutting the soul of the one who wields them...

I do not need to hear this. Not now!

...cutting the soul...

...do not fear...

...know peace...

...fall back...

No, no, no... Loki grimaced as his foot slipped. It is almost done. It will be done. We will be – we will be safe.

...fall back...

...do not fear...

...we will catch you...

...as we caught you before...

Loki shook his head, narrowed his eyes and stubbornly held onto the working which now lay in completion before him. Somewhere around him, he could feel the presence of Thor and the man known as Steve. They were doing their best to stand against the mage. Mere humans – yet the power of their will remained strong.

Thor would never give up. Neither will I.

...back...

We are doing this the only way. With Flarathir gone, we will achieve peace.

...fall back...

...trust us, dear heart...

...let go of fear...

...let go of pain...

...ere truth will be lost...

Light swelled and for a moment, Loki could see or hear nothing. There was nothing but light and the faint chimes of resounding thin voices. He knew that within the great medley, there were billions
upon billions of melodies each beautiful, each unique, each powerful in its own right. Within that world, he could wander for many years until, even though returning to the world of the Seen, he would never be the same. Like Hluti, his eyes would forever be filled with starlight. Loki shuddered.

Inhale. Loki drew breath and then let it go, his hands drifting downward in familiar sigils and everything contracted. Then there was a dim world which whirled about and shuddered and unraveled at the edges. There was the sound of someone yelling, there was an odd mechanical wailing, there was his own harsh breath, there was an odd blank coldness spreading through him -

And then there was warmth, there was Thor. Thor's arms about him and a rough warm voice which brought back a multitude of memories: the talons of a hawk, warm sunshine on a cool mountain river, a campfire and bottles of ale, Frigga's mint pudding and the taste of mud as the two of them struggled for dominance in the middle of a yelling circle of spectators. So many memories. They piled upon him like an avalanche of snow, weighing him down and allowing him to find some connection.

There he was. There was Loki. There was Thor, telling him to let go, telling him Flarathir would die and the Tesseract would be lost and they needed to ask him – Flarathir – questions.

Loki exhaled.

There was dark.

[...and some...]
[...would rage against their Fate...]
[...would turn back the sands of Time...]
[...they do not see...]

Drops of water in a vast ocean, they are born, they live, and they die, arriving and departing with seemingly no impact on the larger scale of Fate. And yet, each droplet forms with others massive waves which may sweep away the greatest of things.

Chapter End Notes

Loki being BAMF without being a Gary Stu, I hope! Let me know what you think! Feel free to ask questions or point out grammatical errors or what have you!

See ya round, guys, and take care!

-KI
The darkness lasted only for a few beats. When Loki finally looked up and around dazedly, the world appeared to suddenly spring into motion. Thor's voice came into sharp and annoyingly loud focus, Steve was standing to the side and guarding the newly captured mage, and overhead, the speakers of the aircraft, which had began to tell Flarathir to stand down, cut out and gave way to some strange kind of metallic noise. A kind of music. At the sound, Thor and Steve began to scan the sky immediately, frowning. Flarathir twisted about as well. However, the bonds now crystallized in
ice and magick held firm and all the older Asgardian could do was squirm, hands hanging loosely from his side.

"Coming in to get this job done," a sharp, husky, no nonsense voice resounded around the small square.

From around the corner of a large building a block over whizzed a brilliant trail of fire and power and a streak of red and gold, rocketing toward them. Loki tensed, but when Thor sagged – and did he just sigh, Loki asked himself incredulously – and the super-soldier whipped around, hand rising in protest, Loki realized that something else entirely different was unfolding.

With next to no warning and without a moment's pause, the blur of metal and fire blasted into Flarathir, throwing the mage back several paces. Groaning as his back hit the edge of a rather icy stone curb, Flarathir struggled to sit upright. Now stationary and on its feet, the attacker appeared to be a robot of some kind. Loki's eyebrows rose.

Robertson on Midgard. This is new... I will have to update the Mage's Archives when I return... If I return, Loki corrected himself. No, no, he remembered Thor's words belatedly. When I return. Hope... Loki sighed. It is hard to hold onto, even if the battle went well, hope is... hard to hold onto.

"Don't move, Merlin." The robot stepped forward, hands blazing.
"Uh, he's not going anywhere," Steve ran over to Flarathir's side, pulling their captive onto his feet.
"We already captured him," Thor said, definitely rolling his eyes with a sort of amused exasperation.
"The situation was under control."
"I had already surrendered!" Flarathir sputtered. "Barbarians!"
"Tell that to the Museum."

With that, the face plate of the robot slid away to reveal a sharp-featured, keen-eyed man with dark hair and deep brown eyes. Loki snorted, which drew a sharp glance from the newcomer. After nodding at Steve, who began to talk over his earpiece with the pilot in preparation for an emergency landing and pickup, Thor pulled away from his younger brother a little and gave Loki a hard look.

"You are-"
"I am on my own two feet," Loki jerked away, feeling the narrowed gaze of the robotic man even more than ever. Making his way over to Flarathir and Steve, Loki hissed softly as sharp pain ran through his hands and arms. "I am fine."
"It was a close thing," Thor said, following Loki and trying to hide his concern at Loki's stiff movements. "But," he added hastily, "we did not need Iron Man's help thanks to you."
"Loki did some good work," Steve agreed with a grateful nod. "Thanks."
"It was good teamwork," Loki replied with a shrug. "I could not have achieved it alone."
"By the Norns," snapped Mage Flarathir, "is this to be some glad reunion?"
"Yeah. What's with the love fest?" The metal robot man flapped a hand dismissively.
"Never mind," Steve muttered, glaring at nothing in particular.

Their aircraft swooped down and settled neatly in the middle of the great ice circle, its ramp lowered and one of the co-pilots beckoned. In the distance, a loud wail was rising – some kind of siren. As they rose in the air, Loki peeked out of the front window and caught a glimpse of lines of flashing red and blue and white lights carefully maneuvering their way around capsized vehicles and chunks of metal and stone and ice littering the streets which led to the square.

"The cavalry," the metal man said, "has arrived. Late as usual."
"I think they were told to pull back," Steve said quietly, "which I am thankful for. There is nothing worse than getting unprepared law enforcement involved."
"Iron Man-" Thor began.
"We've been on a few dates now. You can call me Stark, Thor, or Tony – whichever you prefer," the so-called 'Iron Man''s face twitched as if he smelled something rank. "Tony's between friends. And you are friends. In a way. I suppose," Here, he gave the Captain a hard look. "But don't call me Anthony. Stark is better. Stark is good."
"Stark," Thor began again. "Why did you come?"
"You didn't know?" Stark paused theatrically. "You didn't know. Of course."
"We weren't told," Steve said coolly.
"There's a lot you aren't told," shot back Stark.

A silence followed during which Loki worked his way back – slow and swaying – to the metal seats offered in the vehicle. Not too near Flarathir, for he had no wish to get involved in a flyting match.

Loki, settling into a seat, eased back surreptitiously, closed his eyes and listened to the exchange between the three men. It was obvious that there were deep currents of mutual distrust and dislike between the super-soldier and the metallic man – Steve and Stark. Thor also seemed to be more annoyed by newcomer than usual. For a person who is usually very gregarious and welcoming, Thor does not seem to be impressed by the Iron Man... Cracking open his suddenly heavy eyelids a little, Loki shot Thor a hooded glance. Thor seems uncertain. And he does seem torn... Hmmm...

The super-soldier did not respond immediately to Stark's comment, instead choosing to stare broodingly out the front windows of the aircraft. Standing side by side, the two men, to Loki, seemed to be two roosters giving each other glinting stares, standing tall and refusing to give ground within the roost.

"Well," Stark continued with a shrug, pulling off his helmet smoothly. "You're looking good – for a senior citizen. What's your secret?" At Steve's frown, a cocky grin spread over Stark's face. "No. Wait. Let me guess. Pilates? Was Pilates around in your time? Or is yoga your thing now?"
"Yoga," Thor's brow crinkled and then he chuckled. "I have not seen Steve practicing yoga. Darcy says it is more of a woman's exercise – but she also said that when a man does it well, it is – and I quote her word for word on this – 'God's gift to the world'."
"There you go," Stark grinned. "Something for the Capsicle here to think over." He glanced sideways at Loki. "What's with Death dude over there? He's like he walked off The Crow's set or something."
"Death is a woman, I would have you know," Loki said deadpan.
"What? Death is a figure with a cowl, a skeleton and a scythe," Stark said. "Last time I checked, no breasts."
"You-" Steve failed to find words. "Stark."
"Oh, Loki is right," Thor nodded agreeably. "Death is a woman. Her incarnation takes on many shapes but to many in the Nine Realms, Death is a woman."
"Not to be confused with Hel of Helheim which borders on Niflheim," Loki added wickedly, noticing a look of intrigued horror and confusion spread over Stark's face as he realized the two were totally serious. "Thor had a bright idea once, I heard, of attacking her horde of undead. I am so glad I missed out on that particular misadventure."
"Misadventure?" Thor protested. "We did not lose!"
"Neither did you win, may I point out."
"Yes, but neither did we lose!"
"Were you not removed forcibly by Heimall and Father?" Loki asked archly.

Thor struggled for a moment before managing to say with some pride, "Well, we were removed against our wills. We had everything under control."
"Not if you go by Sif's account of the tale."
"Wait a second," Stark waved a hand. "You attacked Hell?"
"I don't think so," Steve said. "Says the guy who believes in God," snorted Stark. "You're very romantic, Rogers, but you really need to get with the times. Gods are aliens and Hell is a Realm you can attack – apparently."
"You believe them?" Steve raised an eyebrow, deciding to ignore Stark's obvious rudeness. "Well, not necessarily – but they are aliens. That is indisputable fact. What I think is more interesting is what you think."
"I think," Steve smiled, "that, as Shakespeare said, 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy'."
"I thought that was Hamlet's line," quipped Iron Man.

Steve gave the Iron Man a look. Iron Man glared back but refrained from cross-questioning anyone else any further – although Loki could see that the obviously talkative man found the ensuing quiet to be rather burdensome. Thor, in the end, chose to attempt to bridge the awkward chasm which existed between the two men. Loki knew that Thor's gift was one of charisma – and the ability to bring his warriors together. Within a few minutes, Thor and the Iron Man were able to share a few jokes and remark on recent events which had happened somewhere on Midgard. However, even then conversation lagged and the long silence which followed hung about the aircraft for the rest of the ride.

Despite its relative shortness, the trip seemed to last forever thanks to the strained silence between the two humans, Thor's awkward attempts to bridge the gap between the two men and the presence of a powerful captive. Drifting in and out of a light sleep, Loki kept half an eye on the Midgardians whom he had perforce called 'team' and kept the other half eye on the suspiciously calm, quiet and passive High Mage.

Not that the bonds are loosening any time soon, Loki reminded himself. At a word, they will release, but I would have imagined that High Mage Flarathir would test them in some way. Instead, he merely sits there... From under heavy lidded eyes, Loki perused the brown cloak, the blue and white uniform of the Mages and the high-quality dragon-hide boots below. It was annoying how nothing seemed out of place despite the hard battle from which he had just walked away. He sits there and he watches...

I do not like it one bit. Not one bit.

[...the ones who take on the burden...]

[...who stare into the abyss...]

[...and discover the truth...]

[...hold those secrets...]

Upon landing, the small group of fighters disbanded almost immediately. To where Stark and Rogers disappeared, Thor did not know, nor did he care, for Loki still, to Thor's experienced eye, looked unwell and moved in a more lethargic manner than usual. Despite the fact that he must have been fatigued, however, Loki did not lower his chin or relax his stiff, wary posture until Flarathir had been contained in the round cell Fury had prepared. Once Flarathir was installed within, Loki, with an odd pen offered him by the Agent Hill (which the woman had called a 'permanent marker', giving Loki an odd sense of relief at the efficacy of the writing tool), was able to draw three sigils on each holding post surrounding the mage. It was an independent working without need of his direct control which allowed Loki to release his more power-consuming hold on the mage.

Exhaling noisily at the release, Loki sagged a little on his feet and closed his eyes for a few seconds
before straightening. As the world steadied about Loki, Thor's strong muscled arm was there about his shoulders. Loki shrugged his brother off with a muttered, "I am fine." Thor refrained from a snappy response.

*No, you are not,* he thought instead. *I suppose, in a way, you cannot admit that. You never could. Norns know I never did either. It was something we were all raised with – in our own way. Vulnerability and weakness as a slave meant certain death and the old Loki – Kol'la as he was then – would never have shown this side. Even after... Even after, he never shared his pain easily. Asgard demands strength.*

Thor could imagine Jane rolling her eyes and mumbling something about 'stupidity' and 'pig-headedness'.

*This is different. Loki could have the luxury of resting, but he is pushing himself for our sake.* Thor frowned. *Perhaps I could ask Coulson to put him to sleep for a short while.* He searched for the word Jane had taught him around a year back – when he had woken from a long sleep which enabled the then wounded Thor to heal quicker. *Sed... Sedate? Sedation? Whatever it is, I could ask Coulson... but then Loki would be angry...*

Fury was beginning to speak with Flarathir now. Waring him. Sizing him up. Attempting to catch a glimpse of the mage's plan. Thor, tugging on Loki's elbow, led his younger brother away. Loki reluctantly followed, turning to look back at the dark-skinned Midgardian and the knowing dark eyes of the Asgardian.

"It is not enough," Loki was saying with another heavy sigh. "He will be able to work around the spells within the hour."

"Fury and Coulson will think of something," Thor reassured Loki. "The Director has told me before of this cell. It may contain Flarathir well enough on its own. You need to think more of yourself. You need to rest."

"We need to talk."

"Talk later," Thor said firmly. "Rest now."

"But-"

"Just a short nap."

"A short one," Loki finally acquiesced. "If you do not wake me within a half an hour, I will find you and-"

"And what?" Thor asked amused.

"I do not know," Loki yawned. "I will think up something when I wake."

"I will leave that to you then."

With that Thor trundled Loki into his small room, slung the half-asleep Loki onto his bed and sat down for a quick nap himself. It was going to be a long day. Thor knew. It had just begun.

-0-0-0-

Downstairs, the tall, darkly clad, leather-coated, one-eyed Director of SHIELD glowered through the large stretches of glass at the now very familiar figure of their currently most fearsome enemy: the blue and white uniformed, deceptively elderly-looking bearded old man. Flarathir. That was what Loki had called the man. Beneath the second exiled prince's voice, there had been a small note of fear and awe. Obviously someone powerful from Asgard.

Fury withheld a sigh. Carefully watching as the mage turned slowly around. Flarathir's knowing gaze was unsettling, running along and around the edges of his cell thoughtfully. No doubt those sharp blue eyes had already judged and weighed the measure of might as evidenced by the round container.
"This wasn’t made for you," Fury said simply, hitting the button to the release doors below the cell. At their opening, the passing air's roar resounded around the circular room. He shut the doors and continued: "But I think it will do its job well in your case. If you so much as look like you are going to try anything, if even the tiniest crack in the glass appears... Well, we're all curious to see how well Asgardian physiology deals with falling over ten thousand feet."

Flarathir leaned forward and eyed the metal joints which delicately held his holding cell in place. Then a smile passed over his visage swiftly.

"Not looking so ignorant and weak now." Fury smirked. "I think it's pretty obvious that we can and will hold our own – and our 'games', as you called them, hold their own particular... set... of consequences."

"All I see is the posturing of children, playing at being men," Flarathir snorted and gave Fury a knowing look. "You know not truly what powers the Tesseract holds. What have you achieved with it after all? A warm light for humanity? Or something less benign, something more prosaic and in its way very dangerous, and yet – how small! – something..." A knowing pause. "Something that may never find the light of day? Something that will tear your kind apart?"

Fury could feel his shoulders tensing and his back stiffening. His gaze narrowed at Flarathir's implications. How much has Barton told him? Then the Director remembered Loki's words. He cursed briefly. Damn mages.

"You have no idea of what we are capable," Fury returned calmly.

"I have no idea? Oh," Flarathir chuckled. "I have an idea. We have, after all, watched Midgard grow from the ashes of the First Fires, from the clouds of magick during the earliest moments of creation. During the days of the Uncounted Time, as Life carved for herself a niche in the darkness of the Void, our people rose strong – and other peoples as well," Here Flarathir's gaze flickered to the cameras and then back to Fury. "Your people were little better than the remnants of nomads from an overly expanded empire... an empire so vast, and so old, it is beyond the recall of memory..."

Fury rolled his eyes and waved a hand and interjected sarcastically, "Lost in the mists of time?"

"Hm," Flarathir raised his chin imperiously in response to Fury's lack of deference to common Asgardian knowledge. "At any rate, as I said previously – your kind are children who have no hope of harnessing the Tesseract without understanding what True Power is."

Fury could almost hear the capitalization of 'true power'.

"Well," he said, "let me know when True Power needs a magazine."

With that he turned and strode off. Fury did not look behind.

-0-0-0-

Those blue eyes were as clear as Earth's sky – and yet there was something beneath them all. Something unsettling. Bruce Banner, massaging his forehead in a desperate bid to ease his rising headache, sighed.

Nothing good is going to come of this, he thought. Nothing good, something deep down inside him echoed. A whisper, a low grumble. Listen.

Glancing around the white lab in which he had been installed, the scientist shivered. There was something relaxing about the impersonal nature of the room – the gently beeping monitors and machines, the soft glow of the flexi-screens and projector and the cleanliness. Everything was so clean. It was nothing like India. Entirely devoid of the oppressive heat, the ever present grime and the pervasive curry and sewage odors mixing together.
Bruce Banner twisted, hands clenching into hard fists as he fought hard to maintain control. It was unsettled, it wanted to tear apart the enemy, it wanted to rip apart the world to find that voice – what voice, Bruce asked his other self desperately – it wanted to be free.

With that thought, the quiet doctor made his way blindly toward the door, passing by two soldiers bearing a small black crate labeled 'Top Secret'.

"This is for you, Doctor," one of them said, confused as he turned about, trying to halt Bruce in his tracks but obviously unwilling to physically come into contact with the volatile human. "Uh, just, uh, um," Bruce hurriedly said, squeezing past them in the doorway to get out into the hall. "Just, uh.."
"Where do you want us to set it up?"
"On the table by the window."

With that Bruce fled. He needed to get out. He needed to get out.

[...the Darkness is not empty...]

Forty-five minutes later, everyone found themselves escorted to an unusual conference room which opened out into the control room of the helicarrier. At least it looked like a conference room, but Loki knew from his previous visit that this was, in fact, the command office of the dark-skinned human known as Fury. A Midgardian named Fury in command of a military unit with, no doubt, massive firepower and weaponry (for Midgardians at any rate). Loki could appreciate the sinister appropriateness of the situation.

Seated at the round table, the dark-haired, green-eyed mage looked about at the humans invited to the meeting. On his immediate left, Thor sat. Beyond Thor, a red-haired woman in a simple black, body-hugging black suit hunched. With a glance, Loki could tell that the female warrior (obvious thanks to her unconsciously defensive posture) was hiding a well of worry. About whom, he could not tell. An agent. Loki remembered Thor commenting on the archer.

She is not the only one, Loki thought grimly as his sharp-eyed gaze fell on the man who hovered uncertainly behind the woman, pacing in short circles between the table and the door. The quiet, older, graying curly-haired man did not wish to be there, yet he also seemed apprehensive about something else. There is something else... Loki could not quite give words to his misgivings, but he felt the vaguest whisper of something emanate from the human. Something dark.

Across from Thor, the Captain sat. Captain America, Thor had said his name was. That was the face presented to the world, but to Thor the blue, red and white uniformed tall Midgardian seemed to be an unassuming name: Steve. And Steve, Thor had said, is a good man. Loki felt as though the honesty within the super-soldier's blue eyes was rather disconcerting. Good men, after all, can rarely find their place within a world of greed and selfishness. Loki wondered what the good Captain would think of SHIELD's secrets. Not that I know exactly what those secrets are, Loki mused, and it would for the best of our new, and as yet fragile team, to not create distrust in an atmosphere already filled with tension. If only dreams were more detailed and less fragmented...

Beside the Captain, sitting opposite to Loki, Hill, a tall dark-haired woman in the standard uniform, stood. She had said something about Fury running late with another conference. Until then, they were to wait and review the video of Fury's initial talk with Flarathir – and discuss some preliminary strategies on what to do next.
Finding the Tesseract should be the first priority, Loki had immediately thought. Yet, with all reports coming in, who – or what – will be weeding out the false alarms from the true? So much depends on the veracity and timeliness of the reports, Loki rubbed his eyes tiredly. It may not be enough. Whatever the Midgardians may think, we remain still on the defensive while the Tesseract is out of our reach and within enemy hands.

"So you saw the video," Hill began when the short clip was finished. "Any thoughts? What do you think this guy is up to?"
"He is opening a door for Thanos, isn't he?" Steve blinked.
"Opening a door is kinda vague, Rogers," Hill pointed out. "We need specifics."
"Selvig's notes were quite comprehensive," Banner began and the paused in his pacing to stare down at the floor thoughtfully. "I've not been able to get into the details yet, but it definitely is some kind of portal."
"Selvig..." Thor said softly. "Jane's friend," he explained to Loki's unspoken question.
"Barton is missing as well," Romanov said.
"I heard," Thor nodded. "I am sorry. We will get him back, never fear, Natasha."
"Typical," muttered Loki, before speaking up. "I find the stolen material from the science facilities-"
"Lab," Thor corrected him.
"-to be highly informative as to his plan," Loki continued on ignoring his brother's light jab.
"Well, iridium went missing, didn't it?" The quiet man near the door asked uncertainly.
"Yeah. Iridium," Steve frowned. "What does it do anyways?"
"It's a stabilizing agent."

A brisk voice resounded around the room as a short, dark-haired man strode into the room. Loki's eyes narrowed as the cocky attitude and glib nature combined with the familiar face linked with the Iron Man on the plane. Without the red-gold armour, the dark-suited man looks... short. Loki smirked.

"Means the portal won't collapse on itself like it did at the SHIELD headquarters," Stark elaborated as he made a beeline to Fury's semi-circle of monitors. "Also, it means the portal can open as wide and stay open as long as your Asgardian friend wants." He paused, turned around and waited for someone to react. Did he wish for applause? Loki wondered. I knew this already. What is to be gained by stating the obvious? Before he could point the fact out, the Iron Man chattered on, unstoppable.

"Raise the mizzen mast. Trim the top sails," he told a few confused faces which had turned upward to see who had been brave enough to take command of Fury's personal station. Stark definitely seemed to have a feeling of ease and entitlement already, bending over Fury's monitor and adjusting a few settings airily – before stopping and turning to look at something in the distance. "Hey!" Stark raised a hand a pointed in the general direction of a far bank of computers. "That man is playing Galaga! He thought we wouldn't notice..." Pause. "But we did." The short man removed his left hand from his pocket, raised it to his eye, and attempted to survey the monitors with one hand. "How does Fury even see this?"
"He turns," Hill said simply.
"Sounds exhausting. Well, anyways, the rest of the raw materials Agent Barton can get his hands on pretty easily. Only major component he needs is a power source of high energy density-"

Stark fiddled with something else and Loki caught a glint of something metal connecting with the outer frame of one of the computers. Glancing around, it seemed as though the onlookers had not seen what the talkative, self-important man had done. Loki considered saying something and then shrugged. No doubt this was yet another game for power. Amusing.
"-to kick start the fuse."
Hill raised an eyebrow. "When did you become an expert in thermonuclear astrophysics?"
"Last night," quipped Stark. "The packet. Selvig's notes. The extraction theory papers?"

The room was silent. Loki decided to shut his eyes for a few minutes. *Perhaps this style of conversing is how Midgardians attain knowledge since their mental processes appear to be sluggish at best...*

"Am I the only one who did the reading?" asked Stark in disbelief. "Or was everyone just sleeping?"

Apparently so, Loki rolled his eyes – mentally. *Seeing as many here have no head for such knowledge, this does not surprise me... but I had already calculated it. In a torturous, drug-induced, blazing dream.*

"Brother!" Thor said.
Loki opened his eyes. "What, Thor?"
"You can hardly expect all of us to sit about poring over papers." Thor looked hurt.
"Sorry." Loki blinked and, looking around the table, saw everyone had focused on him. Not in a good way. "Did I just say that aloud?"
"Indeed! Rather unfair."
"And unrealistic," Stark scoffed. "In his dreams!"
"Well," Thor said quickly. "Loki has learned many things within dreams. Although it is dangerous when drug induced."
"I am going to pretend to not hear that," Banner muttered.
"So. Flarathir," Steve quickly took control of the conversation again. "What particular kind of power source would he need?"
"He'd have to heat the cube to one hundred twenty million Kelvin just to break through the cooling barrier," Banner said.
"Unless," Stark put in, "Selvig has figured out how to stabilize the quantum tunnel effect."
"Well, if he could do that," Banner pointed out. "He could achieve heavy ion fusion in any reactor on the planet."
"Finally," Stark smiled moving forward. "Someone who speaks English!"
"Is that what just happened?" Steve mumbled.

Stark smiled at the nervous older man who still had as yet to find a seat. "You're Doctor Banner, I'm guessing? It's good to meet you. Your work on anti-electronic collisions is unparalleled and I'm a huge fan of the way you lose control and turn into an enormous green rage monster."
"Uhhhh..." Doctor Banner slowly accepted the outstretched hand shook it briefly before pocketing his hands again. "Thanks."
"Look. He opens a wormhole. Whoever it is comes through. End of story," Tony continued on without missing a beat. "The question is where."
"I have a feeling like I am trapped in some kind of time loop of ignorance," Loki sighed. "Thor, how do you survive it?"
Loki paused at Thor's grin. "Never you mind."
"Well, smarty-pants," Tony folded his arms and stared down at the tall, dark-haired newcomer with a challenging look. "What do you think our next plan of attack is?"
"Attack?" Steve asked. "We have the mage now."
"Interrogation will happen," Fury's voice resounded as he marched into the room. He nodded as he passed by Hill. "Humane interrogation."

Loki raised an amused eyebrow at Stark's eye roll. He pointed out: "Time would be better spent searching for the residue traces of the Tesseract. Perhaps a tracking spell-"
"Now I'm in Hogwarts?" Stark joked.
"Good books," Steve said, at which Romanov smiled indulgently at the blond-haired man.
"Loki is a warrior-mage like Flarathir," Fury clarified for the benefit of those at the table who weren’t in the know. "Loki is Thor's brother. Loki, meet Romanov, Doctor Banner and Tony Stark. Guys, this is Thor's brother, Loki."

Romanov's shapely eyebrows rose a few centimeters as she quickly connected the dots between the hints to which Fury had been alluding over the past week or so. "Thor's brother... As her eyes wandered over the two siblings, her face remained blank. They look nothing alike.

Stark was not so impressed.

"Loki is one of us," Steve frowned. His voice clashed with Loki's as he retorted: "I have no desire to be here, believe you me."
"You look like I could knock you over with a feather," Stark shot back.
"I held my own well enough against Flarathir earlier."
"Uh... and then you had to take a nap. I don't know," Stark mused sarcastically, "but the last time I checked, you can't fall asleep in the middle of a fight."
"I'll be fine," Loki repeated stubbornly before adding a little nastily. "At least I'll be there on time, but I suppose a few of us will need to ride upon the backs of other people's work in order to claim some fame."
"Ooohhh," Romanov appeared to be finding it a bit difficult to keep a smile off her face. "But Loki is correct about the tracing idea," Doctor Banner said. "From the notes remaining of Selvig's research, the Tesseract does emit a particular set of gamma rays which could be identified and located given we have a program capable of searching for the distinctive readings."
"We'll get the satellites and radars on it as soon as possible," Fury nodded.
"There's the small problem of writing the program-"
"I can do it," Stark said and then added, shooting a small glare in Loki's direction, "in my sleep."
"I could probably track it down with a simple working right here and-"
"You are doing nothing of the sort," Thor interrupted Loki's quick retort. "We need you at full strength on the battlefield. Let their machines do the work." He shrugged. "They are slow, but they will eventually find the Tesseract."
"Eventually," Loki repeated disbelievingly.
"Eventually," echoed Thor.
"Eventually," Loki smirked.

The two brothers laughed. Tony Stark's eye twitched a little. Steve chuckled.

"Well, I am certain we'll be able to find their hidden location," Steve said. "Until then, I suppose we should keep careful watch on the mage."
"I'll have a chat with him," Romanov suggested.
"Good idea," Fury nodded. "Maybe you'll get a few more ideas about his plan and the why's and wherefores."
"I thought the 'why' was obvious," Banner said. "He's crazy."
"He is indeed crazed."
"Loki told me once of certain workings which would allow one person to connect mentally with another," mused Thor aloud slowly.
"I don't wanna get inside his head," Banner repeated. "He's a box of cats, that one. You can smell the crazy on him."
"Agreed," Loki nodded – and then shuddered. "A dark shadow hangs over him and his mind is hidden from me, cloaked in the darkest mantle of Thanos. I would not go walking there with him..."

Romanov shot Loki a hard look upon which Loki forced himself to remain unperturbed. It is not their business, he told himself. What I went through is my past alone and it is not as if they would
"You had something similar happen?" Thor asked and then stopped as he got a sharp kick from
Romanov. "Oh, yes..." He paused. "That was when..." Thor trailed off as previous conversations
with Loki began to hold deeper meaning.
"OK. Does anyone feel like they're going down some chocolate tunnel on an out of control boat?"
Stark raised a hand. "Because I think I just wandered into cuckoo land, courtesy of Spock here..."
"Stark," Fury gave the shorter man a death glare.

Thor laughed suddenly and then stopped and mumbled 'sorry' when he caught a particularly vicious
glare aimed at him from Loki's direction.

"Loki is too, ah, emotional to be Spock," Thor hastened to say.
"Too emotional?" Loki asked incredulously.
"I can never be right, obviously," Thor sighed.
"Obviously you can never be right," Loki said coldly. "Emotional!"
"Asgardians watch Star Trek?" asked Stark curiously.
"Asgardians dating Jane do," said Romanov quickly. "So psychic connection is out then."
"What? Wait." Stark said. "You guys seriously were considering mind melding?!"
"I know not of what 'mind melding' consists of," Loki nodded, "but the connection of two minds is
possible, particularly between two who are sensitive to the Realm of the Unseen. With the aid of a
working or drugs, connections of various types may be achieved."
"Shit," Banner said succinctly.
"But I would not attempt it with Flarathir," Loki continued on smoothly. "Banner's intuition is
correct. Standing too long within the presence of the Mad Titan..." The warrior-mage hesitated
before continuing. "I would not wish to delve into an active link with any of them."
"Mad? He's angry?" asked Stark.
"Crazy," Thor and Steve said at the same time.
"He's in love with Death," Steve went on. "If I understand this correctly, Thanos is into genocide on
a galactic scale. More presents for his girlfriend."
"I think you mean, 'beau', Mr. Up-To-Date. Wait a minute," Stark turned to Thor with mock
politeness. "I think I heard this before. Death is a woman."
"Indeed," Thor nodded. "Thanos fell in love with her, they say."
"They say? They say?" Stark waved his arms and turned to Fury in disbelief. "Who says? Evil
Dumbledore? Or a sickly Goth?"
"They've been right so far," Romanov said. "Frankly, I just want to find a way to get Barton back."
"The archer?" asked Loki.
"Yes."
"As anyone else concerned that all of our intel is originating from a group of aliens, some of whom
are claiming something as yet scientifically proven?" Stark asked. "What're we going to believe
next? That little green men exist and have been visiting our planet since the times of the apes?"
"Little green men?" Thor rubbed his chin in thought. "Loki, do you think he's referring to the
Heimskr race?"
"Ahh... Heimskr. Nasty little brutes," Loki chuckled and shook his head.
"The little green men are called 'Hime-scare'?" asked Hill curiously. "How do you spell that?"
"No, no," Thor laughed then.
"Our apologies," Loki added quickly between snorts. "We were merely jesting."
"Ah-ha, ah-ha," Stark glared at the two.
"You will figure it out... eventually," Loki flapped a lazy hand dismissively in the Iron Man's
direction. "Or so I am told."
"JARVIS will know," Stark warned the two.
"JARVIS is his robot without a body," Romanov explained to Thor. "Between JARVIS and Miss
Potts, I don't think Tony has to do anything except eat and sleep."
"Well, sometimes those things are a great chore," Loki said with scornful commiseration.
"I invent stuff! In the realm of technology, I rule!" Stark protested.
"The Realm of Technology," mused Loki aloud. "The Realm... of Technology. Thor, have you heard of such a realm?"
"No, brother," Thor said with all seriousness, but his blue eyes were dancing. "It sounds like a grand place, and I hope to visit there one day."
"Be certain to show them the prowess of Thor while you are at it," Loki nodded. "I heard tell that a king rules there but he is of insignificant stature and relies on his technology to save the day."
"Perhaps he is a man of great wisdom," Thor pointed out, nearly crying with the attempt to not laugh.
"Alas, brother," Loki shook his head sadly, "machines only hold what knowledge you place within them-"
"Truth," Romanov interjected.
"-and he does not even know of Heimskr."
"Well," Thor let out another snort of laughter. "He will understand."
"Eventually,"
"Eventually,"
""Eventually," the two brothers chorused.
"Excuse me," Fury said, his voice now very hard and filled with annoyance. "Are we done with the bullshit now? 'Cause I don't know about you – but I kinda wanna get on this – LIKE YESTERDAY!"
"We are done," Thor said quickly.
"Absolutely," Loki added.
"In fact," Stark stepped back rapidly, tugging on Bruce's elbow. "We are leaving now to work on the program."
"And I am going with them," Loki rose and followed on the heels of the men now leaving the room.
"I'll go talk with the mage," Romanov said simply and left the room.
"We will stand by for any sudden mission," Steve offered and, jerking his head in the direction of the door, summoned Thor.

Thor rose, circled the table, nodded at Fury, offered a general word of encouragement and strode after the super-soldier. Looking about the now empty room, Hill sighed.

"It is going to be a miracle to get everyone to work together."
"Hm."
"You know what Coulson would say." Hill went on. "Something along the lines of believing in them. You know – they'll be able to do it."
"They had better," Fury said darkly. "Or I'll fucking kill them myself."

[...look deep...] 

[...what does one see...]

Fate, as the Sages tell, weaves the Tapestry of Time. Fate is neither man nor woman, faceless and nameless. It is Inevitability; it is Unstoppable. It is the summation of all things.

Look closely. Here and there – the threads of gold and green, of red and blue, of black and white run together and twine about in the most intricate creations. Can one fully fathom the beauty of it in all its detailed and complicated glory? Perhaps not. Yet, it is beautiful to Fate. Fate who pulls the threads together, guides all things at the will of Life and Death and allows What Is To Be be.

[...what will one find?] 

What does Fate see? Fate sees all with a vision vaster and greater than even the golden-eyed
Gatekeeper of Asgard. It plumbs the heart of the shadow and overlooks the swarming armies of the Chitauri with an unmoved eyes. It pierces the thick protective cloud-sky of Earth and observes the preparations of the Midgardians. It follows the super-soldier into dimly lit rooms, forgotten and supposedly unused, yet under lock and key. It knows already what lies within the cases. It shadows the slender figure of black down to a round glass cell in which stands a smoldering flame of power. It eavesdrops upon the conversations of strategy and war as the dark-skinned commander reassures himself of his company's loyalties. It guides the hands of the scientists gently and allows the numbers to fall into place easily. It watches the Asgardian warrior train in his arts of war and the Asgardian mage weave his workings of magick. It steps back and looks at the new creation on the great Loom of Time. It twists its threads together tightly – the threads of gold and green, of red and blue, of black and white.

[...the Darkness is not empty...]

[...in shadows malevolence stirs...]

[...and dark things rise...]

Chapter End Notes

Well, there's that conversation done. Sigh. Phew.

Small Glossary
flyting - more like a word-match, where you get into skill debate and name calling and punning
Heimskr - literally the word for 'fool'

SO... Here's some Q&A for myself just so you can get to know me a bit better. You can stop reading after this if you don't care. Haha.

Q: What's with LIFE?
A: Lately I've been working hard at... WORK! Which is teaching Oral English at a university in China~~~ I'm fine tuning my lesson plans and trying to make things fun for my students. Also... thinking about my birthday next week. Sigh. Aging. And of course - lots of fun hanging with friends, like seeing the new Cinderella.

Q: What did you think of the new "Cinderella"?
A: I think Kenneth Branagh did a good job of directing. Good casting, good costumes, good story plot. Good side characters. Cate Blanchett and Helena Bonham Carter and Derek Jacobi really stood out for me. I loved Cinderella getting stuck in the pumpkin. I did not like the extremely tiny waist and low cut dress Cinderella had. EW! I mean, what if you don't have a tiny waist or big boobs? So not good for girls with poor body image. So sad that had to happen.

Q: What new music have you been listening to lately?
A: Imagine Dragon's new album "Smoke and Mirrors". SO GOOD. I love "Gold", "Warriors" and "I Bet My Life On You" most of all. Also relistening to Imogen Heap's "Ellipse" album. And of course Halo 1 OST and Assassin's Creed OST. Of course.

Q: Anything new you've been watching?
A: Lots of rewatching of "The Hobbit: Behind The Scenes". I love the Peter Jackson
Behind The Scenes. Ugh. They make me smile. That and "The Revelation of the Pyramids". OMG. I love this documentary! At my friend's house, I've been watching "The Liza Bennett Diaries". So funny.

That's about it!
See ya next week!
-KI
I am so so so sorry guys for the wait. I'm assuming you guys are sad when I don't update regularly... which I suppose is egotistical of me to think. But, for some reason I had issues with this scene and then I was trying to add the whole fight scene on the Helicarrier - and then realized I had enough to post without it. So... here we go.

I hope you enjoy this chapter.

Thanks to: InsolentKatt, Vincent1875, Basia Orci, Guest, vonhinten, wbss21, Armand, Elizabeth, Juventus. Thanks for taking the time to support this fic! Thanks to everyone for reading!

Responses below.
LET ME KNOW WHAT YOU THINK!

Distortions In Time
Chapter 84
Dividing Differences

Asgard's Academy for those magickally gifted had held many rooms for the various skills of the mages and their apprentices. There were the apothecaries, the smithies, the alchemists' studies, the distilleries, the spell rooms, the astronomy towers, the herbalists' gardens and the Healing Halls.

There were other rooms locked away filled with various arcane instruments, few of which anyone knew how to use which brought to Loki's mind another dark, dim, foreboding room – the King's Vault. On various marbled and carved pedestals, ancient weapons long left to the grip of Time and dust sat, waiting to be used, and, in a prime position at the end of the Room right before the grille which held the Destroyer, the Casket of Ancient Winters, Jotunheim's long lost prize, sung quietly to itself.

In contrast to the earthy tones of the Mage's Academy and the dark lighting of the Vault, the Helicarrier's 'laboratory' (or 'secret lab' as Stark had derisively called it) was a sparsely decorated, cleanly furnished, brightly lit place. The white counters, the closed cupboards, the tidy storage units, and the shining screens of the computers gleamed as though unused underneath unrelenting, white lights. Like Midgard's healing halls – the hospital, Loki corrected himself as he remembered Thor's unusual vocabulary. Like the hospital, this place is laid open before the eye. The mysteries, such as they are, have been hidden in plain sight, cloaked in numbers and metal – and without Asgard's atmospheric lighting, it does feel more prosaic. In the end, one could say, Loki concluded, magick is more than science, for it deals with more than the reality of the Seen; there is the discovery, the manipulation and the presentation of the Unseen.

Watching Stark and Banner pore over the rapidly scrolling information on the various translucent screens, Loki was once again sharply reminded of home. Of his own little working space stashed in the corner of his room, of Frigga's looms and apothecary's bench, of the Academy's studies and halls. So much more than this, Loki thought as he tapped on his own computer screen and tentatively brought up the data. Looking at the numbers and the oddly familiar configurations and formulas and
With a frown, Loki fiddled with the settings in hopes of setting the information on a continuous cycle. A few seconds later, the tall warrior-mage could feel the gaze of one of the humans. The oddly unsettling quiet doctor. Banner, Loki recalled.

"You looking for something?" Banner asked.

"I wish to set the information on a continuous cycle, but the controls of this technology are a little..." Loki swallowed the first words which popped into his head – 'archaic' and 'simplified to the points of incomprehensibility'. Pause. He remembered Frigga and Odin's words about representing Asgard; he thought of Thor's relationship with the humans. Loki sighed. "Unfamiliar."

"I see." Across Banner's face, a smile flitted. "I suppose where you come from, this all seems a little Stone Age."

"Stone Age," Loki tipped his head and considered the words. "Primitive."

"Well..." Here, Loki glanced around the room. "It seems as though the humans of Midgard have begun the long arduous climb to civilization. Your... science is as yet incomplete, but it does seem to be well applied..."

"High praise indeed," Stark snorted.

The shorter scientist on the other side of the room, who had been typing frantically into his own console and had been talking with some computer interface, glanced over at Banner with a brown-eyed, hurt look as though to say 'how could you have betrayed me?'. Then, he smiled quickly at Loki.

"Of course, Asgard isn't going to share either," Stark continued. "Not that I'm offended. I totally get it. I've buried a few projects for the safety of the masses. Monopoly of information is power. Look at the ship we're standing on. You can bet your bottom dollar that this isn't gonna be dished out to just any country."

*Just any country. So this planet does have many countries...* Loki thought, remembering the two mysterious young people who had saved his life. Mildy and Jace.

"Well, Asgard will not speak of such things," Loki agreed with a shrug. "Much of this is a matter for the working man and the mage – and being such, it is not something the warriors and the elite study. They take it for granted... and without the technicians, as some might call them, the science would be lost, I should think."

"Wow."

"I suppose with a long history," Bruce said, leaning back to double-check Loki's console before nodding, "that kind of thing is bound to develop. It happened in Egypt."

"Except the higher ups in Egypt hoarded it all. Sounds like the opposite is happening in Asgard," Stark shook his head.

"Relying on workings and magick and the sciences can only get one so far... Or so it is said," Loki mused aloud, watching the screen cycle through twice successfully.

"Sour grapes."

"Sour grapes?" Loki echoed Stark's words.

"An old tale on Earth about a fox who couldn't get to some grapes no matter how high he jumped. He gave up and to console himself, he said that they were probably sour anyways." Bruce shrugged, accepting Loki's nod of unspoken thanks. "Sour grapes."

"Sour grapes." Loki thought of Laufey's uncertain magickal abilities and Thor's unspoken jealousies. "Understandable. Still... Asgard may not speak of their technology, but," and here Loki smiled, "I
"Huh," Stark suddenly looked up. "So we can watch you do your thing?"
"I am here, am I not?" Loki turned about and wandered over to Bruce's side of the room, surreptitiously double-checking the man's calculations (and finding them quite correct) while poking through the different cupboards.
"You looking for something?" Stark asked curiously.
"Paper and pen."
"Talking about Stone Age..."
"I found a few pads and pens in the third drawer from the left," Bruce turned and waved at the far counter on the other side of the room. "Over there."
"Paper and pen," Stark snorted, but Loki noticed the gleam of curiosity in his lively dark eyes. "Discovering the correct sigil is key before inputting it into any working or piece of technology," Loki explained.

He dug about, found the paper and pen, pulled up a black plastic and metal hair to his console's counter, propped his feet up on the edge and tipped his chair back to gaze up at the screen. As Loki became immersed in his notes, the rest of the room fell into a companionable silence with the odd occasional short conversation between Stark and Doctor Banner. Every now and then, Loki glanced over and saw them deep in conference about 'teraflops' and 'Homer clusters' and 'R and D'. It was obvious that Stark was courting the retiring Doctor Banner. Amusing.

Once in a while, Loki himself felt the heaviness of someone's gaze upon his shoulders – and judging by how Stark hopped from one place to another poking at various pieces of technology, opening and shutting things seemingly at random, chattering in a scattered way about some scientific principles (and also gossip) and checking on a few of his own projects, it was the rich man who hovered over Loki and watched with eyes like a hawk as the warrior-mage worked out his own magick on paper. The ink shifted and twisted beneath his fingers as Loki flicked his fingers and found the balance of power within the planet. His eyelids drifted lower as the mage focused on the power around him, as he immersed himself in the living flow of the Realm's spirit. The current was strong and just dipping into it he felt the ineluctable pull, the energy fed from youthful stars and the spirit of the Realm which harbored the young planet.

Why this one? That had always been Loki's question from the first day he had read of Midgard in the Academy's library. The question had never been fully answered.

"You seriously are going to go to the dark side on this one?"
"It really does look like magic." That was Bruce. Much closer now. "Admit it."

Loki twisted back in the move-able chair and looked up at the two men who now stood just behind him looking over his shoulder.

"I am trying to concentrate here."
"Doing what?" Tony asked.

The rich man's brown eyes were less cocky and his posture less aggressive – and beside him, Banner hovered obviously torn between the hesitancy of the polite and the curiosity of the scientist.

"All things emit a kind of..."
"Wave?" Bruce suggested.
"Something like that," Loki hesitated. "Of course, depending on the material of the object under consideration, the... waves... or the emissions of being may range from rather weak and difficult to find up the scale to something more..."
"Seismic. Cosmic. Epic."
"Yes," Loki gave Tony a quick, twisted smile. "I am not..." At my fittest, Loki was about to say, but he stopped. Norns know if Thor is right around the corner ready to pounce and drag me back to the infirmary. "It is not easy at the best of times, but it can be done for anything lost." A pause.

"Anything lost."

"Anything?" Bruce asked, voice laced with just a little bit of skepticism.

"Anything," Loki repeated firmly. "With something like the Infinity Stones... it is... much easier, especially when they are-" Here, Loki paused and cocked his head. "Awake. Alive. In use."

"So you are trying to find it from its gamma ray emissions. Like us."

"In a way," Loki nodded. "With the information I find through my working, I could also reach out and ascertain its usage and the details of its whereabouts."

"Huh. Is this like... astral projection?" Bruce asked, removing his glasses and rubbing at them absently with a handkerchief.

Loki gave Bruce a blank stare.

"Never mind that," Bruce shook his head. "With the more powerful an object, the greater the emissions. Something like the Tesseract," Loki turned away, eyes falling closed. "That is how Flarathir and Thanos located the Tesseract. In a way, it desires to be found, to be used."

"It's the Ring!" Stark said dramatically, no doubt making yet another incomprehensible reference to some local lore no doubt.

"So you used the same form of... technology as you are to finding the Tesseract?"

"Yes," Loki nodded.

"They can detect and analyze gamma rays," Bruce mused. "They must be as modern as we are."

"Not gamma rays," Loki corrected the man quickly. "Emissions of being – that is the best way for me to explain it to you Midgardians. They are not gamma rays. They are bhu'foera. Although, using your technology to detect kel'ausa is also an interesting answer to our dilemma."

"Okaayy... High praise indeed," Tony rolled his eyes. "So Flarathir and Thanos used this method to find the Tesseract..."

"And pinpoint its location and perhaps even walk in the spirit among the environs of the Tesseract. It is, after all, the Space Stone and therefore lends itself easily to such workings."

"You mean, people have been astral projecting into SHIELD's HQ?" Bruce asked, glancing nervously over at the mage's spear.

"More than likely. Flarathir, for certain."

"Shit," Tony said, hands on his hips. "They're so far up SHIELD's ass-"

"That's one way of saying it," Bruce rubbed his eyes, his glasses bumping up against his forehead. "Not good."

"However, it is odd, for despite its size, it is difficult to exactly pinpoint even now. I can feel it from a great distance. A powerful voices among many, all of them striving to be heard. Perhaps... perhaps the entire world is attempting to hide it, crowd it out."

"Okay. Time out." Tony scooted back a bit, hands rising. "The world?"

"The Spirit of the Realm. And the Stars." Loki shrugged. "You cannot understand. You must hear them yourself to know. As I said, the emissions of being are not gamma rays. They are something else – and they are strong. Like the center of a galaxy, its light shines brightly, overpowering all. Thankfully, there are other voices..." Loki paused, froze infinitesimally, glanced at the screen, stared down at his sigils and then back up and around at the two waiting men. "Light. Light and song. That – that-"

The chair creaked as Loki's feet were suddenly removed from the edge of the counter and as the exiled Asgardian prince leaned forward, pen suddenly scrawling across as the page.

"That is it! Perhaps – perhaps!"

"What?"
"This part of the universe is unusually filled with-

As the three men clustered around the notebook, Captain America and Thor strode in and paused.

"We caught you at a bad time," Steve said, stepping back.
"Well, all time's a bad time when people walk in on me in my lab," Stark said, looking up, annoyed.
He shifted back a little, rooting around in a couple of drawers aimlessly.
"This isn't your lab," Steve frowned.
"Well, it is at the moment. We were in the middle of something." The short inventor held up two metal cylinders and threw them back in, muttering imprecations against badly misused budgets.
"I see," Thor's blue gaze met Loki's green one. "Any luck?"
"Luck has nothing whatsoever to do with it," Loki grunted. "Hard work, maybe – and I hardly can get any work done around here. I have managed to."

Loki stopped and stared – as the short, dark-haired man, Stark, suddenly produced a small metal cylindrical object and zapped Doctor Banner with it. Jerking away with a wounded look and a sharp exclamation of pain, Banner moved back around the corner of the counter. Steve's mouth dropped open an inch in shock.

"Yes, this is what I have to deal with, Thor. My day feels as though it will last a millenia, but," Loki smiled begrudgingly, "their science and technology, while primitive, does function on some level and my working is almost finished and I believe their, ah, programs have begun running already."
"Nothing?" Stark was saying to Banner, tossing the electrical prod aside and leaning in a little to look at the man closely. "No sign of green anywhere."
"But they are interested in magick and I just discovered – or I had thought I had discovered – something but then you two had to come in and-"
"Hey!" Steve's sharp voice cut into Loki's diatribe. "Are you nuts?"
"You really have got a lid on it, haven't you?" Stark asked conversationally, ignoring Steve. "What's your secret? Bongo drums? Mellow jazz? A bag of weed?"

Loki shook his head, while finishing his final choice of runes.

"Is everything a joke to you?" Steve asked.
"Funny things are," Tony gave Steve a quick, sharp, head-to-toe look. "What's got your panties in a twist? Dropped your shield off the edge of the carrier? Decided to give up spandex?"
"They're making weapons," the blonde-haired super-soldier said, nodding at Thor who set a large, metallic gun down on the white counter top with an ominous clank.

-0-0-0-

While SHIELD's staff worked on gathering more intel, while her newest compatriots separated for their various duties, Natasha made her way down to the lower deck, to the cylindrical glass cell and the prisoner within. It was relatively quiet below – as quiet as a flying helicarrier could get that is. There was only the steady clank-clank which marked the pace of the circling guards, the hum and the rattle of the ship itself, the whoosh of various air vents and the steady beeps of muted monitors.
As she approached, the elderly man, their deceptively strong prisoner, turned on his second circuit of pacing and, catching sign of her, paused. The two eyed each other apprehensively as cats might upon first meeting.

"So they sent a woman." A smirk flitted across his face.
"This is a surprise?" Natasha asked coolly.
"Well," the man tipped his head, "not at such an early stage, no." He turned, glanced upward and then around the restricting confines of the circular cell. "I thought, perhaps, that there would be some... other forms of... persuasion offered before they sent me a woman as balm. Ah, but then
perhaps this race of Midgard is more fairly represented thusly."
"I am the representative of SHIELD... of humanity?" Natasha leaned back against the rail and looked thoughtful. "Now that is a scary thought."
"Scary?"
"To those who know me well-"
"Ah," Flarathir smiled then, his blue eyes glinting beneath craggy grey-white eyebrows, "yet in a strange way, it could be a compliment to your kind. Perhaps more apt than some would think, Drakov's daughter."

Natasha's chin lifted and something crossed her face – a glimmer of regret, a glimpse of grief. Flarathir smiled.

"Agent Barton," Natasha said.
"Indeed."
"I... wanna know what you've done to him."
"What I have done to him?" Flarathir's eyebrows rose in mock innocence. "I have done nothing... I merely introduced him to the truth. The truth of the Tesseract. His mind is now expanded... and grasps more of what truly is than what is seen."
"I see," Natasha stepped forward, her hand trailing along the rail, a picture of worry. "And once you've won – once you're king of the mountain, what will happen to his mind then?"
"Is this... love, young child?"
"No."

A pause.

"Love is for children," Natasha finally said. "I owe him a debt."
"Hm. He spoke of this. You were raised a killer, lived a killer's life and instead of meeting a killer's death, you were granted a second life."
"Yes."
"He spoke of this. Of everyone," Flarathir casually added.
"Then you know this is the truth," Natasha pointed out. "I, uh... well, I made a name for myself. I have a very specific skillset. I didn't care who I used it for, or on. I got on SHIELD's radar in a bad way. Agent Barton was sent to kill me, he made a different call."
"A second life," repeated Flarathir.
"A debt I want to repay," Natasha corrected.
"And if I vowed to spare his life," Flarathir asked carefully. "What then? Do you promise escape? Leniency? Partnership?"
"Maybe."
"As if I need any such aid, any such inducement." Flarathir laughed then.

His laughter scraped through the speaker, grating and irritating like nails running along a black board. Natasha knew all about those. Back in Russia.

"They send one who has nothing to recommend her but an insatiable appetite for blood. You become the scapegoat – carrying the burden of what they themselves could not achieve, what burdens they did not wish to carry." Flarathir slowly paced to the other side of the room. "You wish to pay back a debt – and somehow achieve it with empty threats and equally frail promises. The world may die for all you care, but this man is all."
"It's not that complicated," Natasha said quietly, moving closer to the glass. "Not really. I've got red in my ledger – and I'd like to wipe it out."
"Ahhhh," Flarathir whirled around and stalked across the room. "The prayer of a child, the heart of a simpleton, the sentimentality of the weak. To cover one's work in such a way, to white-wash the actions to which one had once been committed, to attempt some kind of reconciliation before the
end..." He stopped before her and looked down at the red-head and leered. "For the end will come to all – the ones forever stained in blood, the ones who maintain their innocence as they order others to the kill, and the ones who walk in the daylight and never understand the battle for their peace. Ha!"
Flarathir's fist hit the glass and his eyes, staring down at Natasha, were filled with contempt and hate. "I know what it is to stand in the shadows. I know what it is to play the part of those who walk in the dark. You pretend to be separate, to have a code of honour, something that would make up for the horror of what you have done – but they are a part of you and they will never go away!"

Natasha eased back.

"So we are all monsters."
"When I turn Barton on you, when he kills you slowly and intimately in every way he knows you fear, then you will recognize what you hate and fear within yourself – the dilemma of the scapegoat and the never ending struggle against one's fate. Your man will be all that you fear in yourself."
"Scapegoat?" Natasha's face was drawn with barely contained horror. "You're a monster,"
"No..." Flarathir smirked, "you brought the monster."
"Huh," Natasha tipped her head as she stepped back, looking thoughtful. "That's your play then."
"What?"
"Banner..." With that, the slight red-head flicked on her earpiece and moved back down the catwalk, her pace picking up as urgency began to rise. "Flarathir is going to unleash the Hulk somehow. Where is Banner?" At the end of the catwalk, Natasha turned and looked back at Flarathir who stood in the middle of his cell looking a little put out. She smiled. "Thank you for your cooperation."

She left. She did not look back.

-0-0-0-

Loki, finishing his working, looked up, saw that the four men were now mutely staring at the weaponry with no small amount of dismay, set the notepad aside and rose to his feet, feeling all of his thousands of years and then some.

"Fury was hiding something," Steve finally said, breaking the awkward silence.
"Well, he's a spy," Stark rolled his eyes. "Spies have secrets. I bet Fury's secrets have secrets."
"See, the whole question of what SHIELD was doing with the Tesseract... has become fairly obvious," Banner shook his head, stepping a little back from the counter and eyeing the weaponry with disfavour.
"Well, Jarvis has been running a program of mine – a small, yet effective decryption program – since I hit the bridge. We'll know in a few hours what SHIELD is really up to –"
"We don't need a program to guess-"
"What is going on here?"

It was Fury. A not so happy Fury. Loki smirked as everyone whipped around to face the tall, dark-skinned, fierce-looking Director.

"Uh... that's what we've been wondering," Stark said.
"You're supposed to be locating the Tesseract."
"Which we are doing," Stark said quickly. "Bruce and I have a program running and Loki is doing his own... thing... in his corner."
"The model's locked and we're sweeping for the signature," Bruce elaborated. "When we get a hit, we'll have the location within half a mile."
"Which is all very cool and interesting," Stark waved a hand, moving over to his counter and tapping at the monitor of his computer, "until we got interrupted."

Everyone's eyes returned to the counter and the large, hulking metallic gun which lay on the smooth,
"Hey," he asked with mock innocence, "Director, what is..." Pause. "Phase Two?"
"Probably, the weapons." Steve gestured at the gun. "You think I've not seen HYDRA technology
before?"
"Rogers, we gathered everything related to the Tesseract," Fury sighed. "This doesn't mean that
we're actually doing anything."
"I'm sorry, Nick," Stark swiveled his computer monitor around, allowing everyone to glimpse a
plethora of weaponry blueprints which flashed in quick succession across the screen. "What were
you lying?"
"Whoa..." Bruce's glasses were off now and his dark brown eyes glinted with anger. "You were
right."
"I'm always right," Stark stopped, "well, about these things anyways."
"Interesting," Loki murmured. "Quite an effective application of the Tesseract if crude."
"So things haven't changed after all," sighed Steve.
"In the end, that is what learning is for," Thor agreed quietly. "I have seen this kind of thing before.
In Asgard. Loki?"
"Why else are the tender arts of Academics sheltered?" Loki agreed bitterly, "But to bolster power
and accumulate wealth and spawn the fires of war?"

Natasha burst in through the door and skidded to a halt at the sight of everyone ringed about the
room, backs to the great windows on the one end and the Scepter. Instead, all of their focus seemed
to be on a gun and a computer monitor. The red-headed assassin frowned, but then her focus settled
on the problem at hand – Banner. The Hulk.

"Did you know about this?" Banner asked Natasha.
"You need to get out of here," Natasha said. "Remove yourself from this environment. It's gonna
affect you."
"I removed myself," Banner said softly and angrily. "I remember being dragged in, but I know I can
take care of myself."
"It's not you I'm worried about."
"Uh-oh," Stark glared Natasha. "Now you're really gonna make him mad."

Loki snorted, noticing that Stark looked less worried and more excited.

"I am not the one losing it here," Banner said.
"We're being manipulated. You too," Natasha glanced around the room nervously.
"We've all been manipulated," Steve shot back, pointing at the gun.
"Uh, not I," Loki raised a hand. "I knew."

Director Fury frowned, "What-"

"Loki," Thor sighed.
"But I know what she's saying," Loki added quickly. "Human ears cannot comprehend it, but it is
hiding within the subconscious: Flarathir's powers are invoking the Mind Gem."
"I'm not leaving just because some people are getting twitchy," Bruce tensed a little further. "I was
dragged out here for a 'good cause' and now the 'good cause' is making weapons of mass
destruction? I wanna know what's going on! Who wouldn't?"
"It's because of him," Fury pointed at Thor.
"Me?" Thor asked, blue eyes widening in stunned surprise and his voice rising several tones.
"Look, last year, our planet had a visitor: Thor. And from all accounts, there is a war between his
people and many others in the Nine Realms, or whatever they call it. How else do you think we
could respond?" Fury glared at his group of recalcitrant superheroes. "We learned that not only are
we not alone, but we are hopelessly, hilariously, outgunned."
"But..." Thor swung about to look at his friends, obviously hurt. "My people want nothing but peace with your planet."
"In a manner of speaking," Loki muttered.
"Loki."
"Nobody has attacked us!" Steve added.
"Yet," Stark interjected, voice low.
"Well," Loki folded his arms and and quirked an eyebrow at Thor, "how does one have peace with a bunch of barbarians? Peace is what we can call it, but ownership and a sense of patronizing supremacist care is more like it."
"You're not helping, Loki" Steve frowned. "Still, I agree with Thor. From what you and your brother have said, Asgard means Earth no harm."
"No," Loki shrugged, "I suppose not. But the way the Tesseract has been handled is... unfortunate. It needs to return to Asgard. Fa – Odin – Father will know what to do with it."
"Not happening," Fury folded his arms. "You're not the only people out there, am I right? And your people aren't the only threat. Our world is filling up with people who can't be matched or controlled."
"Like how you control the Cube?" Steve asked. "Or did. Before it got stolen."
"Double-edged swords," Loki said thoughtfully. "Fire that burns the wielder. I understand that... but you also do not understand. Using the Tesseract..."
"Loki is right," Thor shook his head. "This is what has drawn Thanos's eye to this planet. It will draw others. It is as signal to all the Realms that Earth is ready for a higher form of war."
"Higher form?" Steve asked.
"Ordinarily I'd say 'cool'," Stark glanced at his monitor, "but this time, maybe not so much."
"Our hands were forced," Fury said defensively. "We had to come up with something."
"Yeah, like nuclear deterrent," Stark quipped. "Cause that always calms everything right down."
"Remind me again how you made your fortune, Stark?" shot back Fury.
"I'm sure if he still made weapons, Stark would be into this all the way – and he wasn't," Steve said.
"Wait! Wait! Hold on! How is this now about me?" Stark asked with mock hurt. "I'm clean now. Clean energy. Robots and fast cars."
"I thought everything was about you."
"OK, Rogers, you wanna go there?"
"I thought humans were more evolved than this," Thor wrinkled his nose and shook his head.
"Welcome to reality," Loki sighed. "But they mean well... I suppose."
"Excuse me, did we come to your planet and blow stuff up?"
"We haven't blown up anything!" Loki said hotly, a touch of red rising in his otherwise rather pale cheeks.
"A piece of back state New York would beg to differ," Fury said acidly.
"That was not my fault!"
"Do you always have to mistrust people?" Thor jumped in to his brother's defense, glaring at Fury. "You can't be that naive," Natasha pointed out. "We all know that SHIELD monitors all potential threats. That includes us."
"Us?" Thor asked even more saddened.
"Potential threats?" Banner asked. "Captain America is a potential threat?"
"You're on that list?" Tony turned to Steve. "Are you above or below angry bees?"
"I swear to God, Stark, one more crack-
"Threatening! I feel threatened now!" Stark slid away from Steve who was now looming over him.
"This is fascinating," Loki shook his head, but his green eyes held a glint of worry.

There was a ring of them now, standing in the lab, shouting and yelling at each other. Voices overlapped voices, rising in volume. Beneath the echoes and reverberations of conflict, Loki could hear it. The whispers.
"You speak of control," Thor was saying vehemently, "yet you court chaos."
"Isn't that your brother's M.O.?” Fury snapped.
"What-"
"Loki, God of Mischief-"
"I am not a god of anything!” Loki protested, shoving down a rising feeling of guilt.

_Isn't it true?_
_It isn't true. It isn't true._

"It is not Loki's fault that Thanos is on your doorstep. If you had not used the Tesseract-"
"We are the chaos." Banner. "We're the chemical mixture, the time bomb."
"You need to step away," Natasha was trying to calm the increasingly tense scientist.
"Why shouldn't he let off a little steam?" Stark shrugged. "I know I wanna. After this."
"You know why?" Steve glared at Stark. "Back off! Let's try – let's try to keep calm!"
"Make me!" Stark shot back.
"That would be criminal," snapped Steve. "Like beating on a tiny kid. Take off the suit – and what are you?"
"Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist... Not hopped up on serum, that's for sure."
"Guys – this isn't helping-"
"...worth ten of you..."
"...you humans are so petty..."
"...the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you..."
"I would just cut the wire."
"...and tiny..."
"...you better stop pretending to be a hero..."
"...told you so, Thor. We should take the Tesseract and just... go!"
"A hero?"
"It's going nowhere."
"Yeah... says the man who lost the Tesseract!"
"Yeah!"
"...not your choice..."
"Like you? A lab rat. Everything special about you came out of a bottle!"
"Agent Romanoff, would you escort Doctor Banner back to his-"
"My cell? Oh, wait," Banner paused, "that's been rented out."
"That was just in case," sighed Fury.
"In case you needed to kill me. But you know you can't! You can't! I tried!"

Everything fell silent at Banner's unspoken admission. Thor and Fury who had been attempting to loom over each other, turned back to the others. Stark and Steve stepped back in mild shock. Natasha inched forward, inclining her head and keeping her stance open and friendly. Banner was upset. Something was wrong. Loki's green-eyed gaze which had been vague suddenly sharpened.

_"A great city of metal and glass and streams of life moving slowly and then quickly down wide streets and amongst it all, glimmered... glimmered..."_

"What?" Banner shrugged, suddenly awkward and just a little defensive. "I got low. I didn't see an end... so... so I put a bullet in a mouth and the Other Guy spit it out."
"Wow," muttered Steve.
"So I moved on. I focused on helping other people. I was good, you know, I was good." Banner continued, "Until you guys dragged me back into this freak show and put everyone here at risk! And for what – some shadowy organization that has been building our planet's... doom?"
"He's right," Steve sighed.
"This is actually... ironic," Thor mused in agreement.
"Ironic?" Loki paused and glanced at Thor. "You discovered irony? Since when?"
"Isn't anyone else upset about this? Wanting to do the right thing but in the end who are we helping here? The world? Or SHIELD? I don't know about the rest of you... but I didn't come here to be some kind of recovery agent."
"Bruce," Natasha said softly, her eyes meeting his.
"You wanna know my secret, Agent Romanoff? You wanna know how I stay calm?"

Natasha's hand fell to hang loosely by her hip, while Fury's hand went to his side – to the holster at his side.

"Doctor Banner," Steve asked quietly. "Can you put down the scepter?"
"What?" Bruce looked down and stared wide-eyed at his hands. "When – when did – what-"
"It is calling," Loki said, green eyes now ablaze. "Do not give in."

A small signal rang on one of the monitors. The two scientists glanced over at the screen. Loki craned his head as well.

"Got something," Stark moved closer to the counter and reached for the monitor.
"Well," Banner set down the scepter, walked over to Stark's side and looked at the scrolling data.
"No party trick today."
"You located the Tesseract?" asked Thor.
"Yes," Loki smiled, staying at Thor's side. "It is in a large city... a city on the edge of an ocean. Within this country."
"You... knew?" Bruce asked.
"Not for a long time," Loki hastened to add as Fury's suspicious eye focused on him. "Only a few moments ago... The tracking sigils have found it. As have yours."
"Everyone wins," Stark said sourly. "I can get there."
"We need to go together," Steve said.
"I can get there faster," Tony shot back.
"Loki," Thor turned to his brother. "You were right about the Tesseract. You were right. Again."
"I know," Loki sighed. "Sometimes I do so hate being right."
"It belongs on Asgard," Thor nodded. "We need to take it back."
"Unfortunately," Loki sighed. "The Bifrost is... and I cannot transport us there... not yet."

The edges of Loki's eyes tightened with chagrin and frustration.

"We'll get there."
"I'll get there first."
"You can't go alone," Steve said firmly, stepping in front of Stark.
"You gonna stop me?"
"Put on the suit," Steve said. "Let's find out."
"I'm not afraid to it an old man."
"Uh... guys..." Banner looked up from the monitor. "Loki?"
"Soon. It is in transit..." Loki met Banner's gaze. "When it is installed with a stable power source, it will be open the gates. Soon."

An explosion rocked the Helicarrier.

Loki smiled. "It has begun."

Chapter End Notes
Well, there you go. Lots of talking. Some science bro stuff. Some arguments. Sigh.

I hope I don't get stuck on the following battles. (goes off to die somewhere)

Thank you for your reviews! They're my writing food!

Glossary:

kel'ausa - gamma rays
bhu'foera - emmissions of being
I keep apologizing for making you guys wait, but really I do feel bad since I should've updated before now. What can I say? Life got a bit hairy toward the end of the school year what with giving exams and all... and then when I returned to this chapter... Well, let's just say I hated it. So I got frustrated and put it aside, figuring that an objective eye would be better later on. Then I talked with my bestie (who is also my original fic editor) and I got inspired to write a certain project I'd been promising her for a while. More on that later. Now, I feel like I can sort of breathe again as I try to get my life in order.

For some reason, I just sat down and wrote this. That is to say...

I've rewritten it.

So, I kinda like it a bit better now. I don't know.

At any rate, I apologize again. I can't promise regular updates per se because the other original fic is still ongoing. You can read it on inkitt. It's called "The Night Runners: Year One" written by 'scarecrowslady'. I need to get it done before my bestie's bday (in October) because it might be the theme for her party. I'm trying to get my eating habits in order (I tend to forget to eat/don't eat a lot of healthy foods) as well as my house in order (decluttering!). Furthermore, school has begun AGAIN and I'm doubling my classes for a couple weeks for various vacation-type reasons. I'm also ill with a cold and allergies and am on meds right now... (rubs her pained chest) So maybe this chapter is actually crap after all and I just think it's good.

Please let me know!

Thanks to all my reviewers! I do love you guys and appreciate your words! I don't deserve you guys!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 85
Turning the Tide I

[...and here time once again turns…]
[...and the Fates weave another tapestry…]
[...a new age mirroring its sisters…]
[...reflected and distorted…]

Like a wire snapping from extreme tension, the entire room exploded into action. Fury began talking with his subordinate, Hill, attempting to ascertain the situation and extent of the initial damage before he arrived on the command deck. Apparently, the Helicarrier's left forward turbines had just exploded.

Watching his notepad and pen slide a little on the slightly tipping counter, Loki's eyebrows rose.
"We lost one of the engines," Fury was shouting over the wail of sirens. "We are under attack. Stark! Rogers! Get on it! Romanov, keep an eye on Banner! You know what to do."

"Yes, Director," the red-headed woman nodded.

"I guess we're suiting up after all," Stark was still talking as he darted out the awkwardly stabilizing room, followed hard by a muttering Captain America.

As the floor gained a modicum of leveling, Loki released his grip on the counter.

"We are stuck in a flying death trap," he said grimly. "Thor, we need a ship. We may not have pinpointed the location of the Tesseract exactly but the closer we get, we could-"

"I cannot leave SHIELD," Thor shook his head, glancing around. "We need to help them!"

"We are helping them!" Loki countered. "In the long run, at the very least."

Loki twisted around to eye the scientist named Banner who was being calmed by the red-headed woman. Romanov.

"There is something wrong here, Thor," he said.

"Ahhh..." Thor glanced around, his blue eyes clouding with worry. "That is an understatement, Loki."

"It's the Scepter. It's more than a channeling stone-"

Suddenly, a new set of alarms began to ring and red lights began to flare. Some kind of code unknown to Loki was called out on repeat.

"Intruders on board!" Thor yelled in explanation, forcing his way to the door and looking down the hallway. It was obvious to Loki that Thor was torn between the duty of protecting him and that of protecting his friends.

"The Helicarrier is under attack-" Natasha's voice was overpowered by a loud crash.

Before she could finish her sentence, the glass wall, where the Scepter lay, exploded under a hail of projectiles. Thor and Romanov dove to the floor, but after the initial explosion, Loki noticed that Banner had disappeared. A large, green, heavily muscled man stood in the quiet scientist's place with the barest remnants of torn clothing stretched around its wrists, neck and waist. Loki froze, not realizing until too late that the red-head was screaming at him about a duck – and then there was more broken glass, flying pieces of metal and ricocheting projectiles as the huge monster tore off a piece of metal wall as if it were paper, hurled it at the hovering hostile ship outside, severed said ship in half and proceeded to rip apart the room in a blind rage.

With a forward roll, Loki reached the far corner, grabbed the Scepter and Stark's tablet now on the floor, and darted to Thor's side behind one of the remaining desks. Thor stared down at the tablet and Scepter blankly.

"Stark's program is still attempting to pinpoint the Tesseract's exact location," yelled Loki. "You must carry this to safety."

"You cannot take on the Hulk-" Romanov stopped at the look in Loki's eye. "Look - Wait-"

Whatever she was about to say ended as the entire room's floor caved in, depositing the Hulk, the red-head and Loki into some kind of spacious grey storage bay. Looking down through the gaping hole in dismay, Thor called for his brother – and all he got in return was a resounding crash and an Asgardian oath. With a curse of his own, Thor realized Fury, long disappeared off to the bridge, was in no position to restrain Loki, much less the Hulk.

"Thor." It was Natasha, looking up at him. "Don't worry. We can handle it."

"What happened to Banner?"
"Nothing unexpected," she reassured him.
"Another SHIELD experiment?"
"Hm... it's a little more complicated than that."
"It always is," Thor grunted. "You will keep an eye on Loki?"
"Yeah," Natasha nodded. "I will."
"Is he there?"
"Down the room," Natasha gave Thor an unreadable look. "Did you see the bullets bouncing off of him? Off Loki?"
"Loki is of Asgard." Thor paused.

And of Jotunheim...

"Uh-huh, well, he'll be the Hulk's new plaything..." She paused, glanced to one side and seemed to notice something. "Honestly, Loki and I can hold our own."
"He will not be-"
"Look, the ship can't bear the stress." Natasha sighed. "We need to pin the Hulk down or get him off. At this rate, we're gonna be closer to the ground than I would like – so in the end, the Hulk and Loki may be the only survivors. Get that stuff to Coulson or Fury. That's what's important-"
"He needs to get off the carrier," Loki suddenly appeared at Natasha's side with a swirl of green.
"Away from that – that stone. I can hear it – the minds of the possessed resonate with this. Thor. This may be another one. Another Infinity Gem."
"Just what we need," Thor sighed. "I will return it to Coulson or Fury for safe-keeping. For now."
"For now," Loki agreed.

Thor gave Loki a weary look and backed away slowly.

"Take care, brother."
"I will," Loki nodded, "and you take care of yourself as well."

The two nodded and Loki disappeared and a frustrated roar resounded from below, echoing down the long chamber. Meeting Natasha's eyes with the unspoken words – 'take care of him' – Thor turned away. Glaring at the tablet and Scepter and feeling even more powerless and useless than usual, the blonde still-human left the room.

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The sound of gunfire resounded about the Command Deck as three infiltrators opened fire. Huddled below their desks, carefully making their way to and out of a side door, the support staff found it difficult to see through the haze of smoke and dust. The remaining men and women on deck, having received combat training, covered for the escaping staff and efficiently worked on targeting and boxing in the attacking militia.

Scanning the various beams, the slowly drifting smoke and the alternating shadowed, then red-lit parts of the room, Fury noticed that the returning fire was thinning out – but then he stiffed as one of the far doors opened and then shut on a familiar set of shoulders. A glint of metal in a pack. Arrows. Hawkeye.

"Romanov," Fury said quietly, flipping to her channel.
"Here."
"Barton just left the Command Deck. He may be after Flarathir."
"Or the Scepter," Natasha replied softly.
"Or an exit route."
"Or all of the above. I'll keep an eye out," said the assassin. "The big guy is tearing through some of the best routes Clint would take. I'm sure we'll meet up."
"Get Loki to lead the Hulk up to the flight deck. We need that guy off the ship like yesterday."
"On it."
"I'm counting on you," Fury said grimly.

Directing his focus back on the task before him, Fury signalled to Hill and her three men. Within ten minutes, the two met in the middle of the room, surveying the damage. Dusty haze now settling, it looked like a war zone with twisted metal, broken glass, torn and tattered furniture, drifting blackened pieces of paper, the silent dead and groaning wounded. Glancing at Hill and noticing belatedly that one side of her face was covered in blood, Fury sighed.

*Even if the blood is hers... Hill won't go to the Infirmary – not yet. It may not be. If we're lucky.*

"Rogers and Stark will have the turbines on in no time-"

Suddenly the whole room tipped further as a second engine died. Without warning, a bunch of support staff raced into the room, tripping over debris and bodies in a desperate bid to get to their now abandoned controls and regain the ship's equilibrium.

"Stark!" bellowed Fury. "What the hell is going on with my ship?"
"Working on that," Stark's tense voice broke in.

-0-0-0-

Once Stark's suit snapped shut around him and the inventor had snapped his equally red and gold helmet shut, JARVIS began sending all of the data he was currently receiving from his broad area scans of the ship. With great satisfaction, the AI had already caught the signal of, tracked and circumvented an odd program skulking around one of the consoles on the command deck – an odd program which had been connected through a small drive, had successfully shut down the second turbine of the ship, accelerating its dive through the clouds, and was currently attempting to dump its data amongst the insanity of the Command Deck. Fury's angry call to Stark a few minutes later confirmed the AIs suspicions. While swiftly yet carefully disengaging the damaging protocols of the program and simultaneously reporting the situation to Stark, JARVIS interrupted the chunks of data which it had corrupted, reinstated on roll-back the default processing system and restarted the turbine.

"Good work, JARVIS," Stark said as he shot off the side of the Helicarrier through a broken window and flew round to the fourth turbine, great blades silent and still. "At least we'll hit the ocean with more control, decorum... and style. We're all about the style around here," A pause and Stark's eye twitched as his screen flickered over and highlighted a familiar figure. "Well, I say 'we'... You finally joining the party, Rogers?"
"I ran into some interference-"

"That's what she said," quipped Stark as he rolled began to read the freshest data from JARVIS's initial schematic scan of the blades. One was going to have to come off. Stark sighed. "Thought of changing your name? Like... uh... Captain Tardy? 'Cause you're always runn- Shit. I'm gonna have to tear...

Stark trailed off as he began to calculate exactly what he could remove without entirely destroying the function of the turbine. *Shit,* he thought. *It's a huge mess. The rounded edges of the circular turbine which previously had glinted with powerful glory beneath the sun now shone dully, dented and torn and nicked. Yep. One blade's gotta go and a bit of the outer-

"What's happened?"
"Well, we have good news and bad news," Stark said to no one in particular.
"The bad news?" Fury's sharp voice asked over the channel helpfully opened by JARVIS.
"Even if I manage to get the debris off and away and even if I manage to somehow kick start it,"
Stark darted down and then up between the two blades to wrest away several strips of torn metal, "control of the turbine is impossible unless we reset the programming on the main board."

"OK." Fury prompted, "And the good news?"

"The hub is more or less in tact and only one blade has gotta go. The rest should be fine," Stark tilted his head thoughtfully. "Ish."

"Rogers, can you get to the," Stark paused, recalibrated his vocabulary, and simplified, "control panel?"

"Sure thing," Rogers's voice sounded confident. "Uh, where is it?"

"You'll have to go down one level. I can see some promising paneling on the schematics JARVIS just downloaded. It's located by a catwalk that kinda goes to nowhere now," Iron Man flew down closer to the open hole in the ship's side where a load of processors had once kept control of the turbines and monitored the diagnostics of the great engines powering the ship. "But yeah, if you turn it on at the same time as I kick-start it, so to speak, well, the carrier will be able to fly, well, limp home."

"The point is," Fury cut in dryly, "to get home."

"Yeah, well, the turbine is the least of our problems," Stark had to point out. Perversely. "JARVIS just let me know that evil Dumbledore is acting oddly. Might wanna keep an eye out on that. If you haven't blown out ALL the monitors over there. JARVIS, get those channels up for them. Rogers, you get down to the level yet?"

"I found a handy stairwell. So, yes, I've been here for a while now... you know, waiting."


-0-0-0-

With an enraged roar that could overwhelm the most courageous of warriors, the Hulk charged forward down another long storage room – a large green blur of muscle and rage. A giant fist rose and fell flattening several large containers which had been filled with spare mechanical parts, scattering pieces of metal and wood and plastic everywhere. No word of reason nor force of might appeared capable of stopping the giant man's rampage. Man is stretching it a little, Loki thought. He is almost nothing like the scientist I had met earlier... His hair, perhaps, and his now rather torn pants...

"He needs to be stopped," Loki murmured to the red-headed woman who crouched at his side. "I don't wanna hurt him," Natasha whispered.

Loki raised an eyebrow. "That is the least of our concerns," he grunted. "I would wager the creature-

"The Hulk," Natasha corrected Loki sharply. "He's the Hulk – and Bruce is somewhere in there. I know it."

Shifting a little, the better to peer around the pile of containers they were currently hiding behind, Loki paused.

"You care for him despite what he is, what he has done... and what he is about to do?" Loki turned back to give the red-headed assassin an assessing look. "You care for him."

"Yes. I promised." Natasha looked away. "I promised to take care of him."

"A personal promise you could not hope to keep."

"And yet... I did."

"Hm."

"To... have to be labeled a monster for something one has no control over..." Natasha sighed. "I understand that to a certain extent. Maybe you can't-

"I can," Loki said tersely before adding: "But I would rather discuss the theoretics once the danger of losing my limbs is past."

"We need to get him to the top deck and away from the internal engines and energy generators."
"Agreed."
"So we're the bait," Natasha sighed.
"In a manner of speaking," Loki pressed her back, halting her movement forward. "There are other ways. Give me a few moments and I will attempt to draw upon some magick..."

Glancing at Loki uncertainly, the human woman eased back and watched as the dark-haired, too pale god hunkered down, hands lax upon his knees, head tipped back and eyes shut. Judging by the Loki's harsh breathing, gathering magick was no easy business but after a few minutes (during which the Hulk seemed to be obsessed with battering his way past a set of double-reinforced steel doors), Loki's right hand lifted and twisted producing a guttering flame of green within his palm. A finger trailed in the air in an odd kind of circular yet angular kind of way. It looked like a kind of sign and upon completion, Natasha realized that another Loki and Natasha now stood in the middle of the storage area.

"Where to?" gasped Loki, looking more like he was about to faint and less like he was up for a high speed tailing exercise.
Natasha glanced around and winced momentarily before pointing at a wall. "We need to get him through there and up a ramp and out to the central flight deck."
"He will make the door himself, I imagine." A fleeting look of amusement crossed Loki's face. "Exactly."

Without further ado, Loki motioned with his left hand and, as the two illusions moved to the far wall, he rose to his feet behind the container and peered around his edge of the metal box to watch the Hulk's reaction. The Hulk, turning and catching sight of the two illusions, roared and charged after them, pausing only momentarily as the illusions appeared to pass through the wall. As Natasha had suspected, the Hulk easily battered his way through the steel plating and a few seconds later another roar announced the Hulk's renewed determination to catch the two insects who had taunted him.

"Now to lead him upwards to the deck you spoke of," Loki smiled.
"The Hulk isn't stupid," Natasha frowned. "He should know it's an illusion! Then what?"
"Maybe he doesn't mind chasing an illusion." Loki gave Natasha an unreadable look. "Maybe there's something more within the monster than you think."

With that, the two followed the trail of destruction which the Hulk had left in his wake. Loki, finding it more difficult to draw breath than he liked, cursed.

I am still not as well as I ought to be, he thought grimly, yet I have no choice. If Thor knew how weak I truly am, he would not have left me. Somehow, that thought brought more strength to the exiled prince's tired limbs. Loki turned and realized that Natasha had dropped behind. Skidding around the corner and staggering to a stop, Loki made his way back and nearly bumped into assassin.

"I'm here," she said tersely. "Keep going! He can't let him get too far ahead!"
"Did you not say that the Director would have his contingency plan ready by the time the Hulk reached the surface?" Loki asked. "If that is the case, we would be better used elsewhere."

Thor. That stone bodes ill.

"Loki." Natasha jerked on the tall man's elbow and dragging him to the side of a window.
Cautiously peering around the corner through the window, she stared down at rows of catwalks below where a familiar figure was making his way across to the far end of the large engineering room. The set of the shoulders and the sheath of arrows was unmistakeable. "My hunch paid off after all," she whispered.
"What is it?" Loki asked testily.
"Barton," Natasha gritted her teeth. "He's right there! I think he's headed back to one of the side
Catching a glimpse of her face, Loki pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. He knew that look – the anxious gaze of a heart that cares. A friend who would die for a friend, or a brother for a brother.

"You follow him." Loki glared at the floor. "If it is what you must do, then you must do it."

"Loki-"

"I will continue after the Hulk and ensure he reaches the flight deck as you promised your Captain."

"Thank you, Loki," Natasha gave Loki a wide and genuine, if brief, smile. "I owe you one."

Watching her dart around a corner to a small side staircase, Loki frowned.

"...can we change the errors of what never was...
...can we mold the future of what we wish to be..."

It was a scene from one of his worst nightmares – a room of death. Instead of seeing the dead bodies of Sif, Volstagg, Fandral, and Hogun, however, these were faces of newer, yet still dear friends. Three guards, tossed like rag dolls over the guard rails, hung limply. Thor, just looking at large holes in their chest, knew without looking that the men were dead. His gaze was fixed on another who sat, back to the wall, with a large gash across his torso. It was Coulson. Thor raced to the man's side, dropped the Scepter and tablet, and tossed aside a large unfamiliar, yet familiar looking, gun which lay across the man's lap.

"By the Norns," Thor whispered, his voice laced with anger and sorrow, blue eyes glittering with unshed tears. "You will live-"

- and if you do not, I will avenge your death, honorable thought it may be.

Gently, his fingers searched for signs of life. There was a weak flutter of pulse in response. Thank the Norns, Thor thought. Perhaps the damage is not as bad as I feared. I will need to administer first aid immediately – but first – call for a medical team, if there is one to be had. Jumping up, Thor made his way as quickly as he could, despite the rocking of the ship, to reach the nearest comm station. Thor punched in the numbers for the direct line to the medical ward.

"Yes?" A rather harried voice answered the phone.

"We need a medical unit in the containment section immediately! It is Coulson. I'll apply first aid."

"What kind of wound?" The voice immediately got sharper at the mention of Coulson's name.

"A large cut to the chest."

"Apply pressure. We will be there."

Thor knew already what to do. I was born in the heat of war, and I have, if not participated in war, done battle. Such wounds are familiar to me... Fingers fumbling with anxiety, Thor pulled a drawer out from the wall by the main door where all first aid kits were stored for emergency measures. Grabbing the white box within, Thor raced back to Coulson, checked his pulse and carefully pulled the man's outer suit jacket away. With what power I have within me, I will do what I can. Not daring to pull too roughly at the thin shirt below for fear of disturbing the cut skin and releasing more blood, Thor gently peeled back what pieces of fabric he could before he double-checked the agent's lungs and applied the thick bandages. Then the blonde warrior sealed and bound what he could, hoping that the blood slow trickle would be adequately staunched. The cut, Thor noted idly, is slightly cauterized. No doubt by the burn of magick. This actually gives him a chance to survive since the loss of blood was probably not as bad as it could have been...

Still, Thor was unnerved by the sight before him. The usually dapper cool-headed agent looked as
white as a corpse and as frail as a leaf. His breath was rapid and light and Thor could see a hint of blood within the edges of his otherwise pale lips, hinting at internal bleeding. Cursing quietly, Thor busied with finishing his first aid procedures, positioning the agent so the unconscious man could breathe easier and double checking the knots across the agent's chest.

Thor sat back, looked at his handiwork, and sighed. Perhaps today I saved a life, Thor mused. If I did… my time here was not in vain. Still, his thoughts wandered for a moment to Loki, I feel… I feel so useless. Looking down at the silent man, Thor believed he could hear a voice in his heart that sounded a little bit like Coulson, a little bit like his therapist. Small deeds have their own great consequences.

Perhaps it was his mother.

Thor frowned, shook his head, and focused on the issue at hand. The medical team had not yet arrived. Have they not been dispatched? Why have they not arrived? Rising to his feet, Thor turned toward the hallway opening – and froze.

Flarathir stood there, proud and tall. Despite the fact that robes on his chest appeared to have been burned, his beard was singed and his skin looked a little more wrinkled than usual, Flarathir held an aura of confidence and power. His dark eyes glittered as he survived the exiled Prince.

"So," his voice dripped with scorn, "our exiled Prince mucks about with the swine as usual. You always did have a taste for… lower company."
"You refer to the Midgardians?" Thor asked, jaw tense as his hands curled into fists.
"Your warriors, your… brother." Flarathir's grin sharpened. "These humans – what is the difference?"
"I hear spite," Thor said softly, "but perhaps there is jealousy as well."
"Is it possible the Prince has gained the powers of insight?" laughed Flarathir. "I think not. I would not be jealous of their scrabbling efforts for power, for control…"
"The Midgardians do not wish for control of the universe or the galaxy -"
"Perhaps not," Flarathir smiled then – and a shadow of something like regret and pain and fear crossed his face. "A man cannot change Fate," Flarathir swept his hand to the side. A gust of wind rushed at Thor, throwing him back and pinning him against the wall. "I know you look optimistically to the future, my young prince – but that is the ignorance of youth, just as they…" Here, Flarathir glanced at Coulson's prone figure. "Just as they, in the ignorance of their humanity, attempt to save themselves. It will all be for naught. Have you not seen it? Have you not heard it?"
"Seen what? Heard what?" gasped Thor, trying to struggle out of his invisible bonds and failing. "Loki has heard it. He has seen it. Even now, he stands on the edge of that precipice… I heard, I saw but I refused to understand," Flarathir's voice dropped to a whisper. Then he gave a short bark of laughter that sounded just a little bit too thin and sharp for Thor's comfort. "Then, one day, I understood – and with understanding is acceptance."
"The path before you will not aid you -"
"Aid me? Aid me?" Flarathir's crazed laughter rang around the room. "No one can aid me, my dear young prince. But," here his voice dropped lower and his hand twisted into another sigil, allowing Thor to collapse to the floor before he sent sharp, invisible knives of wind to disable the young warrior. "I know of One who can free me of all such burdens."

Before Thor could collect himself, Flarathir once again threw the prince across the room, strode over to Coulson, ignored Thor's anguished cry, bent over the man, shrugged, and picked up the Scepter. Flarathir turned it over in his hand and sighed.
"Put that down."

A familiar voice rang through the room.

"Loki!" Thor gasped, attempting to raise himself to his feet. "What are you doing here? You were supposed to go after Doctor Banner! You should not be here!"
"And what of you?" asked Loki, as he turned the corner of the hallway and stepped up onto the circular catwalk. In his hands was the large gun which Thor had tossed aside earlier. "You do not look too good yourself."
"Loki," Flarathir's eyes glinted.
"Put the Scepter down."
"I am afraid I still have use for it," Flarathir sighed gently. "Besides, I think you would be more interested in saving… your brother."

The gun's barrel did not waver. Behind Loki, the sounds of banging could be heard.

"The medics!" Thor staggered to his feet and began to make his way to Loki's side. "I will say it only one last time," Loki's voice tersely hammered out the syllables as his grip on the gun tightened.
"You are in no position to bargain," Flarathir said calmly. "The gun you hold in your hand has an odd power of its own, but it cannot destroy us. I discovered that the hard way," Flarathir gestured at his torn robes.
"Not if I infuse my own power with that of the Tesseract," Loki's returning smile was wide and matched with an aggressive insanity. "I have walked those spaces and I have seen the Void. The Midgardians know not of what they have wielded and their utilization of the Tesseract is like that of a child swinging a great sword – but there is enough - enough for me."

Flarathir paused, his grey brows knitted together as his eyes narrowed. To Thor, Loki and Flarathir seemed like statues, pictures of resistance and obstinacy. Neither of them allowed their gaze to falter in the renewed battle for dominance. Thor glancing down noticed the slight twitch of Flarathir's fingertips barely seen past the edge of his robe's long sleeves.

"Loki!" Thor lunged forward, yanked his brother back and down.

Loki fell back just in time to miss a destructive burst of wind which tore into the wall beyond the place in which they had been standing moments before. Gazing down at Loki's wide green eyes, Thor sighed with relief as his brother struggled to his feet. For some reason, Thor couldn't hear anything. There was only silence and fluctuating colors both dark and bright. The world was slanting sideways and Thor caught a glimpse of Loki's mouth moving. Loki's face filled his narrowing vision and Thor struggled to smile. Judging by the wild fire in Loki's eyes, the throbbing vein on his brother's temple, and the red flush which spread over Loki's face, his younger brother was not happy.

Of course Loki would be angry if I saved him, Thor thought as he collapsed onto the catwalk. I suppose he wouldn't be Loki otherwise…

[in the end, however, they say…]
[good may triumph…]
[in the end, they say…]
[despite all odds, the balance between light and dark is maintained…]
[and the cycles continue…]

What is Valhalla? The stories, he had heard as a child, spoke of golden halls and endless feasts and glorious maids and eternal life of joy.
What is Valhalla? Odin All-Father had spoken of his brothers long gone and his father lost to war. 'Valhalla,' he had said, 'is the home of our fathers, where they sit and wait for us to join them.'

What is Valhalla? Frigga of Vanahem had other stories from her people. 'Valhalla,' she explained to her young son, 'is different for every people, yet in a way, I believe, it is the same. Whatever you call it, if you heart be true, you will find your way there.'

What is Valhalla? Loki had not believed in Valhalla when they had first met. The bitter young man of the fighting pits had once said that after death there was darkness and nothingness. Such finality in despair…

He understood now. Loki had come from darkness and saw only before him more darkness. Like Flarithir. Yet he refused to believe that. Not quite like Flarithir. Loki still fought. Somewhere in Loki, a hope had been birthed. What had Loki seen beyond the darkness? Perhaps he had seen his own version of Valhalla…

*Valhalla is different for every people, yet in a way, I believe, it is the same. Whatever you call it, if you heart be true, you will find your way there.*

This was not Valhalla. This was a soft darkness which slowly gave way to grey and then a blinding light as something familiar drew him up to the surface – the unconscious song of his youth: the fire of Asgard within his soul and heart and the cry of Mjolnir.

[…in the end, they say…]
[…despite all odds, the balance between light and dark is maintained…]
[…and the cycles continue…]

Chapter End Notes

Well, sigh, there you go. I think it's much better than what I had planned before. Plus, I managed to fold some of my planned timeline into one chapter... which is just sweetness. Does it feel rushed? It probably does. Lots of running around and people talking and not a lot of description. I'll have to edit this later, I think. (tears)

At any rate, you can see here that I'm trying to combat what I feel to be one of the weakness of the Thor MCU mythos - that is how Thor gets his powers back. It just seemed to simple and easy. A weekend away from home and you figure it out and get with the program and learn your lesson after an extended lifetime of douchery? COME ON NOW, C'MON!

So this is my answer to the dilemma of Thor's 'return'. I hope it makes more sense and feels a bit more authentic within this framework of a story.

Thanks for reading! (and reviewing~!)

KI
Thank you to everyone who reviewed last time and let me know they still support this story despite my epic failure to update! You guys are awesome! Also, thanks to new folks who are popping in and letting me know they enjoy this. This story has taken a lot of my time and energy, so it's great to know you new people are enjoying it!

If you'd like to support this story further, I entered an edited version of Book One into the Inkitt Fanfiction Contest. You can go to this link [http://www.inkitt.com/stories/24909] - or you can just go to Inkitt (DOT com) and search for "scarecrowlady" or "Distortions In Time: Book 1". Special thanks to those who go and vote there. I don't expect to win, but it'd be nice to get a bit further up in the ratings for the sake of getting noticed as a writer. You can also read my free original fiction "Night Runners" on that website as well.

Onward to the chapter~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Distortions In Time
Chapter 86
Turning the Tide II

[...the Cosmos is a game of catch...]
[...between Life and Death...]
[...in the end, they say...]
[...despite all odds, the balance between light and dark is maintained...]
[...and the cycles continue...]

Instinctively his fingers reached out, but the one who had been at his side so long did not come readily to his hand.

*Mjolnir, my other soul*, he cried out as the wave of light washed over him. *Come.*

[...despite all odds, the balance between light and dark is maintained...]
[...and the cycles continue...]

A slight man, who had been bent over an awkwardly twisted piece of metal sheeting, sighed loudly, straightened up and looked around the broad vista of devastation as he wiped his damp tanned brow. Somehow the heat of the unrelenting sun did not cool or dry the trickles of sweat which ran down his face and off his scruffy chin. *It's that kind of day*, he sighed. *I must be going out of my mind because I just... Did I just hear an explosion or crash of some kind?* He thought. *Or have I reached the hallucination stage of fatigue...?*

"Did you hear that, Pete?" he turned to his partner who was standing and staring up at the sky, eyes wide. "Pete?"

Pete turned and pointed at a black speck in the sky.
"It flew!"
"What flew?" groused the first man. "We're running behind schedule. The boss wants this base up and running as soon as possible and the last thing we need is some leaked information or lost-"
"It flew!" Pete repeated. "The hammer thing flew!"
"What?"
"I saw it. We need to call it in state," Pete's fingers fumbled at his belt as he withdrew the walkie-talkie.

Pete had been a janitor at the base, pre-explosion, and, as a very responsible, down-to-earth man, wasn't given to making up stories just for the hell of it. Did Thor's hammer just fly out of here? Jim wondered. As Pete reported in, Jim began to make his way over to the center area of the cave in, carefully finding his footing to the nearest metal walkway which the reconstruction team had set up for easy traversing of the site. Others seemed to have seen something – for already a band of ten or so workers, grimy and sweaty men and women were rushing down various walkways to the where Mjolnir had last been seen in the facility pre-collapse.

"It just flew outta there!"
"Did you see-"
"So fast!"
"Why did it-"
"Does that mean-"
"Did someone radio this in?"
"Pete's on the radio."

Jim looking down at the newest hole in the old ceiling of the base glanced upward. What does this mean?

But the empty blue sky held no answers.

[...and Life and Death continue on...]
[...unhindered...]

Thor's blue eyes focused vaguely on the pale face above him and then blonde-haired man, noticing Loki's worried and scared and angry expression, grinned. He is going to be beside himself – but I really do feel fine. More than fine... Which is - oh!

"Thor?" Loki asked, his green eyes widening as Thor sat up. The dark-haired prince stared at his older brother, stunned. "You-"
"I feel great," Thor rose to his feet – and as he did so, light gathered around about him, swirling round about as his abilities returned in one overriding wave, reconstituting the armor which had been gifted to him at his Koma a Aldur upon drinking from the Velspara-Speki.

The old speech, the All-Speech, returned in its fullness, bringing back memories which had begun to dull and fade with time. Memories of ancient celebrations and deep knowledge and the visions which he had faced at the Well. As the chain mail encased his arms and as his favored breast plate and leathers settled around him with a familiar weight, Thor clenched his left hand in amazement. Far away, he could feel her.

She is coming. Mjolnir. Thor's smile grew and the young man glanced over at the pale face of Loki whose thin hands were sparking green fire. Did the idiot try to heal me? I told him not to push himself!

"Loki-" He said, voice lowering.
"I am fine," Loki insisted. "Don't let down your guard. He remained, expecting to gloat, no doubt -
but this has been a surprise make no mistake."

The now reinstated Asgardian prince turned to face the enemy who looked on, half intrigued and half shocked. Flarathir's dark eyes glittered as he glanced between the two Princes who now stared down with renewed determination. However, Thor's hammer had as yet to present itself and Loki looked even whiter than usual. Flarathir, contemplating the younger prince, smiled.

"So Thor returns," Flarathir laughed, "and the world will right itself once more." He laughed again. "Or perhaps not."

"Let this madness go," Thor said softly, stepping forward, eyes on the Staff in Flarathir's hands. "It is an illusion of despair that grips you – and hope is there for the taking."

"Hope?" Flarathir sneered and gestured with his staff at Loki who gazed back unmoving. "Hope is the illusion. Your whole life is a lie, Odinson, and you are surrounded with lies whispered by liars. Did not Laufey-King of Jotunheim say that Odin's house is full of traitors?"

"If you think to bait me with such words," Thor smiled, "you are too late."

"You do not wish to know the truth?" asked Flarathir.

"The truth?" mused Thor. "What is truth to one blinded by despair?"

"Despair has turned me to other sights, other visions," Flarathir smiled then. "Such truths that no one desires to face. Such truths... Take your brother for example."

"My brother? Loki?" Thor asked, blue eyes glinting. "What slander do you wish to spread now?"

"Nothing but truth, my prince," Flarathir returned and his eyes seemed distant as he focused on the faint glow of the gem within the Staff.

It whispered – and Loki could hear the faint call echoes of madness, of an eternally corrupt Titan entwined with the taunting of the Gem.

...HERE...

...THE DARKNESS AND THE LIGHT...

...AND THE FIRE AND THE ICE...

...DESTROY IT ALL...

"I can hear it. It has shown me the truth," Flarathir continued on, his voice dropping to a harsh whisper. "The one who is your brother is also your greatest enemy. One of the beasts you swore to slay on many occasions in Odin's feast hall."

"Ah," Thor said quietly. "I was young then."

"He is Jotunn!" hissed Flarathir and he whipped round to Loki and his right fingers twisted in a sigil, forming a small ball of light. "You cannot deny your heritage, creature of ice!"

With that, the light sparked forward, hitting Loki hard enough to fall back a few steps and then collapse forward to his knees, coughing as the working coursed through his body and broke through his weak attempt at shape-shifting. Thor with a sharp cry, bound forward.

"Loki!" His great warm hand rested momentarily on Loki's bonier shoulder. "Are you-"

"I am fine," whispered Loki, unwillingly allowing his red eyes to meet Thor's blue. "It is only a working for disspellment."

"You turned again," Thor smiled and then his face hardened and his eyes glinted like sharp jewels. "What did was the man thinking?"

"He hopes to turn you against me... turn us against each other," Loki said softly. "As our ancestors did in times of old."

"We know differently," Thor turned and gazed at Flarathir with an unimpressed look. "I knew he was Jotunn-"

"You could not – how could-" spluttered Flarathir. "It was a secret only known to a few!"

"Families don't keep secrets," Thor said. "Sometimes they do, but the intentions are for protection
and in the end, the truth will out. Loki may be Jotunn-"
"He is the son of Laufey-King!" Flarathir voice cracked as mad fury wracked the aged Asgardian. "He is the very image of what you hated-"
"He is Loki," Thor replied calmly. "He is my brother – and together, we will bring you to Asgard for reckoning whether you will it or no."
"Such confidence," snarled Flarathir, all calm now stripped away. "When we next meet, the tables of Fate will have turned and I will bring sanity to this mad world."

With that, the mage spun and disappeared with the wave of his hand and a wash of blue fire.

"It is you who is mad," Thor told the air.
"Thor," Loki said, his dark lips curving up in a small smile. "You-"
"Why are you so surprised?" Thor rolled his eyes. "We talked about this already. You may be Jotunn, but you are also my friend. Even more important, you are my brother, you are family. Loki, you had a choice, didn't you?"
"A choice?"
"In that ship you rode, the, uh..."
"The Sarcofagi?" Loki asked. "I had a choice, I suppose."
"You could have chosen Asgard and mother. In the end, you thought of Earth."
"I thought of you," corrected Loki and then froze and a dark purple flush rose in his cheeks. "I see your point. However, we have much to do. Getting the medics in here to look at your friend is the first step."
"Oh, by the Norns," breathed Thor and he darted to the door, let the medical unit in, and only after Coulson was strapped to a wheeled stretcher, would he allow Loki to draw him away.

[...there are no turning tides...]
[...only the illusion of change...]
[...and yet...]
[...yet...]

When Thor strode into the main conference room by Director Fury's now damaged control room, everyone fell silent. As the tall blonde handed the tablet he retrieved over to a suddenly quiet Stark, Thor looked around, obviously unaware of the confusion (and slight awe) which had fallen over the room upon his entrance. Loki, leaning back against a nearby railing, folded his arms and sighed.

As usual, Thor impresses wherever he goes, Loki thought with mild disgust and a slight tinge of envy. Yet, underneath his frown, the exiled prince felt a bit of relief and happiness. Thor deserved it, he had to admit. Thor has grown in ways I never expected. I suppose in the end it was a lesson he had to learn on his own and he needed to be away from everyone in Asgard to truly understand what it means to mature, to be a man, to be a king...

"Uh, does Thor look different to anyone else?" Stark finally had to speak up. "I mean – did he stop by and get suited up or something?"
"The armor is new to me," Steve glanced evaluatively at his friend. "What happened, Thor?"
"My abilities returned!" Thor smiled. "It is truly a day for rejoicing! If we were in Asgard and in more peaceful times, I would have us all go to a mead house and celebrate all night."
"He's even talking differently," Stark said. "I suppose it goes with the drapes."
"Drapes?" asked Hill with a snort.
"Yeah, totally Shakespeare in the park," Stark shook his head, flicking his tablet on and starting it up.
"Mjolnir has not yet returned, but she will be here soon," Thor smiled.
"We heard about that," Fury said briefly. "Congratulations."
"Mjolnir?" asked Steve. "Like... the hammer in mythology? It really exists?"
"Top secret," Fury said briefly.
"Yes," Loki said. "It is a weapon that was forged in the heart of a star with uru, a powerful metal. Mjolnir has a long history and was handed down from father to son in Asgard – and it only answers to the righteous of heart."

"Namely Thor," Steve said.
"I suppose," Loki frowned. "Righteous might be too strong a word."
"I am righteous!" Thor protested with a wide grin. "I am filled with righteous fervor!"
"Fervor, yes." Loki deadpanned.
"Where is Natasha?" asked Steve, swiveling around. "She'd love to see this."
"She's with Barton," Fury said. "Thanks to Thor and Loki, we were able to save Coulson from near death – and the ship is saved thanks to our combined efforts. More good news on Barton as well. He has been returned to, well, sanity thanks to Natasha managing to see him and rescue him in time."
"I heard she hit him on the head and dragged him back to her cave," Stark smirked.
"Well, we get things done," Hill said and added with an unimpressed stare, "unlike others."
"I got the ship fixed!" protested Stark. "Sort of. And I've pinpointed the location of the Tesseract."
"It is on a tall building in a large city by the sea," Loki said. "The building has a name like y-"
"Holy shit! It's Stark Tower! The bastard hooked the Tesseract up to Stark Tower!" Stark glared at everyone (but Loki thought he also looked a little pleased). "I take offense at that."
"We should go and shut it down," Steve rose to his feet. "I'm sure Natasha will want to know-"
"I know," Natasha's voice cut through the sudden rising chatter at Stark's announcement. "Clint is going to go with us."
"Should he-" Hill hesitated and glanced at Fury.
"He will be going," Natasha shook her head. "He needs to go."
"Well, this is that day," Fury looked around the table. "We had had a dream – an idea, an initiative-"
"Here he goes," muttered Stark.
"The Avengers," Steve said. "Is that what this is?"
"A bunch of messed up people trying to save the world?" Natasha asked skeptically. "We can barely stand each other. And Banner's missing."
"He'll turn up," Fury said with a sigh. "I have a feeling. The Other Guy is indestructible."
"Where did he go?" asked Stark.
"Jumped off the Helicarrier after we baited him with a quinjet," Hill said. "Pilot had to evacuate and the quinjet is totaled."
"Not the Hulk," Stark laughed. "I bet he'll be waiting for us in New York."
"So the Avengers will form?" Fury caught each of their gazes. "Captain America, Iron Man, Black Widow, Hawkeye and Thor."
"And Loki," Thor said firmly. "Loki goes wherever I go."

Loki rolled his eyes but deep down he felt relieved. Moving closer to the table, Loki glanced at the red-haired woman and gave her a nod of acknowledgment which Natasha returned with a small smile of thanks.

"I have only worked with a few of you," Loki said quietly, "and for only a short time, but I believe much may happen if we are not afraid to grab hold of our collective destiny."
"That will only happen if we can agree to work together," Thor nodded. "Working together may be difficult, but I agree with the Director. As a team, as the Avengers, we can make a difference – we can save this world!"
"If you all rise to what you can be," Loki added soberly, "you will save more than this world."
"What does that mean?" asked Stark.

Fury said nothing but his dark brown eyes rested on Loki thoughtfully for a few seconds before moving onward. Setting aside his own tablet, the dark-skinned man smiled grimly.

"So the Avengers have been formed – perhaps not the original Avengers I had envisioned, but this is even better than I had hoped." He paused before continuing. "I will gather as much intel as I can for
you guys in an hour. Hopefully, we'll have a general idea of what is going on before we send you
down. Within an hour, you will be on a quinjet and heading down. The helicarrier will catch up half
an hour later and provide ground and air support if needed – but from a distance since we are still
under prepares and cannot hope to hold our own in actual battle."
"Sounds like a plan," Steve nodded. "We'll go in, stop the Tesseract, shut down the wormhole if it
opens before we get there."
"Save the day, no biggie." Stark shrugged. "What you say to getting it done before dinner?"
"I think a celebratory dinner afterwards should happen," Thor agreed. "With much mead!"
"Let's first get the Tesseract back, get the staff back, and get on our way home," Loki muttered.
"Agreed," Natasha sighed and rolled her eyes. "Boys."

[...so unlikely heroes bond...]
[...the battle begins...]
[...the great city of steel and glass...]
[...glitters brightly beneath the sun...]
[...and above...]
[...above...]

When the quinjet zoomed down through the white clouds above New York, the newly-formed
Avengers' fell into grim silence at the sight which lay before them. As Stark and Loki had predicted,
a glint of metal atop the Stark Tower clearly declared where the Tesseract had been placed. As the
ship swooped closer, a giant beam shot upward into the sky and the clouds began to swirl wider and
wider as a giant black eye formed in the sky.

"The door has opened," Clint said, his fists clenching. "We couldn't stop it after all."
"Perhaps we never could," Loki's voice sounded a little faint.
"Loki-"
"I am fine, Thor," Loki reassured his older brother. "The Voices..." Thor watched his brother with
concern as Loki finally admitted: "They are overwhelming at times. It is easy to get lost-"
"You won't get lost with me here," Thor said firmly. "Not if I have any say about it."
"If it happened, you wouldn't be able to stop it-"
"You aren't going to go anywhere I can't find you," Thor repeated. "Not this time."
Loki's quirk of a smile was brief but it relieved Thor a little. Too easily he falls into despair, he
thought, but this Loki is learning a little. He has found some kind of hope within him – it is still small,
but it is there...

"I will hold you to that promise," Loki finally said.

As the plane jostled against the buffeting winds which swept around the proud buildings and finally
came to land in a nearby park which was now emptying of fleeing, panicking, screaming
Midgardians, Loki stood a little closer to his older brother. As the ramp lowered to green grass and
the sure promise of an oncoming army, Thor smiled.

You said it, brother – we are taking hold of our destinies. They may not have been the Fates we
expected, he mused, but they are gifts nevertheless. These little things, these unlooked for experiences
will teach us of a brighter path than we had envisioned. As the Midgardians say, let's take what we
can get.

Blue eyes rose and glinted at the familiar whirring sound and a familiar weight met his hand and the
soft leathers of Mjolnir filled his palm as his fist closed around his other soul.

We are not passive nor immutable, Thor's grin widened as he raised his hammer and summoned
lightning. *While there is life, while there is change, there is hope.*

[...yes...]
[...change comes...]

Chapter End Notes

ALMOST DONE THE EARTH PORTION OF THIS STORY AND THEN BACK TO ASGARD AND CLIMAX OMG SO EXCITED. SIGH.

Ok~! Let me know what you think and if you love this story, be sure to let the folks at Inkitt know~! Thanks~!

Koma a Aldur – Coming of Age
Velspara-Speki – the Well (of Deep Knowledge, Wisdom)
Guys, thank NANOWRIMO for this chapter. It's thanks to that wonderful writing challenge that I got Chapter 87 and 88 (YES! NEXT CHAPTER IS DONE!) finished. 8K for both chapters together. I hope you guys enjoy it! We only have one chapter left and then... ONWARD TO ASGARD!

Thanks so much to the people who are reviewing. If you guys are interested in voting for Distortions in Time another fanfic contest is going on at inkitt.com. Genfic like DIT don't get a lot of readers because it is a mature, slightly depressing story that is super long and heavy and has little to no romance. (Whoever is reading this and still following this story gets full kudos from me, you guys are champs!) Anyways, Book 1 is edited (sorta) with a couple bits added and you can read it (and vote and review it) on Inkitt~ Find the fic and click on the heart on the bottom~!

http://www.inkitt.com/scarcecrowslady

Thanks to Skywinder, notoverjoyed, marh13, MissyZ, CorsetedPirate, Limne, thaliaarche, sukuiddo, legion11! Thanks everyone! I appreciate your encouraging words!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 87
Turning the Tide III

As his green-eyed gaze wandered over the rapidly emptying park, Loki's fists clenched. Overhead, he could already see a dark cloud of the spiky-looking spacecraft so typical of the Chitauri. A long time ago, the creatures had diverged from the vast numbers of the Kree, it was said, and had morphed into something else entirely different. Bionic beings with minds more similar to insects of prey, the Chitauri landed upon planets and devoured them whole. Like swarms of flies, the ships swarmed downwards, blasting away at anything before them. This was not a conquering race, but a devastating species who could only destroy and scavenge.

Against the blue sky of Midgard, the Chitauri's Leviathans looked even more alien and dangerous. The great, dark space worms slowly drew out from the edges of the wormhole. Like worms crawling out from the underside of a rock, Loki shuddered. Those will be holding quite a few of the infantry, and they will cause the most long-term damage on the planet. They need to be destroyed.

"Is your 'bud on?" Natasha reached up and tapped the small piece of technology which he had set inside his ear while on the plane. "We'll be splitting up, but communication is key."
"I'm on my way back to Stark Tower," Stark's voice suddenly resounded in Loki's ear. "I need a new suit. JARVIS says that there's no sign of the Chitauri hanging around the pad yet, so it should be safe."
"Be careful," Loki said quickly. "I sense Flarathir. He is around here... He could have chosen your Tower as his headquarters." The dark-haired prince turned around, his eyes narrowing as he scoured his surroundings for any sign of the old warrior-mage. "I can sense him."
"That's just great," Stark said. "JARVIS will let us all know if he spots Evil Merlin. While you go all
hoodoo-voodoo, I'll see about getting that wormhole turned off. Oh, there you guys are! Nice landing."

The group saw a black speck soar overhead with the occasional alarming dip of speed and altitude as it progressed across the city. Behind it trailed a thin line of grey smoke.

"Holy shit! Worms from space!"
"Yes," Loki sighed. "Be careful, everyone. Those are Leviathans. They have little protection, but they can carry around a hundred infantry."
"We need to take them down," Hawkeye said grimly. "I need to get up somewhere and provide you guys some cover."

Swinging his hammer from hand to hand, Thor grinned at the others. He looked if possible even more eager than usual – and with his gleaming armour, long blonde hair and light beard, Thor looked more than ready to take on any foe that should happen his way.

"This is a good day to fight," he laughed – and then sobered. "As a team, however, we not only need to focus on stopping the Chitauri, but we need to ensure that as many civilians can be evacuated."
"I'll talk to the police," Steve Rogers interjected. "We really have no time to lose. Let's go."
"Doctor Banner is coming your way," another smooth voice interjected over the team's channel.
"Thanks, JARVIS!"

With that, the group split up. Whirling Mjolnir a couple times, Thor crowed with delight in the return of his powers and, grabbing Hawkeye with him, shot upward in the sky. Watching a startled, now yelling Hawkeye and his brother disappear in the direction of the Leviathans, Loki shook his head.

Well, I would like to say 'as usual', but in this case, it is perhaps better if Thor focuses his wide-range attacks on the enemy.

-0-0-0-

Transporting himself to the top of building, Loki looked around for a sign of the traitorous Asgardian warrior-mage. Allowing his magick to spread outward from within, Loki tipped back his head and shut his eyes. Cold spread throughout his body. Not cold, he admitted to himself. It feels easier this way. More natural. As his fingers twisted into the sigils for Intentions and Directions, Loki whispered a short spell. A very specific working that should lead me straight to him. Loki recalled a dark sanctuary rising before the dark spell of a black hole and the war council of Thanos, the Mad Titan. The sooner the better.

-0-0-0-

Finally reaching the relative safety of a very tall skyscraper, Hawkeye breathed a sigh of relief. After swerving and soaring through the air, it felt good to feel the solid foundation of concrete under his feet again. Looking about, Hawkeye smiled. Since it was quite a tall office building, from the edge, he would be able to shoot at will. It could be a while, he hoped, before the Chitauri noticed where I am located.

"That was some wild ride, Thor," Clint turned to thank his friend, "thanks-"

Thor was already gone. The blonde-haired Asgardian was already making a twisting course toward a Leviathan. However, before he rose upward, Thor dipped downwards toward the congested street now mainly full of emptied cars. Glancing downward as he followed Thor's trajectory, Hawkeye noticed that a familiar, gigantic green muscled monster was plowing over the vehicles in front of it, flaring green eyes locked on the Leviathan and descending Chitauri overhead. The Hulk has arrived.
Grabbing the transformed Doctor Banner, Thor darted back upward to the oncoming assailants and the two of them began to tear away at the Leviathan, crushing any unlucky Chitauri who attempted to attack them.

Hawkeye, drawing his first arrow, smiled.

-0-0-0-

Natasha and Steve Rogers discovered that the streets of New York, thanks to the suddenness of the attack, had become a chaotic mass of screaming, running civilians. Overhead, blasts ricocheted, smashing into glass and concrete and wood, raining debris down upon the unprotected heads of tourists, office workers, shoppers – anyone and everyone who had been going about their day as usual in the Big Apple.

Paramedics and police were attempting to make their way down the less populated streets, but getting past the now emptied cars was well-nigh impossible in their emergency vehicles. In the face of the oncoming attacks which blew apart anything in its attacks, the police cowered behind what cover they could, obviously uncertain and inexperienced enough to handle such weaponry. Barricades were being hastily set up and, receiving a running commentary from Hawkeye on the placement of their attackers, the blue, red and white suited Captain America immediately made his way over to the largest group of law enforcement officers. He began to hand out orders to a stunned policeman.

"I need men in these buildings. There are people inside that can run into the line of fire. You take them through the basement or through the subway. You keep them off the streets. I need a perimeter as far back as 39th!"

"Why should we listen to-"

The most important looking cop broke off as a massive explosion resounded overhead. A building began to collapse in on itself, shooting glass and concrete out into the street before them. From another incoming Leviathan, a newly arrived troop of Chitauri began to jump over to the walls, scaling the buildings to smash through the windows.

"Fall back to 39th!" hollered the policeman immediately, recognizing (finally) the seriousness of the situation before him.

"Why isn't SWAT and the military here already?" Steve frowned.

"Politics... but they are apparently on the way," Natasha yelled over the reverberations of a particularly large blast which seemed to come from the far end of the street ahead of them. Most of the police officers were following their chief back while a few huddled behind the barriers which they had erected between the cars. The two superheroes watched as one of the space worms slammed into the side of a building, tearing away its sides and revealing the rows of cubicles and offices within. "We need to shut the wormhole," Natasha glanced around – and then overhead at the small alien spacecraft zooming about, she grinned as an idea occurred to her. "Throw me up!"

"Are you sure?" Steve Rogers swung his shield around and held it up before him.

"Yeah. Throw me when I say go, and I'll be able to rebound off your shield in time," the red-haired assassin reassured him.

Eyes raised, Natasha tensed, sprang while shouting 'Go!', and leaped several feet in the area quick enough to grab onto the lower undercarriage of the Chitauri spacecraft. Flipping up and around, she quickly tossed off the first two very surprised Chitauri, broke the neck of the third gunner and stabbed the pilot, dumping his body into the street. Swerving around, Natasha shot upward. Behind her, Steve battled newly landed troops as a group of cafe customers poured out of a now very trashed cafe toward the relative safety of the police barricade. Natasha nodded and turned her gaze upward.

*Now for the Tesseract.*
"I took the arc reactor off line," JARVIS told Tony Stark as he wound his way around the taller skyscrapers of New York. The suit, now torn up thanks to the Helicarrier's blades, had taken quite a beating and puttered along slowly. "However, the device is now self-sustaining. Furthermore, from my calculations, the barrier now surrounding is pure energy and will not be easily breached."

"What other bad news do you have?" grunted Stark as his tower came into view.

Amazingly, it appeared undamaged and untouched.

"The Mark VII is not ready to be deployed."
"Skip the spinning rims," the man quipped. "No seriously. We're on the clock here."
"Will do, sir," JARVIS replied and then added, "Someone just landed upon on the balcony as well and appears to be pacing back and forth. Initial scans match with the Asgardian Mage Flarathir."
"Damn it," Tony swore briefly. "Merlin has chosen the pad for his hideout?"

"If by 'Merlin', you mean the Asgardian Flarathir, then yes." Tony could swear that JARVIS sounded amused.

"Let Rock of Ages know," Stark said briefly. "By that, I mean Loki. He's probably out hunting for the bastard."

With that, Stark, drawing closer to his tower, saw that JARVIS was indeed right. His right visual (what part was working) showed a tell-tale glint around the Tesseract and the stooped shoulders of the ancient Asgardian could be clearly seen through the windows of his balcony. Taking a deep breath, Stark lit down on his personal landing bay, allowing his suit to be deftly removed by JARVIS, and strode into the room as though he had nothing to fear. Once he got to the bar, the dark-haired man grabbed his best whiskey and began to pour himself and his unwanted guest a drink.

Flarathir, swiveling around, glared at the human from under his grey eyebrows. He doesn't look too happy for someone who's succeeded at invading earth, Tony thought. Well, we'll stop him somehow, but maybe he senses Loki or his crazy Mad Titan buddy is late showing up to the party.

"Hey," Stark raised a glass. "Drink?"
"You hope to offer peace, small man?" sniffed Flarathir. "You hope to reason with the hounds baying at your door?"
"Uhhh... I was actually planning to threaten you," Tony smiled. "I'm guessing that's a 'no' to the drink, then."

"Threaten?" scoffed Flarathir. "A puny mortal, unarmed and unarmoured, dares threaten me. How wonderful."
"Hm. Well, I can put the armour back on," Tony shrugged, "if that would make you feel better. But the suit's seen a bit of mileage." He gestured to the man who now drew closer in curiosity. "You aren't wearing armour... and all you have is that blue stick of destiny."
"Do you think you can hold me here with your idle chatter?" One of Flarathir's grey eyebrows rose, but judging by the dark glimmer in his eye, the man was not amused.

I suppose going crazy and hanging out with megalomaniac Mad Titans does a number on your sense of humour, Tony rolled his eyes. And here I thought Director Fury was bad.

"What? No, no, no! Threatening, remember?" Tony lowered left hand to the bar while his right hand reached for another bottle of bourbon. "Are you sure you don't want a drink? It's just that alcohol, in opinion, really goes a long way towards making things better." A pause as he lowered his hands, slipped on his newest creations– a pair of Colantotte bracelets which would allow the suit to hone in on his location. "Or look better even if things aren't, you know, better."

"Your future is dark," Flarathir grinned madly. "There Chitauri are here and nothing can change that.
What do I have to fear?"
"The Avengers?"
"It's what we call ourselves," Tony shrugged, "sort of like a team. You have teams back where you came from? 'Earth's Mightiest Heroes' and all that. Or," he paused to think for a second, "for you that would be 'Asgard's Mightiest Heroes.'"
"Ah. And you are one of them. You were all on the flying ship."
"Most of us. But the people on the ship are..." Tony thought of JARVIS's update, of Coulson lying on a stretcher. "Never mind. There's a small bunch of us, but we get the job done."
"I don't recall success on your part when we last met," Flarathir sneered.
"Yeah, it does take us a while to get any traction, I'll give you that one. But... let's do a head count here. There's a super-soldier, a living legend who kind of lives up to the legend; a man with breath-taking anger management issues, who can turn green too in a drop of a hat; a couple of master assassins, who can probably twist you into a pretzel; a newly charged up battery Prince Thor complete with hammer, whom you should know well... and his kinda super strange brother from another mother, Prince Loki... and you managed to piss off all of them."
"That was the plan."
"Not a great plan," retorted Tony, hoping that JARVIS was doing his best to prepare the Mark VII.
"When they come, and they will, they'll come for... you."
"I have an army," Flarathir laughed. "An army with great will and the vast purpose of Death itself."
"We have a Hulk with a shitload of anger."
"No one can stop it now. This is the will of the Voice of the Void. This is the unescapable reality, the truest truth of the universe."
"How fun," Tony gave a sharp laugh, "but you do realize that even if you manage to crush New York, maybe you tear the Earth up or whatever, maybe your Voice of the blah blah comes round... That's not going to stop us – because if we can't protect the Earth, you can be damned well sure we'll avenge it."
"Hm," Flarathir drew closer and raised his Scepter. "How will your friends have time for me, when they're so busy fighting you?"

With that, the ancient mage raised the Scepter and tapped it against Iron Man's chest. Clink. Flarathir frowned and tried again to no avail. Clink. Tony gave him a 'what can I do?' shrug.

"Performance issues?" Tony asked cheekily.
"You have... no heart!" Flarathir frowned. "What witchery is this?"
"Witchery? Well, I suppose to the eyes of the uneducated superior technology may seem like magic-

Before Tony got any further, Flarathir's free hand rose twisting, but before his attack could hit the human, a shimmering wall rose between them. Flarathir flew back from the force of the reflected magick, and his dark eyes instantly flew to the door. Following the line of the Asgardian's glare to the door leading out to his balcony, Tony Stark sighed. There stood a familiar, tall, scarecrow thin figure with a scavenged Chitauri energy spear in hand.

"Fantastic," Tony remarked deadpan. "Now we get a chance to see some wizard on wizard action."
"You are needed elsewhere, Man of Iron," Loki's red eyes fixed unwavering upon Flarathir.
"It's... actually Iron Man." Tony said. "Tony, to friends," he added.
"The more Leviathans are descending," Loki said, moving slowly and catlike into the room. "My brother is a great warrior of Asgard, but although he may like to think he can hold the battlefield... I fear the numbers are too great for him."
"JARVIS is just finishing up the last touches on Mark VII. JARVIS?"
"Almost ready, sir."
Tony glanced over at Flarathir who was glaring intensely at the Jotunn blue of Loki's skin and the startling crimson of Loki's eyes. The dark glittering madness within Flarathir's eyes seemed to hesitate at the sight of Loki. Staring back and forth between the two warrior mages, Tony had a feeling that whatever was to follow, it would not be in his best interests to linger.

"I'll, uh, leave him to you," Tony said. "JARVIS!"

With that, Tony thumbed on the honing device and ran out of the room. Behind him a crackling BOOM resounded as a second blast of power from Flarathir's Scepter was once again deflected by another shield erected by Loki's workings.

"You-!" Flarathir roared, darting forward. "Jotunn runt!"

Tony glanced back and caught a glimpse of Flarathir and Loki clash – Scepter against spear – and beyond them, a red flash of metal. The Mark VII. Without hesitation, Tony threw himself off the building as his newest model of the suit shot past the balcony and began to scan for his rapidly falling signal. Around him the whooshing air nearly took his breath away – as did the ear-shattering explosion above him. Just as the Mark VII had located him and began to surround him, what felt like the entire top half of his building exploded outward in a shower of glass and metal. How the roof is staying on there... well, it's a testament to my genius, just admit it.

"Let's get out of here, JARVIS," Tony grumbled as he followed the indicators which pointed him in the direction of the nearest Leviathan. "No point in getting stuck between..." The man paused as he realized that for once his wit had failed him. No humorous comparison or reference had come to him. "I suppose this day is full of firsts."

For the next fifteen or twenty minutes, Tony sped about New York's skyline, blasting Chitauri off the Hulk's back, blasting away at ambushes set up against Thor, destroying any Leviathan that came close to the city, and ensuring that Steve's stand on New York's streets would not be in fact his last one. When he was just finishing up a particularly difficult chase of a Chitauri chariot, Stark's team channel blared to life with the Director's voice, which sounded particularly harried.

"Stark, you there?"
"Hey, Director, hearing you loud and clear-"
"We've got trouble," growled the black man. "Massive trouble heading your way."
"Why am I not surprised?"
"It's a nuke."
"Aw, Hell no," Hawkeye's voice cut in. "Whose shit idea was that?"
"The Council?" Natasha guessed. She sounded a little breathless.
"I've got JARVIS on it-"
"We need to get rid of that bomb stat," Director Fury sounded more than unhappy. "It was a decision totally taken out of my hands and there's no way I can stop it-"
"Why would they do that-" Steve broke off suddenly.
"I'll try to redirect it through the wormhole," Tony said suddenly. "But we need to shut down the Tesseract at the same time-"
"What if you get trapped on the other side-"
"That could work-"
"Who can get to the Tesseract?"
"It's useless," Tony cut through the chatter. "There's a barrier around the Tesseract."
"The Tesseract's energy is more than likely that of an Infinity Gem," Thor's voice sounded over the channel suddenly.
"So you are thinking that another Infinity Gem could break through?" guessed Tony with his usual flas of genius. "I suppose those things aren't just lying around are they..."
"Loki is facing down Flarathir right now. We need someone to go in there and coordinate with him to get that Scepter."
"The Scepter is an Infinity Stone as well, huh," Tony sighed. "Well, who's up for that job?"
"I'm on it," Natasha said quickly. "Thor, stay where you are. Loki and I can handle this."

There was a long pause and then a short sigh.

"Very well," Thor said finally. "Take care... and keep an eye on him. He's the sensible one, but Loki still has his... moments."
"I'll keep that in mind," Natasha chuckled.

With that, the channel fell silent and Tony, after firing a round of Jericho inside a Leviathan and blasting his way through its innards as it exploded around him, veered around and headed out to the Atlantic. *It's time to save the world*, he thought. *Again.*

*[What is power?]*
*[What is the engine of desperation?]*
*[...it is...]*

All that remained of the world were the lines of sfumato shadow as the material gave way to the spiritual, as the physical sense surrendered to magickal intuition. Whirling round, trading blows and drawing upon the well of power found within the planet, Loki summoned and manipulated what came ready to his mind and hands.

*This*, he thought exultantly as a mist of snow and ice smothered Flarathir's fire attack, raising a wall of steam and fog between them. *This is what I was born for.*

It was an odd thought.

*...this is for that which you were born...*
*...Other-Soul of the Realm of Ice...*

The words echoed and vibrated in the air about him. Whispers of the youthful Heimsrsal, a child perhaps of the mothering force which enveloped the heart of the Realm Eternally Sheltered.

It was an odd thought which Loki would have more attributed to Thor. *Nonetheless*, he mused, *it is true. In the end, perhaps it is my destiny to fight, to rage, to struggle.*

The young warrior mage stood stock still now in the center of the rapidly dissipating fog. His keen ears picked out the barely audible crunch of Flarathir's dragon-hide boots on Loki's thin ice field which now blanketed the entire flooring of the room. Stark's furniture had long taken up a smoldering look as various leathers and carpets and draperies had caught fire. Black smoke from a variety of substances, which Loki guessed had less natural origins, billowed out slowly from every broken glass window. Loki, in an attempt to control the blaze, had put out as many fires as he could, leaving most of the room now frozen in varying levels of ice. As with most mage's battles, the environment bore the brunt of their devastating attacks.

"Loki?"

It was the red-headed woman carrying two Chitauri blasters. *Natasha*, Loki reminded himself. However, there was no time for response as Loki recognized the cant of Flarathir's mumble and dove into a roll. Coming up in front of Natasha, the long, black-haired mage pulled the assassin down into a crouch and scratched a sigil of protection on the icy floor. As a combined wind and fire attack blasted their way, ripping through the tatters of fog, a small energy dome rose up around the two to
"Wow," Natasha breathed. "Intense."
"Flarathir is a man of cunning," Loki warned her as the attack spent itself around them. "He is an experienced mage in – in my Father's Court, the shadow master of the Mage's Council and advisor to High Mage Agaeti."
"Politics."
"Yes," Loki nodded. "Dangerous politics."
"I can see that," Natasha grunted. "Somehow it has landed an invasion army on our planet."
"The army would have come eventually, Flarathir or no," Loki reminded the woman. "In fact, if not for Flarathir, the army would have traveled slower, yes, but it would have arrived in its entirety."
"The more you talk," Natasha rose to her feet as the barrier melted away, "the less reassured I feel. Just so you know."
"Hm." Loki swung his energy spear and shifted into a defensive stance as he widened his sphere of awareness in order to relocate his now hidden enemy.
"I suppose you played the game too."
"Oh yes," Loki said grimly. "That is our way, our world, and it is yours now as well – thanks to the misuse of the Tesseract-"
"Speaking of which, we need to get the Scepter back."
"I'm not-"
"To shut the Tesseract down – or at least break through the barrier around it," Natasha quickly explained. "Stark and Thor seem to think that the only way to break through a Tesseract-generated barrier is another equally powerful, uh, power source... like an Infinity – Thor said something about an Infinity Stone?"
"They may very well be right," Loki nodded. "If we fight together, we may overwhelm him – and you could take it and run."
"Breaching the barrier with the Scepter will not be easy and you may feel a strong repulsion from the magick; however, you must continue forcing it through and that should naturally cause a chain reaction which may even destroy the device, or at least force it to stop."
"Got it."

Loki jerked his head and lifted his index finger slightly in the direction of the door by the another room. Natasha nodded and when Loki summoned another illusion of the two of them, a smile flitted across her face. As the illusions darted across the room to the door, Loki and Natasha followed in time, allowing their steps to resound as though they were the illusions themselves. Flarathir's blast aimed at the illusions' bait ended just as Loki and Natasha slid along the slippery ice sheets, safely below Flarathir's range of fire. Leaping up, Loki swung his staff, staggering Flarathir, while Natasha chopped down hard on their opponent's wrist with her Chitauri gun.

For a second, Flarathir's grip on his Scepter weakened and, as Loki swirled around from behind the man's back, the younger mage gave a mighty blow to the man's torso with the staff and a cutting blast of ice which left a line of blood across the older warrior mage's chest and severed his left arm.

First blood.

The Scepter fell and Natasha flipped head over heels, snatched it up and dashed back toward the balcony.

Flarathir roared with maniacal rage, but his following blow failed to land on the redhead. Loki's shield however shattered once the wind blast bashed against it – and the resulting flare of power nearly blew Natasha across the room and off the balcony. Natasha, gripping the Scepter, began to one-handedly pull out her belaying wire. Throwing the hook onto a sturdy-ish scrap of metal now sticking out where part of Stark's sunroof used to be, Natasha hauled herself up, allowing another
blast of icy wind to blow her away from the building and up.

*I am so close,* she thought as she dragged herself up to the roof. *So close. Let me be on time!*

[...it is only for those...]
[...who turn their face from despair...]
[...and fight onward in hope...]

Swiveling around, Thor swept three Chitauri off their feet with one swoop of Mjolnir. As the Crown Prince of Asgard raised his hammer to the sky and called lightning down, the green-skinned Hulk at his side with a black sedan battered several Chitauri creeping up on the blonde Asgardian. Steve Rogers ran past, throwing his shield ahead of him, as he led a charge of SWAT into a library nearby.

"Where's he going?" Thor glanced around, noting that for the moment, the horde of Chitauri had thinned.

The Hulk, giving Thor a mighty blow of friendship, roared.

-0-0-0-

As he grabbed the missile in his ungainly hands, Tony gritted his teeth and swore. The pull was massive. *It shouldn't have been a surprise, he thought, but somehow it is. This thing feels huge.*

It was, Tony knew, not as huge as he was making out. Considering the payload it carried, the missile was a streamlined grey and navy beauty which the engineer in him could appreciate and admire. From a distance.

Now he was clutching an atomic bomb to his breast and dragging it upward toward the wormhole. Over the team channel, Natasha's voice resounded.

"I'm on the roof with the Scepter."
"On my way," he grunted past his clenched teeth.
"I can see you."
"Don't hold back," he replied quickly. "Start now."
"You're not even close."
"Now!"

Raising his speed, Tony ripped through the blue sky now choking with black and grey and hoped that no one would target the tiny man carrying the small missile. For some reason, there didn't seem to be any interference on the part of the Chitauri.

"JARVIS," he frowned. "Have I gone invisible without knowing it or what? What's going on?"
"Thor and the Hulk have been joined by a few others, sir, which has drawn the attention of the Chitauri."
"If you tell me it's Spiderman," Tony sighed, "I'm gonna hurl."

There was a significant pause before JARVIS said, "It's Spiderman."

"JARVIS!" Tony rolled his eyes. "Do you want to know what permanent shut down means?"
"I know what-"
"I'm just joking, JARVIS. Just a joke. I'm glad that the mutants and whatever have gotten off their asses and done something to help."

*Really, I'm just lightening the mood because if I think about it too much,* Tony thought as he began to climb upwards, as the giant lidless black eye seemed to gobble up the safe, familiar horizon of
blue, I just might go crazy. Crazier than I am now anyways.

"Stress on the Mark VII is ri-"
"I can see it," snapped Tony as he passed the event horizon of the worm hole.
"The suit will-"
"I know."

Natasha made her way across the roof. It was empty save for a vaguely familiar figure: a tall man with greying wispy hair and blue eyes which glowed with a familiar madness. Doctor Selvig. With a sigh, she carefully approached him, and as he swung around, her fingers gripped the Scepter just a little tighter.

"I need to stop it," she said.
"There is no way to stop it," Doctor Selvig smiled and raised his hand with pride at his creation.
"And why would you? There is a new world waiting and She calls to each and ev-"

Before the man could get any further in his cult-like speech, Natasha shifted the Scepter to her other hand, twisted around behind the scientist, and efficiently targeted the base of his neck. Catching him carefully as he slid to his knees unconscious, Natasha let him down to the concrete roof and made her way over to the Tesseract. Remembering Loki's words, the woman rammed the Scepter into the barrier, and as she grunted and yelled in frustration, Natasha shoved the Scepter further and further into the glimmering static.

A few seconds later, the Scepter's stone met the barrier and – BOOM – there was white bright light, there was a great explosion which knocked her on her back and sent the Scepter flying, there was a roaring and splintering boom as the device's outer casing ricocheted off into the distance over her head. The blue energy beam detached from the worm hole and disappeared.

Natasha's gaze however was only fixed on the worm hole into which Stark had just disappeared.

The assassin sighed to herself as she realized that she was actually worried about the cocksure inventor who had nearly made her tear out her hair a year or two earlier.

You better make it, Stark, she told him wordlessly. Don't make me go to hell and back to bring you home to Pepper.

[...and fight onward in hope...]
[...hope...]
[...that is indeed the treasure so hard won...]
[...in the face of the oncoming storm...]
[...in the face of the unceasing dark...]

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reviewing and commenting guys! Thanks for reading! An update will come next week around this time! Until then, see ya guys~!
-KI
Standing Together

Chapter Notes

As I promised~ Another update!

Thanks to the few who reviewed! I appreciate you all! This is last full chapter spent on Earth. Next chapter is the return to Asgard and I'm so excited! I've written it - and it'll be ready to go next week! See you guys! Let me know what you think~!

Also be sure to go to inkitt and vote on Book 1 of Distortions In Time (if you haven't already).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 88
Standing Together

He was now in zero g. Weightless. Drifting. It was like his worst nightmare, having no control and no abilities and no idea about what to do. He could aim the rocket and let it continue onward.

"JARVIS?"
"Sir – programming the missile – go – continue – primary mission canceled."
"You're breaking up, JARVIS. JARVIS?"

He was in another world. It was hard to imagine, hard to grasp, hard to accept – but as he fell back, as his visor filled with the images of a vast darkness, an endless march of alien ships, he knew that what he saw could not be denied. Hundreds of the space worms swam about like a swarm of insects about a corpse. There were glimpses of nebulae and planets and suns he couldn't recognize – and an asteroid field which hung before a massive worm hole which seemed to thrum with ominous energy. Tony, for the first time in a long time, felt like a frightened child.

Ice began to take hold of his suit.

He was falling back now toward the rapidly diminishing worm hole, but his eyes were solely fixed on the terrifying sight before him.

He would never forget. He would never forget.

-0-0-0-

Watching the black speck fall from the now blue sky, Natasha heaved a sigh of relief and sagged back against the concrete wall against which she now half-sat, half-laid. At a familiar roar behind her, the woman twisted her head to the side and realized that the Hulk had joined her. Together they watched as the suit continued to free fall.

*He's not flying – he's falling. The suit isn't working...?* Natasha tilted her head and sighed again.

She turned to the Hulk, "Hey, big guy. You see the loud-mouth over there – falling? Think you can do me a favour and catch him before he hits the ground? I'll owe you one."
With teeth-bearing grin more suited to a whale shark, the Hulk roared, "Puny human!" and bounded off. Somewhere over her ear piece, she could hear another update from Hawkeye. Apparently the army and SWAT and SHIELD were managing to regain large portions of the city. Reinforcements were coming in from Washington on a few scrambled carriers and the Canadians over the border were offering aid.

*This*, she mused, *has gone much better than I thought.*

Below her, the concrete began to shift as an explosion resounded below

*Or maybe not.*

[...and fight onward in hope...]
[...the treasure so hard won...]
[...and those seconds crawl as hours...]
[...for the moments carry the weight...]

Allowing himself to be propelled along with the expanding bubble of debris which had once constituted the upper level floor of Stark Tower, Loki swung a little in midair, battering aside pieces of grey rock, wood furniture and rags of fabric. Below him, the building receded rapidly. It guttered now like a dying candle, blackened and smoking and crackling with unused electrical impulses. Here and there, sparks flew and small fires blazed. Parts of the flooring had disappeared as well in certain section, baring lower floors to the sun.

Around him the debris was starting to lose momentum – as was he. Most fell between the tall buildings of the city onto the now mostly empty roads littered with destroyed vehicles and spaceships and the mangled remains of dead bodies – human and Chitauri alike. Loki saw no sign of the mercenaries which Thanos had hired to aid him in battle.

*They were probably with the advancing force,* he thought. *He glanced upward. The wormhole was gone. No more will come... today.*

Loki was now passing by the edge of a lower roofed building and, reaching out his arm, he caught hold of a railing and pulled himself to relative safety. Glancing down, he caught a glimpse of red and blue and white and the metallic flare of armour. *Thor and the Captain. Steve.* They were standing and looking upward, waving and pointing. Loki followed their gestures and noticed that the great green beast – the Hulk, they called him – was carrying down an old man whose face Loki thought he recognized from his dreams and the familiar red-head of the assassin woman. Both of them appeared to be unconscious. Laying his burdens down by the Iron Man who now rested in relative comfort between two scrap heaps of unrecognizable metal, the Hulk straightened and gazed upward.

*It was Flarathir, descending.*

*A master,* Loki had told Natasha. *There is no mistaking it,* he thought as he watched the old man manipulate the wind to slow his descent. *He walks on air, he commands the winds, he is able to fight in the face of losing limbs... He too sees the colours of the magick,* Loki's red eyes hardened until they glimmered like cold rubies. *How can he then despair? What hopelessness did he embrace to descend to this level of madness? Perhaps we will never know.*

"Loki!" Thor yelled, blue eyes wide as he recognized his brother's protection barrier stretching across their heads.

Shimmering blue and white, it looked like a fragile, delicate thing, but Loki knew that this working, anchored with six sigils hastily scrawled along the concrete rooftop wall of the building upon which
he stood, would hold against at least one powerful attack. Leaping forward, high and clear of the building and its sigils, Loki landed on the protection barrier briefly.

"Be careful!" Thor's voice was nearly drowned in another round of artillery.

Loki gave Thor a grim smile and nod before turning and leaping upward. *Don't worry, Thor*, he swung the Chitauri energy spear and drew upon the ice of his ancestors. *I am not alone.*

[Can you not hear it?]
[...it is the call...]
[...it is the song...]
[...the Heimsrsal...]

The clear melody of power wrapped about the young warrior mage as soared upward, propelled by the force of power within his barrier. In his mind's eye, he could see the warping of reality about Flarathir, who looked more like a black smoking arrow than a mage. Blood and fire and wind.

*But I am different*, Loki told himself.

Like a mother and child in one, the Heimrsral reached down.

[...we all work together, you see...]
[...in the end, the spirits of the For-Eldra...]
[...the Souls of the Realms...]
[...all, all join...]
[...as one...]

They were drawing closer, and Loki could see Flarathir's glinting black eyes now. Deep in their depths, something familiar glimmered: fear.

*What does he see?*

[...all, all join as one...]
[...to bear this burden together...]

Loki's spirit burned with a cold light. His motions, his movements, the twirl of his fingers spoke of grace as he called upon the power of water and light and ice. Grace and power. Power filled the slight frame of the warrior mage.

Flarathir, for the first time in a long time, saw – he saw and understood. The red eyes burning with the fire of a thousand stars, the blue skin shining with the lines of a long lost royalty, the hands twisting the lines of water which soared upwards. And beyond the body–

*Beyond the body, the blinding light of his soul. This child*, he thought, *this child carries more than destiny on his shoulders.*

*If this is to be the end*, he thought disjointed as his blade of wind met Loki's blade of ice, *it is a good one.*

[...we are not alone...]

Loki, however, was not interested in counter attack. Only barely deflecting Flarathir's wind blade, Loki cut forward, grabbed Flarathir, and held on for grim death. Even though both men lost their momentum and began to fall together, Loki paid no heed, refusing to let go of the now flaring and
burning mage. Pinning the man in the right shoulder with the thin bladed end of his spear and so disabling his working arm, Loki raised his free hand now formed in the Jotunn dagger of ice and stabbed downward.

The thin blade of ice, reinforced by Flarathir's own wind and the power which now coursed through Loki, sliced easily through Flarathir's robes to pierce the thin chain mail beneath. Gritting his teeth, Loki stabbed the mage three more times as the two fell back toward the barrier. Each time, Loki felt a surge of strength.

*It's you, isn't it?* He whispered to the world.

...*we stand together, Other-Soul...*
...*strike now and free of us this threat...*
...*strike a blow to the heart of the dark...*
...*fulfill your destiny...*

Beyond the barrier, he could see Thor, with Mjolnir in hand, tensed and ready to fight, but Loki had no time to call on his brother. Focusing down, Loki raised his ice dagger again. With each blow, the knife in his hand grew – and as the two exploded through the barrier, shattering it into shards of magick light with the force of their combined strength, there was only a column of ice where Flarathir's heart used to be.

For a moment there was only his breath.

Inhale.
Exhale.

There was only the light of the stars and their twinkling, wobbling, melodies sung in ancient tongues, understood by the soul alone. There was a rainbow of colour which bathed the world until all that was physical seemed like lines drawn in smoke. There was only the cold and the ice –

Inhale.
Exhale.

Ice covering his hands. Ice splintering as he pulled back. Ice all about, spiraling out in ancient Jotunn spell arcs. Ice forming the Jotunn letters and sigils which he had learned from Elska.

Inhale.
Exhale.

There was also Flarathir. Flarathir's dark eyes which were fixed upon Loki's face as though unable to tear his gaze away. Such dark eyes that with every second lost their light.

*And yet...*  
*And yet...*

Inhale.  
Exhale.

Flarathir smiled.

*He smiled.*

Inhale.  
Exhale.
Loki drew himself to his feet in an ungainly fashion, seemingly unable to find the ground beneath his feet. He staggered back several paces, his breath coming fast and harsh.

*It's done,* he thought. *It's done.*

Inhale.
Exhale.

It was all crashing down now as the reality of the physical began to reassert itself. Loki instinctively sought the warmth which suddenly surrounded him. Thor's arms and hands. Thor's voice, grounding him.

"Mm-"
"Shhh." Thor said. "Sit."
"I'm-" Loki tried again.
"Rest," Thor said over and over again. "Rest."

When Loki finally began to recognize his now very scuffed black boots (standard SHIELD issue), torn black pants and shirt, he realized that Thor and he were sitting side by side on a pile of stone rubble. *Not entirely stone,* Loki thought, as he caught sight of a crumpled paper cup, a piece of soft fabric which looked like it was attached to a chair. *The remains of another life.*

*Not all is lost,* another part of him which sounded like Frigga, like Thor, spoke up. *Life was saved today. Life beyond your reckoning.*

Thor's hand squeezed Loki's shoulder in a familiar, comforting fashion.

"You have returned."
"Yes," Loki glanced over at his brother and noticed that only now was Thor's eyes showing some signs of relief.

*He was worried.* Loki smiled tentatively at his brother, the edge of his thin lips turning slightly upward and his dark eyebrows lifting.

"Again," he said.
"We won," Thor looked around at the scene before them – at Natasha who was getting to her feet, at Selvig who still lay unconscious, at the Iron Man whose helmet was being carefully peeled away by the Hulk and the Captain. "Somehow, it doesn't feel like winning."
"It never does."
"What will we do now?" asked Thor.
"Go back home, I suppose," Loki shrugged with a deep sigh. "There is much for us to do ahead."
"You still wish to return with the Tesseract – and the Scepter?"
"Perhaps not both," Loki glared down at the blue hands before him now clasped before him.
"Asgard may not be safe for both of them."
"The Vault certainly isn't," Thor frowned. "Remember those... those Jotunn invaders? Back before I was exiled – the reason why we went to Jotunheim in the first place? If they could get in, who knows who else could enter Asgard unnoticed?"
"About that," Loki scratched his head.
"What?" sighed Thor, giving Loki an incredulous look. "Do not tell me this was one of your schemes, Loki!"
"I did not..." Loki admitted slowly and in shame. "It's a long story... but in short... I feared for you. I feared for Asgard and the throne. I did not think you were ready and I had no one to turn to – I felt – I felt so helpless. It was like watching a comet fall and having no method to stop it and-" Loki buried his head in his hands and rubbed his face in vain attempt to steady his still over-stimulated nerves and
It was a scheme... but I did not intend it to harm any."
"The Jotunn were harmed."
"Yes," Loki said, voice muffled. "I did not care then."
"And now?"
"I do not know."
"That is why you were exiled?"
"No, no," Loki said with a sigh. "Well, perhaps, that played a part in it. Using the Bifrost to completely eradicate Jotunheim was the main reason. It is my fault... It all went wrong, terribly wrong."

For a moment there was silence as Thor digested this new information. The blond-haired Crown Prince looked at the leather-strapped handle of Mjolnir and thought of his new life on Earth, of Jane, of Hawkeye and the Black Widow and Steve, of SHIELD, of the Loki beside him.

"But in the end," Thor said slowly, "it turned out for the best, didn't it."
"You think so?"
"I know so." Thor sighed, "I mean, you were exiled and somehow ended up thrown to the Void and tortured and imprisoned and Norns know what else... but I learned much from my stay here. I grew. I became a... a better man, I think. I hope. I needed this lesson."

Loki raised his head and looked at Thor curiously.

"I wasn't ready to be king," Thor admitted. "I was afraid but I hid it. I felt inadequate, so I pretended. I pretended to not care about what did not come naturally to me. I focused on what I thought I could mend – the Jotunn problem, the security of Asgard."
"We were both wrong," Loki smiled ruefully.
"Yes," Thor grinned, "but we can improve. Always."

A pause.

"You remember the first day we met?" Thor asked.
"Hm."
"You were someone who had lost all hope. I remember your eyes," Thor's voice grew soft as he drew on the memory. "I looked at you and I sensed within you a darkness, a despair. I thought I could mend it..."
"It's a fault of mine, I suppose," Loki sighed, "to see the worst in people, to expect the worst, to imagine the worst outcome possible."
"You had been raised to see the world in such a way-"
"It was my decision as well - a burden I refused to let go-"
"At any rate," Thor mused, "you grew up fearful and alone."
"You don't know how I grew up," Loki reminded his brother mildly. "I lied quite a bit on that point."
"Wherever you were," Thor shook his head, "I know you were hated and disregarded because of who you were – are – a Jotunn of – of small size. And you were fearful of being found so you hid the truth of your ancestry, the colour of your skin, and you could never speak of the truth with anyone. You never told Mother... Father... me. So, in the end, I think you were always alone."
Thor's blue eyes glinted. "But not anymore."
"No," Loki gave Thor another small quirk of a smile, "not anymore."
"See," Thor shifted back and gave Loki an evaluating look. "You would not have so easily said that before! I see that there is indeed a difference in you since the last time we parted... and since the time we first met."
"Well," Loki stopped and then started again. "I suppose some things have changed for me as well."
"Consider your course of action, Loki," Thor gripped his brother's shoulder and looked Loki in the eye. "You chose to come here in the face of certain death. You found some sort of courage – a
desperate courage fueled by hope." Thor sighed. "You speak of your failure to tame me. I speak of my failure to support you. In the end, I could not give you this."
"I couldn't teach you common sense," Loki pointed out. "Perhaps we had to learn for ourselves. Perhaps we needed to hear it from a certain person." The dark-haired man added ruminatively. "Mal. Jane."
"Mal?" Thor raised a blond eyebrow. "You have not spoken of this person before..."
"She is gone," Loki said softly and his green eyes rose to the blue skies above sadly. "I do not think I will meet her one the shores of the living again."
"I am sorry."
"I as well."

There was a long silence after that punctuated by distant wails of mechanical vehicles and the occasional blast and returning spatter of a gun. The two Princes leaned back and watched occasional wisps of grey haze drift past the blue sky.

A creaking and clanking broke the newborn quiet.

"Hey," Iron Man said tiredly. "Shwarma?"

[...this...]
[...the weight of destiny...]
[...we all share...]

Chapter End Notes

A much needed post-battle chat. I hope you guys enjoyed!

Let me know what you think!

Thanks for reading!

-KI

p.s. Lately I've been playing Dragon Age 2 (XBOX 360) and Fantasy Life (3DS). Gosh. Anyone love the emo psycho-ness of Anders and the awesomeness of VARRIC?! hashtag making dwarves attractive hashtag writers rule hashtag this vid gamer regrets nothing
Homeward Bound

Chapter Notes

Well, here we are at last. On the edge of the Avengers 1 arc and boy, am I so glad... but at the same time, so scared because it's been a good chunk of a year since I've last written Asgard and original stuff for this fic. Also, I suddenly have to double-check what I had planned for the future. I have a sinking feeling I've gotten important building up plot points for the end of this story, so... YIKES! Gotta remind myself again of what I had planned.

That being said, I wanna just shout out to you all. Thanks so much for your kind words! I hope you enjoy this chapter!

If you like this story and have enjoyed it, please be sure to give it a heart on Inkitt (http://www.inkitt.com/scarecrowslady). THANK YOU!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 89
Homeward Bound

The nearby food shop of which Iron Man spoke turned out to be small and empty, incongruously wedged between taller office buildings. Arriving there in a military transport vehicle, borrowed and driven by a grimy-looking Steve Rogers, the group stumbled inside to discover the place deserted. However, thanks to JARVIS, the owner was discovered soon enough – cowering and shivering within a cold inner room which Hawkeye had called a 'walk in fridge'. The group would have laughed had they not been so exhausted.

Upon hearing about the relative safety of the city and the promise of peace once again, the mustached old man sighed with great relief, praised the heroes effusively and told them that the meal was 'on the house'.

On the house, Loki blinked as the All-Speech filtered the words. Are we to eat on the roof?

With a few short words, Iron Man ordered for the lot of them, and the squat tan owner rushed off to prepare the meal. The room fell silent for the most part as the group took their seats around a large, round, metal table and waited for their meal. In the distance, Loki could hear the occasional wail of sirens and shouting. Within the shop, there was only the scuffle of their cook's shoes on the tiled floor and the steady chop-chop-chop of his knife as he prepared their food to be heard.

Still a little dazed, Loki sat at Thor's right hand, staring at the rough metal tabletop before him. To his right sat Natasha and then Hawkeye, both nursing a variety of scrapes and bruises. Hawkeye had applied some sort of bandage to his wrist and one of Natasha's shins were also similarly bandaged. Beyond Hawkeye, Captain America – Steve, to Thor, Loki reminded himself – slouched, looking more dirty than hurt. Bruce, beside Steve, appeared more or less the same as the super-soldier. However, with his now shredded clothing (the bottom hems of his pants and his sleeves had been completely torn off) the curly-haired man looked more like a beggar or rough peasant than a scientist. Between Bruce and Thor, the Iron Man – Stark – still wore his dented, smoke-stained armour. The man's helmet had been set by his chair, looking more like the ripped shell of a fruit than a piece of
machinery. In all, the so-called the Avengers, looked more like a beaten, tired group of roadside workers than actual Heroes of the Planet Earth.

The food arrived on flimsy, round, white plate-like objects, disposable by the looks of them. Disregarding decorum or etiquette, the group grabbed the bread and meat rolls ('shawarma', Stark had called them) and began to eat their meal. Noticing how Thor wolfed down his meal with quite a bit of gusto, the owner returned to the counter to make some more for the group. Watching his brother, Loki felt the rise of a familiar sensation – a feeling Loki had, if he were to admit it, missed: disgust. Thor's bread and meat roll was quickly falling apart onto his plate and the blond-haired prince had resorted to using his fingers to squish the roll back together. Tearing his eyes away, Loki sighed.

Some things, he thought, never change. And the others... Loki's eyes wandered over the rest of his companions. We do not look so victorious as the conquering heroes of Asgard do when they arrive in Odin's feast hall and drink to the memories of their deeds. Here, there is no tale-telling, no celebration. How odd to be so disregarded – or perhaps the celebrations will come much later.

After everyone had finished their second shwarma and Bruce had retrieved and handed out small, round cans of a black fizzy drink, someone sighed. It might have been Steve.

"Well, it's done for now," the blond-haired super-soldier said quietly. "For now," echoed Hawkeye. "There's still more on their way."

"It will take them some time to recoup," Loki offered some consolation. "The distances are great and they may recall the second half of the army."

"To come up with a better plan." Stark didn't look too happy at the thought. "They'll be back."

"They always come back," Thor said soberly. "If it is indeed the Mad Titan Thanos who has driven the Chitauri to such lengths... then this is a nightmare made real. The darkest fairy tale I heard as child come to life."

"It might not be Thanos," Natasha shrugged. "Perhaps it is someone using his name."

"Dread Pirate Roberts," Stark suggested. "Dread who?" Loki asked.

"Ah," Thor smiled briefly. "I know that one. Jane made me watch that film. But no... No, the discovery and usage of Infinity Stones does not bode well."

"Only Thanos would attempt to find and recover the Infinity Stones," Loki explained. "Such treasures are those of legend... legend so ancient they have even passed out of the memory of Asgard and the great empires of Vanaheim and Alfheim and such like."

"Shit," Hawkeye said briefly.

"If one is to believe the tales – they are treasures – powerful, ancient, and devastating," Thor gave the Avengers a sharp look. "One was hidden in Midgard. Who knows how many more are upon this planet?"

"You want to take one home," Steve said. He shrugged and looked around the table for unspoken agreement. "That makes sense to me, in a way. It's a good way to split up the location of power... but does Asgard have the ability to keep it safe?"

"Yes," Loki said immediately.

"I thought someone broke into your dad's safe," Stark's dark eyes narrowed shrewdly in Loki's direction.

"They had help," Loki said stiffly. "My help, if you must know. But the intruders were killed. All of the perpetrators were killed, so no one with the knowledge of how to penetrate the Vault remain."

"How nice for you," Hawkeye grumped.

"Wait," Bruce frowned and tilted his head. "Why did you help people get into your father's, uh, Vault?"

"It is a long story," Loki mumbled.

"It is a long story," Thor chuckled with some amusement. "One I have only recently learned. Let us
just say that my brother hatches devious, complicated plans that often go awry for reasons out of his control – and more often than not turn out for the best somehow. Loki has the luck of the Norns on his side."
"Like a cat with nine lives?" smiled Natasha.
"Something like that. A tale worth telling, I will be honest, but perhaps not for today." Thor sobered.
"We have much to accomplish before the day is over."
"I'm already making lists," Steve shook his head. "Clean up after war always seems to take forever."
"Not that you were much help last time," Stark quipped. "Sorry," he added quickly when Bruce gave him a look. "Couldn't help myself."
"You never can," Natasha smirked.

Stark winced and helped himself to a third shwarma. Thor, Loki noticed, was starting on his fourth. Now finished his second, the slender warrior-mage could only sit back and watch his brother devour even more meat and bread.

"You need to eat more, Loki," Thor said around a mouthful, dropping a few pieces of meat onto his armoured chest. He pushed the tray closer to his brother. "There are more than enough to spare."
"I can not," Loki folded his arms. "The physician said as much."
"His stomach is still too small to handle too much food," Steve wiped his mouth with a napkin. "I heard that often happened to POWs in the war."
"It is not just that," Loki sniffed. "Just watching the way Thor eats puts me off of food."
"As usual," chuckled Thor and nearly choked on his mouthful.
"Disgusting," Loki shook his head, his face twisted in a sharp grimace.

Natasha laughed – and for the first time that day, the lines on her brow and around her eyes eased. The redhead shook her head and rose to get another bottle of water ("for hydration").

"You two boys are very different."
"Well, Loki is Loki," Thor shrugged. "When we adopted him, I was so happy. Of course, it turned out to be a more difficult affair than I had first imagined-"
"Surprise, surprise," grunted Loki.
"-but in the end, it feels so natural. As if it was meant to be."
"Perhaps it was meant to be," Bruce mused aloud. "Perhaps the universe where you two are not brothers is a darker place."

Loki glared at his hands as he remembered the dark dreams of the drugs which he had been forced to consume while being tortured at the hands of Inquisitor Wen. There had been other visions later when he had traveled that disorienting journey to Thor's side.

_The truth is that He was there all along. He had remembered that. He had been there all along in the darkness – manipulating him and taunting him – and drawing all things who could hear His voice to Him. And I, Loki, was one of those He courted. I could have been one them. That is what I saw._

Through the cracks and edges of the world and in the glistening memory of starlight which bent time and space as they reached through to other worlds, Loki had caught glimpses of another life. A dark Loki, alone and afraid and angry.

It was not the him that was now, Loki knew, nor would it be the Loki of the future. It was another Loki of another time and place. A Loki who had grown up in a golden world. A golden life, filled with love and uncertainties and as fragile as a glass. When the truth revealed itself, the mirror cracked
and all that he had known about himself had seemed so fruitless – a lie and an illusion.

That Loki had come to believe that he was nothing but a monster – and he had ran and ran and ran until only the darkness could find him. That Loki had lost his way home.

*But,* Loki reminded himself as he looked at Thor sitting beside him, *I am not alone now, and I can see my way back home clearly. It will not be an easy return, but neither is it impossible.*

...all, all join as one...
...to bear this burden together...
...we are not alone...
...this...
...the weight of destiny...
...we all share...

With that, the conversation turned to more mundane topics and eventually the group parted ways. Stark managed to prevail and Bruce joined the inventor and his personal assistant at a nearby 'five star hotel'. How a way station could have five stars was beyond Loki, but he kept his mouth shut and followed Thor, Steve, Natasha, and Hawkeye back to a waiting aircraft which returned the group to the Helicarrier, where Loki was given a small room to sleep in.

Sleep came slowly as the dark pressed down around the warrior mage. It was a warm, humming darkness and brought back many memories. Memories of honeycomb cells. Memories of his travels. Memories of adventures. Memories of those he had left behind. Memories of Nesta and the Tro'watal. Memories of Mal.

Closing his eyes, he could imagine Mal leaning over him, gently soothing him. However, the warrior mage knew that what stood at his side was only the Heimsrsal of the Realm dressed within the memory of Mal. Mal was, he fancied, waiting for him at Death’s side. Perhaps she would be able to join the For-Eldra, despite her heritage. He could only hope.

For the first time since their parting, Loki found an opportunity to mourn for the loss of the soul who had brought him such joy and completion. Once again, he wept in the dark, but this time, he did not grieve for himself.

-0-0-0-

Thor called Jane. When Loki joined his brother for breakfast in the morning, feeling much more refreshed and ready for what lay ahead of them, he saw immediately that Thor was more than a little despondent.

"Has something happened?" Loki asked with some alarm as he noticed that Thor was barely picking at his thick stack of pancakes and eggs.

"I had to say goodbye to Jane on Skype." Skipe?

Loki paused a moment, knife stuck in a thick wad of bacon.

"This is... worse than usual," Loki guessed. "Well, saying goodbye is never good when one says goodbye to one's loved one."

"It is never good in general."

"No," Loki agreed.

"I should not complain," Thor sighed. "I will be able to return and see Jane again. Your Mal... you said you will never see her again."

"I have reason to believe she passed on," Loki's red eyes rested on his plate with a renewed sense of
sadness, "but I will... I will be fine. My loss should not interfere with your own feelings of grief. After all, our future is uncertain. We do not know what we shall find on Asgard."
"That is what she said. I found that I could not promise her a safe return. At least, there is a small chance that we could be injured or trapped on Asgard."
"If the war has been going on without us, goodness knows what has happened," agreed Loki. "Exactly."

The two ate their breakfast in a subdued manner.

"It really is too bad that Asgard is at war," Thor said, mind obviously stuck on the subject of Jane and his upcoming separation. "Peacetime would allow me to return to Asgard with her."
"Father would not appreciate a visit from a human, however lovely and intelligent they are," Loki pointed out. "You know how he is about Midgard and the other Realms."
"He would understand."
"He would not."
"He accepted you," Thor said stubbornly. "He could accept Jane."
"Jane is human and mortal and not an important political pawn," Loki said calmly, spearing for himself another pancake (his second one).
"Father did not invite you to Asgard because of that alone."
"Maybe not alone, but it played a big part."
"Mother-"
"Mother is different," Loki said. "You and I know that. But let us be honest, Thor, your – our father is a man with many plans and he had plans for me. I am not ashamed either to say that I had my own hopes and dreams and goals as well, and I knew that they did not necessarily align with your father's schemes. I played a delicate game, and we used each other well. For the most part, we attempted to hold up our end of the bargain with varying degrees of success. That our father knew who I was from the beginning – when that was revealed to me – it only made more sense."
"Hmmm..." Thor looked unhappily at his food.
"On the other hand," Loki mused aloud. "If we were to invite Jane and have Mother meet her first, I think Father could be made to see reason."
"Mother can always make him see reason."
"Exactly," Loki punctuated his word with a stab of his fork.

A pause. Then Loki, after setting aside his plate and sipping at the hot tea provided him, closed his eyes and mentally made a check list of things he needed to accomplish. Getting his hands on the Tesseract was the first order of the day.

"When do we leave?" he asked Thor, opening his eyes.
"Today," Thor said, looking even more unhappy. "I believe the sooner we return to Asgard, the better."
"The sooner you can return to Earth." Loki quirked a smile which faded quickly.
"Yes. Steve has arranged for us to take the Tesseract. With it, we may return to Asgard easily enough, right?"
"Yes," Loki nodded with relief. "It will make the process much easier."
"I wonder what is happening in Asgard," Thor said around a mouthful of egg and bacon which made Loki shudder a little. "I can just see Father overlooking the troops and Mother no doubt trying to make all the banners by hand."
"Or the city emptied as all of them have gone to Jotunheim," Loki sipped at a sweet cup of tea. "That could happen."
"Either way, we need to get back home as soon as may be." Loki rose to his feet. "I have few things to pack, but I am off to my room to see to my pack."
"I will meet you on the flight deck in an hour," Thor promised.
With that, Loki wound his way through the canteen's long rectangular tables to the far door on the opposite side of the room. Watching his younger brother's slight frame (clad today in a new set of black pants, turtleneck, and boots) disappear around the corner, Thor found himself stifling an odd urge to call his younger brother back and ask him to delay their return.

We have to go, the exiled Prince told himself. Asgard calls and duty to your people still remains, king or no. There is no way I can let Loki return as he is right now. He may think that he is ready for battle, but he is still blue-skinned. Yes, he is more like a walking skeleton than a Jotunn right now. I wonder if he was not fed well when he was young – and that is why he remained so small... So many questions to ask him, Thor thought. I wonder when we will have the time to discover each other once again.

Finishing up his meal, Thor made his way to his room, picked up his phone and texted Jane a few more times, packed up his bag slowly, and then made his way up to the flight deck where he had promised to meet Loki. Loki was pacing back and forth like a wild cat trapped in a cage. No sooner had the designated aircraft been pointed out, Loki was striding over to the lowering ramp and taking his seat inside.

He really wants to get home, Thor sighed. Then he frowned. Really, Thor, you should be excited as well. It has been two Earth years since you saw Mother and Father – and Loki has had a hard time of it, so it should be no surprised that he is looking forward to returning to some kind of familiar comfort. On the other hand, a more practical side (which sounded a lot like Jane) pointed out, there is a possibility that Loki and you will have no time to relax once you rejoin the war effort.

Thor sighed, followed the rest of the crew in, took his seat at Loki's side, and forced a smile.

You are going home, Thor. Going home.

-0-0-0-

According to Clint Barton (Hawkeye's real name, Loki learned), Stark had chosen New York's Central Park as the lift off point for Thor and Loki. Waiting at stone terrace, Bruce, Stark, and Natasha stood about a plain truck from which Steve emerged holding a round tubular container within which flared and shone the Tesseract.

"Here it is," Steve grunted, handing one end to Thor. "Made just as Loki specified."
"It is a neat piece of engineering if I may say so myself," Stark smiled. It looked strained beneath his large pair of sunglasses. "A good night's work for Bruce and I."
"It was a piece of cake really," Bruce hastened to add.
"I thought it would be," Loki said smoothly. "Asgard appreciates your aid and cooperation."
"I'm sure it does," grunted Hawkeye.
"What happens now?" asked Natasha.
"I take this end and turn the handle, infuse it with my power – and off we go," Loki took his end of the tube. "We will return to Asgard, speak with our father on your behalf, and perhaps we will return soon."
"If the war with Jotunheim is still ongoing," Thor said, "we will be delayed, but I hope we can find some way to mitigate another conflict with Jotunheim in the face of the more obviously dangerous threat of Thanos."
"Enemy of my enemy is my friend," Stark nodded. "I get it."
"I hope it works," Steve's blue eyes were solemn as he shook Thor's, and then Loki's, free hand. He watched as Thor picked up Mjolnir lovingly. "I know that conflict is often the best way our true enemies succeed."
"That is true," Thor agreed. "With this in mind, let us have peace between our Realms and we shall
"If you ask of us, we will come to your aid if you ask of us."
"That is great to hear," Natasha smiled at the two of them. "SHIELD can always use fighters like you two. I did not expect your brother to have such natural abilities. I always welcome competence on the field."
"High praise," Hawkeye chuckled.
"Thank you," Loki placed a hand on his heart and bent low. "I too am glad to have met someone who carries grace alongside deadliness."

Loki gave his brother a scathing look.

"We go," he said shortly. "Now."

His hand turned and the last thing the two of them heard was the combined laughter of the Avengers fading into white light.

[...all, all join as one...]
[...to bear this burden together...]
[...we are not alone...]
[...this...]
[...the weight of destiny...]
[...we all share...]
[...for we are not alone...]
[...and we are not alone...]

The Tesseract was a wind and a song. It was light and it was pain and it was present and past all in one. Combining his strength with that of the Infinity Stone was easily done, but continuing to harness the wildly course power was a different thing. The heat of the moment burned his very soul and his magick flared wildly.

Flarathir had arrived in pain and disorientation. Loki could now understand why. The Tesseract was a wild thing and not to be tamed.

Beside him, Thor roared with power, Mjolnir now in his hand and singing. They were together.

[...we all share...]
[...for we are not alone...]
[...and we are not alone...]

Loki was no longer alone facing the stars, but there was one at his side who would understand what he now faced.

Carrying them both onward, Loki imagined Asgard, imagined home.

[...for once..]
[...catch whispers of a long-forgotten flames of hope renewed...]
[...flames of hope renewed in the fires of exploding stars...]
[...in the steady signals...]
[...in the surge of power...]
[...as the door between space is opened and closed again...]
[...and that which goes round in full circle...]
[...returns yet again...]
For a second, the two of them stood there, disoriented. Breathing heavily, the air rattling in their throats, Loki and Thor barely had enough prescience to recognize their surroundings. When finally sight and sound settled, when the world about them crystallized, Loki recognized the bronzed and etched walls as belonging to the Vault. They had traveled straight to the safest place for the Tesseract.

Swearing a little as he staggered away and released his hold on the Tesseract, Thor fetched up against a wall, closed his eyes again and coughed a little.

"That was..." Words failed the Prince.
"Yes," Loki said dryly, taking up the burden of the Tesseract only to set it gently in an alcove and stepping back to admire the combined efforts of the Terran scientists and his own. "We are home at last."
"How can you walk away so easily from that?" Thor rasped. "I felt - I feel as if I am about to explode."
"Breathe deeply," Loki said. "In and out. In and out. Follow the rhythms of my voice."

Thor cracked open an eye and gave Loki a disbelieving look.

"You have been using these techniques all along in order to relieve stress?" he asked, betrayed. "I do not know about stress," Loki said mildly. "However, most apprentices in the Mage's Court must learn these basics for safety sake. It is the basic process of expending workings and magick."
"Hm." Thor breathed in and out with surprising experience.

When he looked less pale, the blonde-haired prince pulled himself upright and then paused at the sight of his brother. Loki was once again his pale-skinned, green-eyed self.

"You think you can hold that illusion for long?"
"I have to," Loki waved a hand. "We are going to battle against Jotunn - the last thing the people need is to be confused."
"We could get Father or Mother to say something."
"If you think that's best," Loki shrugged.
"I don't want you fainting in battle," Thor grumbled as he made his way up the steep stairs of the Vault, "and turning into a Jotunn and getting yourself stabbed by an overzealous Heimdall or Volstagg."
"Is that intended to be a joke?" Loki smirked.

No sooner did he set foot outside the vault than the half-smile on his face melted away. Thor, noticing his brother's suddenly pinched look, stopped.

"Loki?"

Loki was already running down the side halls. Following hard on his brother's heels and calling Loki's name, Thor wondered what was going on. However, Loki would not slow. In fact, with each step, his speed increased until they were out in the main hall and Thor began to realize that the crowds of Asgardians were a mix of medics and mages and peasants gathered around moaning soldiers. Asgardian soldiers.

Ignoring the chorus of surprise at the sudden appearance of the princes, the two young men continued onward through the great oak doors of front hall and came to a halt at the top of the main stairway. Loki and Thor fell silent, mouths and eyes wide with shock, as a scene they had never expected greeted them.

Asgard spread before them in a vista of smoking devastation.
There you guys go. I hope you guys enjoyed THIS AWESOME CLIFF HANGER! YOU GUYS PROBABLY THOUGHT "OK, well we're back to Asgard ho-hum ho-hum". BYAHAAHAHA.

Let's hope I manage to write the next chapter quickly~!

-KI
It was the nightmare of Thor's dreams. In the dark of the night, the exiled Prince would wake sweating and trembling at the vivid pictures which haunted his dreams. If Jane were there, she would sleepily pull him down and wrap comforting arms about him. If he were alone, he would rise from his bunk and walk into the desert and stare at the stars in vain attempt to find some calm.

This is no dream, he thought as his blue gaze roamed over the shocking vista before him. Smoke lay over the city, clouding out the familiar sight of nebula wisps and golden sunlight. Buildings lay smoldering and broken, some of them utterly ruined. Market banners and the guard flags hung tattered and dead in the windless air. Belongings were scattered across the road as though dropped in haste or thrown out. The streets were emptied.

A desolate land. A land of sorrow. And silence. The air, Thor thought as he turned about to watch three groaning warriors being dragged into the main hall on litters. It is too quiet. There is something wrong.

Glancing to his right, Thor's fist tightened at the telling blank look which had spread over Loki's face. He looked down and noticed that Loki's hands had tightened into hard balls as well.

"There is something wrong," Loki said softly. "Other than the fact that our capital has been laid low?" Thor asked in disbelief. "Can you not feel it?" Loki sighed in exasperation and then shook his head. "Perhaps not. Not yet."

"It is too quiet," Thor finally admitted.

Loki gave his brother a thoughtful look and then turned away, his green eyes scanning the horizon with anxiety.

"Am I right?"
"Yes," Loki finally said. "It is too quiet. Much too quiet. The Spirit of the Realm..."
"The Spirit of the Realm. Do you mean those Voices you spoke of on occasion?"
"You would not understand... You never did, not really."
"Well, I may not understand fully, but I can feel something is very wrong. I never thought this would happen," Thor said, voice tight. "Not really. I dreamed – I dreamed of it once or twice before, but never did I think it would actually..."
"Happen?" Loki frowned. "I, of all people, should have prepared for such a possibility-"
"Loki-"
"We need to find Mother," Loki was already moving down the stairs. "Now."
"We need to find someone who knows where she is-"
"Volstagg."
"Volstagg would know but how do we go about finding-"

Thor was interrupted by Loki's finger pointing across the courtyard toward a mass of horsemen
dismounting at the far end of the square by the stables.

"There."

"Volstagg?" Thor barely recognized his battered, blackened, and bruised friend. "Volstagg!"

The brown-headed, heavily bearded man turned at the sound of his name and Thor's voice, his face a
picture of disbelief, joy, and relief all at the same time.

"Thor!" The warrior bellowed, turning away from his charge – a wounded Asgardian now being
carried off on a litter. "Thor! You have returned!"

Rushing toward each other, the two men clasped each other warmly and drew back to assess each
other. Thor wondered what Volstagg would see. The taller blond-haired Asgardian was already
filled with disquiet at the glimpse of fatigue and worry within Volstagg's expression. Glancing about
warily and gripping his sword hilt continually, the older warrior looked as though he had never left
his guard post.

"Where is – where is Mother?" Loki asked, getting straight to the point.
"Queen Frigga and the All-Father are behind the front lines. All-Father was in the middle of his third
war council of the day when I left. The Queen was in the primary medic tent offering first aid."
"As I expected," Thor smiled.

"We should take you to the war council immediately," Volstagg turned back to nod at a familiar face
beneath a captain's helm. "Captain Thardon commanded us return posthaste to the front lines, so it
would be best that you ride with us. Jayne! Jayne!"

With that, Volstagg strode off, disappeared around the corner of the Royal stables, and then
reappeared with a slender girl garbed in rough clothes. Behind her two horses followed on a long
lead now in Volstagg's fist.

"-and you will have to return them as soon as may be," the girl was saying, "for Captain Arthe will
have need of them for his scouting mission to the south."
"If they decide the need for it," huffed Volstagg. "Not much good we would be able to do spreading
the troops thinly."
"We can discuss that in more detail once we get to the All-Father," Loki took the reins and swiftly
mounted the horse. "Thor."

"Right behind you, Loki," Thor gave Volstagg a much put-upon look. "We should get moving
before Loki leaves us behind in the dust."
"Behind in the dust?" asked Volstagg blankly. He glanced at the dark-haired prince who returned his
questioning glance with a shrug.

"Thor has picked up quite a few Midgardian habits since we saw him last," Loki smirked.
"I wouldn't wonder," Volstagg grunted. "He was down there a bit too long for my liking. What took
so long, Thor?"

"Learning my lesson," Thor smiled ruefully.
"And getting an opportunity to show that you learned your lesson," Loki added generously.
"Odd... How it was you that allowed for that," Thor mused.
"Yes, odd," agreed Loki, totally deadpan.

Briskly, Loki flicked the reins and followed his brother and the rest of Volstagg's small company out past the main walls of the royal courtyard and down the winding, broken streets of Asgard. Up close, the damage did not look as terrible. However, it was a shock to see the rubble which littered the causeways and the places where the less sturdy buildings of Asgard's capital had once stood.

"They brought firepower with them," Loki murmured. 
"Firepower?" Volstagg twisted round in the saddle. "Oh yes. Firepower."
"Mercenaries?" guessed Thor.
"Yes," another soldier from behind said. "A motley bunch from the Far Reaches."
"It could have been worse," Thor gave Loki a nod.
"What could be worse than Marauders and Jotunn?" asked Volstagg.

When the princes did not reply, Volstagg's face tightened and the usually bluff, hearty warrior fell silent. Turning back to face forward, the older Asgardian sighed.

"Well, it looks worse than it actually is. Civilian casualties are moderately low, and we have managed to hold our position for the past four days."
"For now," Thor reminded his friend. "We must remain on our guard."
"There is something wrong," Loki added. "The Realm has fallen silent. Its connection with Asgard has been damaged in some way."
"Father will know more about that," Thor looked even more unsettled. "No doubt High Mage Agaeti and Mother are working on it."

The company continued its way down and around, through the streets of Asgard's capital, until it began to enter parts of the city more ruinous than before. Here, large pillars and pieces of rock were strewn hither and thither. A makeshift stable and sentinel blockade in the road brought them to a halt.

"We must walk the rest of the way," Volstagg jerked his head toward the stables. "We will leave the horses here."

-0-0-0-

After a fifteen minute walk past several crumbling walls of what had been the artisans' quarters as well as the textile and weavers' guilds, the party of Asgardian warriors and the two princes finally reached the rear end of the foremost encampment camped down within the largest western market square. Upon every wall and within every tall building, sentries were posted and various squadrons moved up and down and around the area, glimpsed occasionally by the slanting alleys.

At the rear, as usual, white tents were lined as neatly as may be, filled with bustling physicians and mages who attended upon any injured. Those grievously wounded were mended as well as possible before being sent back to the more defended areas of the city. The rest, once first aid was administered, found their way to several rows of long black tents which were the soldier's resting tents.

Loki's sharp green eyes immediately fastened on a familiar golden head, and the young prince swung over a small wall between them and made his way to her side. On hearing his rapid footsteps or perhaps sensing a familiar presence, Frigga turned about. At the sight of her sons, a smile lit her face, her hands rose outstretched, and she drew Loki and Thor into quick embraces.

"Heimdall informed us of your coming – and expected you to join us on the morrow!" She shook her head. "You two have not rested -"
"Mother-" Loki began.
"I know," Frigga's eyes became solemn and she nodded and squeezed Loki's shoulder. "I know. We will speak of everything later," her blue eyes rested on the young medics and mages beneath her supervision. "Not here."

"Where is Father?" asked Thor.

"In his Council's tent." Frigga pointed toward a royal red pavilion which had drawn down its curtains. "Go to him. I will join you all within a few minutes."

Tearing himself away reluctantly, Loki nodded followed Thor. He turned a little, uncertainly. Frigga smiled and gestured at him, mouthing: 'Get going!' before turning back to her charges. Suppressing a sigh, Loki followed his brother. As he passed by various groups of soldiers, Loki watched as Thor's presence brought old friends to his side, as unfamiliar and familiar faces crowded round, as cheer and hope spread throughout the ranks.

**AS THOUGH THE ADDITION OF TWO WARRIORS COULD CHANGE ANYTHING,**

something dark within him whispered. Loki gulped back bile which rose in his throat.

*It is not him,* he told himself. *It is not Thanos. It is an old habit. It is your fear. He is not here.*

[...and yet...]

[...the shadows of Darkness...]

[...smoky black hands tug at every corner...]

[...He is waiting...]

[...as he always has through time...]

*And yet in some ways He is here,* Loki thought as the flap of the red tent rose before him and fell behind him. *In this war, Thanos has no doubt played a part. I can feel it. It is in the silences...*

[...as he always has...]

"Thor, Loki," Odin's pale blue eyes rested on his sons momentarily before he rose. "Your arrival is most welcome – as is your haste. I appreciate your concern, but you two do realize what your mother will say when she finds out!"

"We just survived her scolding," chuckled Thor. " Barely. However, we felt haste necessary, considering the situation."

"The Jotunn and their allies stand before us, held at bay," General Tyr frowned. "Is there another threat?"

"The Realm has fallen silent," Loki said, somehow managing to keep his voice even. "Surely the All-Father has recognized the silence for what it is. I know that such a matter seems small to the warriors, but it is important for Asgard as a whole with long-term survival in mind. If Asgard is to rely on the power of its mages..."

"You felt it as well," Mage Agaeti sighed, easing back in his chair. "We have begun work on restoring the connection, but it is difficult unless we can cleanse the origin of the corruption."

"Mage Flarathir had a hand in it no doubt," added Odin with a frown. "He left Asgard and we took aside two of his favoured students and questioned them. They do not know what he did, only that he was unhappy with the order of things, with his supposed fate."

"I daresay he went to the source," Loki said.

"The Well?" Agaeti nodded. "Hrotha and I thought so as well. We have had peasants and farmers working every hour to remove the rubble. It will take another half a day before the entire area is made passable for any ceremony. The good news is that every mage is within the city and together
the connection may be restored and Asgard's power and shielding may rise again.”
"As well as my eyesight," Heimdall's golden eyes rested on Loki thoughtfully before returning to the large round table between the group of men. "I cannot see beyond the constraints of the city."
"So you do not know that Mage Flarathir is dead," Thor frowned.
"He died?!"
"How-"
"On Midgard-?!"
"He died on Midgard, leading a fleet of Chitauri to claim the planet as their own," Thor explained. "The invasion was halted. Thanks to Loki, we know that it was a plot of Thanos, the Mad Titan, in an attempt to regain another Infinity Stone."
"The Tesseract," Loki clarified. "We brought that one home and placed it within the Vault. The Mind Gem," here, Loki glared at Thor a little, "remained on Earth in the hands of a well-secured party."
"You left the Mind Gem with Midgardians?" Odin's blue eyes sparked with anger. "What were you thinking, Thor? Midgardians have no concept – no ability to handle such-"
"When was the last time you were on Earth, Father?" Thor's temper flared in response. Loki rubbed his eyes. "Humanity has learned and grown in ways so unprecedented."
"Boys!" Frigga's voice cut in, silencing both men.

Surreptitiously the mages and generals stepped back, looking a little scared and relieved. Frigga, lowering the tent flap, drew near to the table. She contemplated the table top for a few seconds. Upon it stretched the thin golden lines of a hologram-like map, complete with moving pieces to show the placement of the Jotunn as well as Odin's own forces.

"Have you decided?" Frigga turned to her husband. "Will you offer a peace treaty?"
"You were planning to parley with the Jotunn?" asked Thor curiously.
"Parley?" Odin asked and the rest of the others in the room blinked at the curious expression which the All-Speech managed to translate to a certain extent. "A treaty?"
"I meant 'treat with them'," Thor rolled his eyes.
"Early this morning, we sent word to the Jotunn camp offering King Laufey a chance to speak with myself," Odin sighed. "He responded with a few additional strictures. I am uncertain as to whether we wish to take this step, whether it will do any good-"
"It will do good," Frigga said quietly, "when it is apparent to all that only death lies before them."
"Especially when Thanos is involved," added Loki.
"Thanos may have attacked Midgard," another general put in, "but I fail to see how that directly affects us."
"If Flarathir worked for Thanos and attacked Midgard, then Flarathir may have in fact done as we suspect – corrupted and polluted the sacred connections between the Spirit of the Realm and Asgard, rendering us vulnerable. In this way, the Jotunn would be able to easier enter our Realm and attack us," explained High Mage Agaeti.
"The shields about the castle are no longer adequately powered and have fallen as a result," Heimdall added to Agaeti's explanation. "If anyone else were to join the Jotunn..." He let the unspoken suggestion linger a little in silence.
"Thanks to Thanos," admitted Loki, "I played a part in inciting this war-"
"As did I," Thor quickly added. "We are all a part of this now – and we will do everything in our power to make things right. If that means that we must parley with them, then parley we must."
"Try to speak sense into Laufey," Frigga urged her husband. "Tell him of Thanos and his part to play in manipulating us all. He should see reason."
"Optimistic," Loki grumbled to himself but he fell silent at Frigga's sharp look. "Well, other than attempting to find a peaceful solution, the, ah, parley would give the Mages sometime to reconnect with the Realm."
"Having you here as well may aid us," Mage Agaeti stroked his chin thoughtfully, his deep brown
eyes shrewdly gazing at the young warrior-mage.
"In what way?" asked General Tyr blinking. "One mage can hardly-"
"It depends on the mage," Odin smiled grimly. "Not all mages are born equal."
"If you took part in the ceremony, Father, would you not be able to heal the magickal breach?" asked Thor.
"I would," Odin admitted. "However, I am old and my abilities... my abilities in that area are not what they ought to be. I am more like Laufey than I would like to admit: ill-equipped to be what some call the Other-Mate or the Realm's Shield. Thor, you took part in the Ritual as well – and would have a better chance than I. You are the child of this Realm and close to its heart. This is why you may carry such as Mjolnir."
"I cannot promise to fix anything," Thor's voice tensed a little. "I barely can hear the Voices of the Stars."

"But you have begun, so one day-" Loki laid a hand on Thor's arm. "We cannot wait for 'one day' - Thor turned to Loki. "You said it yourself – the corruption or whatever you called it must be cleansed now!"
"Which is why we will rely on Loki," smiled Mage Agaeti. "It is difficult to explain, but Loki is not a mage like the rest of us. He is also an Other-Mate, except where he comes from, they call it 'Other Soul' or the Voice Incarnate."
"Ohhhh..." Thor looked at Loki thoughtfully. "That is why you knew- That is why you See things others do not."
"Not quite," Loki frowned. "Others may achieve it."
"But your Sight reaches farther, reaches further than any I have known," Frigga smiled, drawing her younger son into a sideways embrace. "You can do this, Loki. Please?"
"You do not have to ask," Loki said, voice suddenly tight and posture suddenly very stiff and prickly (a sure sign he was trying not to show tears). "I would do anything for Asgard." A pause. "Anything."
"I am glad to hear that," Odin said briskly. "If time is required then, I will parley. As Frigga said, perhaps Laufey may see reason and we may find peace. Frigga, I will rely upon you and Loki to aid the Mages in whatever they need. Thor, you may-"
"I will say with Mother and Loki," Thor said quickly. "It would not do to fan the flames of the Jotunn's wrath. Furthermore, even if my grasp of the magick is weak, but I could help focus or – or something..."
"Indeed you could," Loki was quick to agree. "There is something amiss here," the First General Tyr muttered to one of his aides. "Loki has gained some strange power and Thor has gained forethought..."
"A tale worth telling there, I imagine," grunted another general. "Two tales," added the aide, but he was not heard. Already the gruff First General was making his way over to the All-Father's side, a familiar determined look on his face. Sharing a few knowing glances, the General aides and secretaries filed out of the tent, followed by the Mages. High-Mage Agaeti and Mage Hrotha turned to face the tanned, scarred face of the First General. Judging by the mild twitch of Mage Hrotha's eye, Loki could tell that the mage was annoyed with the warrior. Mage Hrotha's shoulders began to tighten.

"Mage Hrotha," Loki found himself saying, drawing the mages' attention away from the warriors. "It would be best if you showed me what efforts have gone into preparation for the ceremony."
"I agree," Frigga smiled. "If the princes and I are meant to be the focal point, we should have a clear idea of how the ritual will take the place."
"Absolutely," Hrotha returned Frigga's smile and allowed her to draw him out of the tent.

Loki and Thor, nodding and slightly bowing, left the tent after their mother. Underneath the grey light of the overcast Asgardian morning, Loki's expression looked more withdrawn and sour than
"I think they are going to talk about me," Loki's voice lowered as they passed by a group of armed peasants who stared at the princes as they swept past. "I think they are," agreed Thor, "but there is not much we can do on the matter. Father will straighten them out."

And what if he is incapable of straightening them out, Thor? Loki wondered. What if Father also does not trust me? What then? Will I end up dogged by minders the entire-

Stop, Loki told himself, shutting his eyes and shaking his head. Stop it, Loki!

"Loki?" Thor stopped and jerked on his brother's elbow, bringing both of them to a halt. "Loki..." The slightly taller warrior sighed as he glanced over his brother's thin frame and stiff face. "Father trusts you. Mother trusts you – and I trust you as well. Do not lose faith in us or yourself."
"The last time we met, things did not go well."
"The last time Father and I spoke things did not go well," pointed out Thor. "Yet I can stand in his presence with confidence, not because of my position or abilities – but because of our relationship, because I am his son. As are you."
"I am not, I was never-"
"Loki," Frigga, having left Mage Hrotha's side and returned to her two tardy sons, had caught the last part of their conversation. "How could you think that after all this time? After all that is between us?" Her blue eyes filled with sadness. "I always saw you as the son that Fate had stolen from me, the son who should have been. When you joined our family, I felt that it was meant to be. We have spoken of this before."

The three of them stood there, surrounded by bustling crowds of warriors and servants and medics and farmers-turned-footmen. Loki raised his unhappy green gaze from his shoes to his mother's sorrowful blue eyes to Thor's matching ones and then back to the red tent behind them.

"I know that what the shadows tell me is a lie, and I have begun-" Loki stopped and then began again, attempting to keep his voice level. "It is very hard."
"It is hard to ignore the whispers which have haunted you all this time," Frigga sighed, drawing her son into another tight embrace. "We now know who has spoken into your dreams, and the prospect of facing such a Darkness may seem impossible, but you must remember that you are no longer alone."
"I am being a fool," Loki's fists clenched. "Never mind me, I do not know what I was thinking."
"You were thinking as you always do," Thor patted Loki's back. "You were worried and were strategizing as usual... Do not fret, Loki."
"You and Mother will sort him out, I know," Loki smiled wanly.
"Always," promised Frigga. "Your Father always needs sorting as you know. Come, Mage Hrotha is anxious to show us the work."

Loki discovered that the crook of his arm had been claimed by his mother. Leading her away and following Thor who caught up with Mage Hrotha to discuss with him the latest court intrigues, Loki decided to focus on what he could do, on what he must do.

Asgard needs me, he thought. He looked at Thor's back and then smiled down at his mother. Asgard needs all of us.

[...He is waiting...]

[...as he always has through time...]
Upon arrival, it was obvious to Loki that the Mage's Court and Academy had been targeted in the
attack. Large portions of the apprentices dormitory lay blackened. A great fire, Mage Hrotha had
explained, broke out due to the use of missiles. Various sections of the Academy itself had fallen into
rubble thanks to the use of explosives, but other portions remained intact. Loki was relieved to see
that the library had not been touched by the fighting. Mage Varthi, bless his soul, Mage Hrotha told
them, took five apprentices studying in the library and erected a barrier immediately, holding it for a
total of six hours until the wave of Marauders and Jotunn had been repelled.

Loki, remembering the stalwart, dour face of Mage Varthi, did not have a hard time believing Mage
Hrotha's story. He was as stubborn as a mule at times, Loki mused, and as cranky as a jarnkottr[1] in
the winter.

Unfortunately, the ceremonial halls had not been so lucky and the Well was currently beneath a layer
of rubble which had once been the east wing of the hall itself and the three revolving stones above.
The three royalty and Mage Hrotha, arriving at the Mage's Court, watched as peasant and soldiers
and mages and apprentices, handing pieces of stone from one to another, formed two long lines
leading out of the largest atrium (which now had a hole in its gracefully arching roof). On occasion,
the lines broke apart, allowing for a mule or horse-drawn carriage to emerge from the large open
doors with a cart and a larger piece of rubble upon it.

"They got down to the Well, Master Hrotha," gasped an apprentice between one large piece of rock
and another. "However, they say we need to clear the area about it for the ceremony."
"Indeed," Mage Hrotha nodded and choosing one of the side doors, led the three into the main
atrium and then down another side flight of stairs to a lower level where Loki and his fellow
apprentices had held their Rites.

It was dusty and gloomy within. Occasional rays of light fell through gaps in the floor above their
heads. As the four progressed down the long hall, the wing showed increasing signs of deterioration
as the walls began to crumble and collapse inward and outward. Lines of workers had removed the
stones at the far end where the main room had stood. It was there that Loki had made his promise;
there where he had been named a Mage of Asgard; there were he entered down into the room of
quiet, where the Well had been ensconced.

A green place, a sacred place. Loki's mouth formed a hard thin line at the sight of the stones being
lifted away from the flattened portion of the building. On either side of them, the walls crumbled
downwards baring the tiled stone floor to the murky sunlight. Closer to the heart of the operation, a
large cluster of mages and apprentices worked, looking dusty and tired and hot from their efforts.

As the Loki, Thor and Frigga picked their way down past the broken statues and wood and tiles and
brick, Mage Hrotha outlined the plans for the ritual. It would involve two circles of mages and seven
lines radiating outward comprised of apprentices. Sigils would be laid on the ground and round
about, the better to draw in the raw power of the Unseen from the surrounding environs.

"There are others," Hrotha huffed and puffed as they reached the center of the devastation, "but the
power required to draw upon those distant powers would be..."
"Disproportionate to the result required?" Loki hazarded.
"I should..." Frigga's voice trailed off at the sight before them when the four arrivals finally reached the edge of the Well.

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Thor looked down at the Well, looked at his mother's still face and Loki's drawn one, looked back at the dark water, and then looked back up in growing confusion.

"It is black – pitch black," he finally said. "No natural water can..." Thor recovered enough to ask: "Is that what you two meant by the pollution – or is it indicative of something worse?"
"Something worse," Loki stepped back a little gingerly. "A shadow lies between the Realm and its Spirit. No one should touch the cursed well."
"A terrible omen," Hrotha muttered. "I must return to Agaeti and speak with him at once. We must purify it as soon as may be."
"Agreed."
"If there was any question about the return of Thanos and his work within our Realm, then it has been laid to rest," Frigga sighed. "As we all feared."
"We will cleanse it and regain the power of our peoples," Thor assured his mother. "Thanos will not win this battle, nor will we allow him to win the war."

Loki, stepping back a little further, seemed to Thor a trifle too pale and nauseous. Loki was always more sensitive than us regarding magick. Considering what he endured at the hands of Thanos and his allies, Loki cannot see this as anything but a threat.

As his younger brother abruptly about face and stride off aimlessly, Thor glared up at the lowering smoky grey sky overhead.

Tomorrow, Father will hold parley with the Jotunn – with Laufey – and we will begin the process of healing Asgard. Thor sighed. Tomorrow can not come soon enough.

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"It is cold," General Tyr murmured as he strode back and forth in the large, three-sided tent which his men had erected in the middle of what had once been a fenced in field for cows headed to market.

Farmer Kyrstonr, now one of the refugees making his way further west with his herd of cattle, had shaken his head at the sight of the trampled grass now churned into mud. War, the monosyllabic peasant had grumbled before drudging off after his family's cart.

Now, the field stood empty and the houses and the stalls and the various sized smaller pens ringed about it also were silent beneath the perpetually grey skies. It was an ominous quiet broken only by the occasional creaking of rope and tackle as a listless wind plucked at the white banners now raised.

"The sun is shadowed. The weather has turned sour..." Agaeti looked up from the parchment spread before him. A small lantern hung with a dim light, shedding a little bit of gold about the elderly Asgardian. "Early winter has fallen on Asgard."
"Do you remember when my father returned on a litter from Vanaheim. Vanaheim, the land of greenery, and Midgard, the land of the youthful sun," Odin stood at the open end of the tent and looked out across the dreary scenery before him. "Places of death, where my father and his father before him fell to the sword. Worlds that could not hold a candle to our Realm, but now Asgard has been touched by grief and Winter has come knocking at our door."
"Do not open it," Tyr grunted.
"I could say something about feeling a draft," chuckled Agaeti dryly.
"They come," Odin's voice lowered.
"Hm." Agaeti set down his pen, rolled the parchment and tied a quick ribbon around it before handing it to a waiting apprentice. "Let them come. Our people have set the ceremony in motion. Can you feel it?"

Odin, sitting down in the great oak chair reserved for him, did not reply, but his glance at the gently stirring flag outside the door was thoughtful.

[...you feel it?]

[...the turning of the tide...]

[...battered rise to their feet, strength renewed...]

"It has been some time since we saw each other last," Laufey said as he took a seat in a large chair provided him by one of Tyr's aides. On Laufey's left, two quiet generals stood as well as what looked like a foot soldier. "Quite some time, Odin King."
"That would have been when my son visited your Realm," Odin nodded with the air of tired wisdom.
"'Visited',' echoed Laufey blandly. "A simple word for a complex situation."
"It was... complex," Odin agreed. "Errors on all of our parts were made and have led to this... unnecessary conflict."
"An error on my part?" Laufey raised an eyebrow.
"Did your people not attempt to remove the Casket from the Vault? It provoked my son. It provoked war."
"They were lured there. You know that to be true."
"Lured?" Odin raised an eyebrow. "By whom?"
"You know by what," Laufey bit out. "In the end, the thing was a snake. Did it bite you as well? Is that why you cast it off to Jotunheim?"
"It?"
"The thing which masqueraded as your second son."

Odin's face tightened for the barest second before he leaned forward, "I have not cast my son off. In fact, I sent him back to you in order to repair what damage he did your world. Prince Loki is gifted in many ways, and I thought it a fair punishment for him as well as fair return for what he had attempted. Agaeti?"

"Ah! Loki!" Agaeti wagged his white head sagely. "A firebrand if ever there was one, but good at heart, yes. In the past, we had sent him on many missions and assignments to Realms or planets in distress. A double-edged blade, indeed. Sometimes extreme, always effective... always brilliant. All-Father told us that he had sent his son down in recompense, which I had thought at the time would aid Jotunheim to recover. He is after all-"

"That thing is not my son," Laufey's voice froze the very air between them.
"He is your son – and he is something else even more important." Odin said mildly. "Yet, I am glad to claim him as my own. He meant to teach Thor and I a lesson – and this war was the unforeseen result... but there is something else. Someone else who lurks deeper within the shadows and who weaves a treacherous tale for us all. It is why I asked to speak with you."
"Someone behind... behind..."

"Behind Loki." Odin folded his hands. "Something tugs upon Loki's heart and mind – a darkness, a shadow... and it has fallen upon Asgard. Can you not feel it? The still air and the dead waters?" His aide set two large mugs filled with mead on the small table between them. "Or perhaps you have already felt it... A hint that perhaps something is not quite right. Perhaps there has been an uncertainty at the back of your mind. Perhaps you wonder – is this how it was meant to be?"
"You think someone drove..." Laufey's hands tightened around each other as he continued, "Loki to his madness?"
"Loki was not mad, merely desperate to show us the truth of something." Odin sighed. "His inability to turn to us for aid, his pride and his fear... these all drove him into extreme measures. When was such pride and fear born? When he was a child, forsaken and unloved? When he was a slave, alone and determined? Or was it with him all this time... from the moment of his birth?"

"It is vaetki, a Nothing. It should have been disposed at birth." spat one of the Generals, who then flinched at the vicious look which Laufey bestowed upon him.

"Some would call such practices barbaric," Agaeti said smoothly, "but from what I understand, the ah, runts of the Jotunn were aborted or killed upon birth due to deformities."

"Deformities and powers," Laufey elaborated. "There are stories that within the dark ages of the beginning, the Lesser Kindred built Jotunheim, but they were not stable and neither was their power. Since the initial destruction of Jotunheim, the Lesser Kindred have been removed from our people one way or another."

"They still are born," Odin noted.

"On occasion," Laufey sighed.

"How do you know that the, ah, Lesser Kindred are less reliable nowadays?" asked Agaeti, his blue eyes suddenly sharp. "Our records also hold many accounts of those you call Cursed, and although some were prone to instability, a large majority were harmless – and even more importantly, gifted and generous." Agaeti shrugged. "So, a few of the Ancient Kind made some errors... Can one condemn whole generations of beings according the mistakes of their ancestors? I think not."

"Especially if we consider the one behind Loki," Odin interjected. "Heimdall has seen a Shadow growing throughout the Realm of Midgard. It is growing – and Loki has come from the heart of it, bringing news of the greatest import: a Titan."

"A Titan," Laufey pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes for a few seconds before meeting Odin's gaze. "You would believe this tall tale of one such as – as Loki?"

"Loki is many things," Odin sighed. "A prankster, a trickster, a storyteller, an adept within magic and the illusory arts... but his heart remains with those who cherish him. He would not put Asgard or its people at risk. Loki may... at times... resort to extreme measures, but concerning a Titan? He would not lie."

"A Titan."

"I never saw one but my grandfather told me that many Titans roamed the Realms when they were young. In fact, I heard you aided the Celestials and other Ancients to imprison a Titan. Is that true?"

"Thanos. Yes, we imprisoned him," Odin shook his head, "but as I feared, he has been freed and now threatens us all – with the Infinity Stones. It was he who has overshadowed Loki's thoughts all these years. Loki sensed his evil purpose – and has been fighting it all this time."

Laufey said nothing. Odin, watching the dark-skinned aged monarch's face, fancied he caught a glimmer of something in the deep red eyes opposite him. The slash of dark which marked Laufey's lips were firmly turned down at the edges, but there was something else there that could not easily expressed. Pride, Odin wondered. After all this time...

"I know what you seek," Odin continued onward, carefully. "You seek the Casket and the restoration of your Realm."

"You have said that you will not return it," Laufey leaned forward then. "Why would I ask for it again, knowing your answer?"

"Considering our shared enemy and the importance of facing the Mad Titan together," Odin explained, "I would return it to you. We would then end this war and face our true enemy together."

"All-Father." Tyr rose to his feet, looking the part he was to play – anxious and angry.

"Tyr." Odin gave his subordinate a look, at which Tyr took his seat, looking subdued.

"Your people will need to decide," Laufey guessed.

"Two days," Odin smiled and added smoothly. "I have already decided on my part. It is merely a matter of telling my people. Once decided, the scribes will write a treaty and we will exchange our war for a new alliance."
Laufey cocked his head.

"War for alliance."
"Yes," Odin rose to his feet then. "Will you agree?"
"In two days, I will have my answer, Odin All-Father," Laufey stood then, his dark wiry hair brushing the top of the tent. "In two days, we shall know either way."
"The Casket will be returned to Jotunheim," Odin nodded.

[...and...]

[...there stirred...]

After an exchange of further compromises on both parts, Laufey and his two generals and aide left, allowing Odin and his own party to depart in the other direction.

"So you will give them the Casket?" Tyr frowned at Odin's back.
"If I must," Odin replied and then glanced at Agaeti wryly. "You must know that it will not change anything... not now at any rate. It is too late for Jotunheim."
"Not unless," Agaeti paused.
"Unless?" Tyr asked.
"The Casket is only one of three. It is the medium, if you will, of two parts – the Realm's Soul and the Other Soul. The Other Soul changes from being to being, from king to king... If a Realm is blessed by the Norns, the line is not broken." Agaeti sighed. "The All-Father is gifted in some ways, but not entirely in this way."
"And Thor?" asked Tyr.
"It is hard to say," Agaeti replied diplomatically. "A question of whether it is due to lack of ability or lack of... application."
"Lack of application," Odin grunted. "The boy underestimates the importance of a Realm's Soul. Loki, on the other hand... I think he knows. He knows and has turned his back on his own Realm. No, Tyr," Odin clapped the old warrior on the back, "we may give them the Casket, but it is too late for them. It will mean nothing now, unless Loki is holding it."

At that, the three men arrived at the end of the southernmost line of apprentices. The apprentices, clad in the white and blues of the Mage's academy, did not turn at their arrival. Each were linked to each other in straight columns, left hands resting on the shoulder of the one before them. With their eyes closed and the right hands raised steadily before their chest, palms outwards, the mages' apprentices looked unnerving to Tyr's untutored eye as he passed by.

"What are they doing?" He found that his voice had sunk into a whisper for some reason.
"Drawing upon their own power," Agaeti explained quietly. "With the combined power of everyone and what is in reserve within the Realm's soil and the Other Soul of the Realm..."
"Thor."
"Yes, and Loki who is an Other Soul and has his own connection to the Stars," Agaeti finished, "we may push back the Shadow and corruption of Thanos, cleanse the Well, and link Asgard more firmly into the magickal framework it requires for health."

Now they were at the center. Loki, Thor, Frigga, Hrotha and Verra were standing in a circle around the Well, both arms out palms down with their heads tipped back and eyes closed.

"What are they doing?"

Odin said nothing in reply to Tyr's hushed question. Tyr turned to Agaeti, but the High Mage would not respond. He merely crooked a knobbly finger upward, pointing at the circle of Mage's banners surrounding the clearing. The elderly general did not need to see the gently stirring silks of gold and
red to know that the wind was returning. As something stirred in the air and tugged at his own silver grey air, Tyr took a deep breath. It felt as though for the first time in a long time he was waking up.

[...and...]

[...there stirred...]

Loki did not hear the whisper of the wind or the gentle clatter of the flags. He did not hear the hushed whispers of Tyr or the occasional cough of an apprentice. He did not hear the mumble of Hrotha's workings. He was soaring upward, reaching out to the stars and drawing close the rough yet warm Spirit which had vitalized Asgard for as long as the universe had shone bright. He could hear the other songs of the young stars and the more experienced ones within Asgard's glow.

...you have come...

...Other-Soul...

...as was Fated...

He was falling back now, drawing the light with him. With a shout that sounded like a thousand trumpets, the Soul's power swirled around the tight circle before bursting out along the lines of acolytes. They were all connected now – carrying the life of Asgard outward.

...this darkness cannot last...

...not when we stand side by side...

Light and colour swirled about them and the connection was once again reforged. Shadows clung at the edges, but with each chanting, they would shrink and disappear all together.

...this darkness cannot last...

...it is our eternal battle...

...thus We stand at your side...

...dear ones...

It will take some time, he told the Spirit. It is not finished yet. Not yet.

Loki's green eyes opened and he gazed into the haze of magick which sank down from his fingertips into the Well, leaving him feeling wakeful and refreshed.

The colour of magick, he thought, is indescribable. It is so beautiful... and it can never end. Loki looked over at Thor. Thor's blue eyes were also gazing down entranced. We have all seen it... and we will never forget. And those who see, let them see – and let them never forget.

[...the wind stirred...]

[...and life returned again...]

[...and by the by...]

[...the Song would be heard again...]
"The magick is stabilizing?" Odin asked Loki the next morning.

Loki paced back and forward by the door of the Royal quarters, set up in what had been Lord Lothar's city home. The spacious rooms now housed the Royal family, the High Council, and other servants and aides. Thor and Loki, after refusing to appropriate someone else's rooms, had bedded down on their parents' floor on wide rugs of mountain bear fur and underneath equally thick goose down blankets hand sewn by the palace maids.

Having risen from bed at the crack of dawn, Loki discovered that his family had also begun to rise. Within an hour, the three of them were seated about the breakfast table. Loki found himself unable sit down and eat much. Despite his mother's scolding and Thor's repeated entreaties to sit down, Loki contented himself with nibbling on some toast and staring out the windows.

"It is," Loki paused for a moment, "but we need time."

"Today, Loki and Thor will continue the Focus," Frigga looked up from her eggs and glanced over at Thor. "Thor was able to concentrate quite well yesterday, so my involvement is less necessary," she added with some pride. "I will of course remain on hand should anyone tire."

"Merely standing about and being still," mumbled Thor modestly into his cup of mead. "Although my arms ached a little, on the whole I felt even more rested when I ended the ceremony."

"Thor did quite well," admitted Loki. "You said yesterday night that Laufey wants the Casket of Ancient Winter? Would you give it to him?"

"I could," Odin shrugged. He pushed his plate back and reached for the cup of tea which Frigga had just poured for him. "The others would not agree, however."

"The others," Thor frowned. "You mean the generals and the mages?"

"As usual, they cannot see beyond the past and the injuries of that long and hard war between Asgard and Jotunheim."

"Unseeing hatred and overwhelming fear does not make for reasonable discourse," Loki sighed.

"They cannot see that the Jotunn need the Casket? Loki tells me that without the Casket, the Realm will fall into nothing! Their Spirit has been damaged for so long," Thor frowned. "Just as ours is now. Yet they would allow something like that to come to pass on Jotunheim?"

"They do not know the true state of Jotunheim," Loki pointed out. "Remember how shocked you were when you landed there?"

"I suppose it is hard for many to imagine a world without a secure foundation," Frigga turned to Odin and added: "You have to make them see reason. Otherwise... the Jotunn and their allies may be pushed to their own deaths."

"Of course," Odin glared at his tea cup. "Today we will gather and discuss it, but without Loki, I hardly think the Casket will-"

"All-Father! I need to speak him at once!"

"Tala!" Upon hearing her maid's raised voice, Frigga ran to the door, pulled it open, and pushed past the two guards who had been stationed outside their chamber. "Tala, what is the matter?"

"I must speak with the All-Father!"

"Come in, come in!" Frigga pulled the girl in, giving the guards a sharp look.

"Mistress Iletha of the Wards just sent word – the rear camp is under attack. Several Jotunn have already entered the city from the south-east and-"

Thor and Loki bolted out the room at the girl's first words, followed hard by Odin who began to bellow orders as the three of them made their way down the hall and out to Lord Lothar's front entrance and stairs. By the time the three had arrived in the courtyard, a wide-eyed, breathless messenger was dismounting from his sweating horse.

"Where are they?" Odin barked out. "What news have you? How many have arrived in the city? From which direction did they come?"

"They make for the palace, Your Majesty," gasped the short man. "I did not see them with their eyes
but Master Koren from the south sent word that he counted a goodly company – and they seem to be headed to the center of the city. At a guess, the palace."
"Yet the All-Father is here," muttered a guard. "Surely they do not think to-"
"The Vault." Loki said succinctly.
"Hold tight," Thor warned Loki as Mjolnir crashed through the wood door of Lord Lothar's home and settled in his hand.
"Hold tight for what?"

Grabbing his brother around the waist, Thor swung Mjolnir several times and then raised it, lifting the two men off his feet with a sudden jerk. As the crowded courtyard faded into the distance, Loki gritted his teeth.

"Thor!" He bawled. "This is rash! What are we to do when we arrive?"
"I do not know!" Thor yelled back as the city rushed past them. "You have not come up with a plan yet?"
"How could I?" growled Loki indignantly. "We have just heard the news!"
"Think faster!"
"How can I- Ah!"

A statue suddenly reared its head up in their path. Mjolnir swerved around it and continued onward, drawing closer to the rising towers of the Palace. Beneath the overcast sky, Odin's golden halls seemed more like a dirty bronze, holding only the barest dull gleam. As the two drew closer, Loki caught a glimpse of rising smoke and torrents of peasants and medics and other civilians milling about, rushing like thin streams through the veins of the cities. Coming from the south-east, as the reports said, there was a thinner line of blue. Several Jotunn were disappearing into the side entrance of the palace most often used by the servants.

"An inside job!" Thor shouted.
"'Inside job'?" Loki bellowed his question into Thor's ear as they darted over a bridge and under a causeway.
"Someone inside the palace told them where to go – or someone who had been there before told them about the servants' entrance!" Thor explained.

Mjolnir veered toward the entrance and within moments the two princes were brought to the upper steps where Thor immediately began to smash his hammer into the last of the enemy's company which now laboured up the stairs. Whispering a working which gave an added blast of fire power to his thin knives, Loki threw three of his blades across the servants' courtyard, taking down two more Jotunn. He darted inside and began to make his way through the halls where refugees and servants cowered, some of them gravely injured, others too frightened to move. Ignoring them, Loki followed the trail of devastation left behind the vanguard of Jotunn.

"We are not far behind, Thor!"
"I am right behind you, Loki!" bawled Thor. "Keep running!"

At his brother's encouragement, Loki sped up. Behind him, he could hear his brother's heavy boots pounding. Together, the two princes raced down the halls and stairs. Loki swerved around the corner at their left and disappeared down the last hallway leading to the Vault.

"Whoa!" Thor yelped as his boots suddenly slipped on a long patch of ice spreading across the floor. Skidding past the door, Thor swung himself to the right, called Mjolnir to his hand, and threw his hammer down the hall to splinter the ice and to punch through the door. With an unimpressive thud, Mjolnir bounced off the door's carved facade, leaving behind a heavy dent, and fell onto the ground.

Loki turned slowly and gave his brother a disbelieving look.
"What?" Thor shrugged. "It is but a door."
"I can not believe you tried that," Loki shook his head, barely masking amusement. "On the other hand, it did put a dent in it – which is impressive considering Father had the door reinforced after you... left."
"You can stop talking any time now, Loki," Thor made his way carefully down the stairs. "Is it locked from the inside?"
"Did you even approach the door?" Loki rolled his eyes, stepped through the doorway as the great doors rose in front of him – and came to a tense stop at the top of the great stairway.

It was here, he thought, here that Father and I last argued. Here, where I discovered... Here, where my worst fears were seemingly confirmed... Here, where...

The air within the Vault was unnaturally cold. Ice spread across the floor showing the clear path of the Jotunn's natural abilities as they had made their way down the hall. Two guards lay dead, hastily thrown aside and now half-wedged into the alcoves where Odin's many treasures stood.

Five Jotunn, Loki counted. The five stood there and stared in awe down at the silver and blue Casket which flared gently. It was small in size compared to the Jotunn giants. Loki drew in a sharp breath as the memory of wielding it returned to him with the impact of a sudden blow. Its handles fitted his palms perfectly; it had become a part of him. It spoke to me...


The Jotun Captain's hand swept down – and through the Casket. A gasp. Thor's face filled with horror as the Casket disappeared in wisps of smoke. Recognizing the horror for what it was, the Jotunn whipped about and then stepped back uncertainly.

"It is-"
"An illusion?" Thor blinked. "Father must have... moved it! Loki – did you see-"

Thor, turning to his brother, paused as something familiar appeared from the recesses of Loki's 'pocket', the mysterious temporal fold which his brother had created during his mage apprenticeship.

Loki's long fingers closed around silver handles, and he smiled darkly as the power of the Casket coursed through his veins; as the cold turned his skin his natural blue; as his eyes glinted stonily, red as rubies.

"Looking for this?" He asked frostily and let the ice storm fly.

Chapter End Notes

There you guys go! An update! Almost 9K long... a lot of work... and I hope you guys liked it! Let me know if you did! We're getting to the end... and after that... Well, we'll see if I do a sequel (aka book 4) for this monster - or if I get sucked into writing X-Wing fanfiction for Star Wars 7 since that is one of my favorite films now. Be sure to click on the art link on the profile!

Glossary
[1] Ironcat (from Jotunheim)
Chapter Notes

Well, here's an update - now that I am in a place where there's internet~ Yay~

Thanks to everyone who reviewed! I'm sticking this story for you guys!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Cosmos was formed from nameless darkness and cold. That is how the stories go. In a wash of light and heat, the Realms were formed. Such a primeval history Asgardian celebrate in the rising and the setting of their Sun’s equinoxes twice a year. For as their people rose out of the ancient ages, flame and power became the glory of Asgard. Yet there are others who claim the power of the dark – the Dark Elves and the Jotunn. It is they who remember the power of the dark and the ice. With the rising of their cold suns, Bleikr-vitr and Kala'vitr, the Jotunn praise the arrival of the Wintry Dawn.

*The Forn’a’vetr, the Casket of Ancient Winters*, the sages of Jotunheim say, *embodies the Spirit of such a Realm. In the hands of a powerful mage, in the hands of a True Heir, it wrought the Realm - Jotunheim emerged from the mists of Time with power. One day, it is said, another will come and herald the coming of the Unending Spring.*

[...in the barren winter of Early Time...]

[...life springs...]

[...cold and pure...]

For a moment, Thor could not find breath as a blizzard of snow and ice raged about him, pouring out from the glowing box which had materialized within his brother's hands. Sheets of ice and blankets of snow thicker than any Jotunn magick spread like a wave over the floor and upward into the reaches of the Vault's arched ceiling. Using Mjolnir to free his legs, Thor turned and gazed in awe at the statues of ice to his left – the Jotunn now captured and secured.

Shouts resounded as a phalanx of Asguardian soldiers brandishing short swords and farmers brandishing long spears burst into the room, rushing past Loki and Thor as they stood and gazed at each other.

-0-0-0-

"How are you feeling?"
"Better."
"You look less pale."
"The new potions from yesterday have been quite effective."

Laufey gave Farbauti a worried look, but the monarch pressed his lips tight and said nothing. Instead, the King rubbed his brow and settled himself forward, elbows on his knees as he contemplated what lay before him. Farbauti, knowing how worried his beloved was, fell silent. His dark red eyes wandered over the servant who set down a plate of tarnished silver filled a variety of sliced fish and hard bread. Byleistr, without turning his head, nodded in thanks, but he did not touch the dish.
Nothing was said until Helblindi, thanking the elderly Jotunn quietly, allowed the servant to pass.

Silence hung in the air. The only sound within the iced cavernous storage room, which the Royal family had claimed as their private quarters, was the dull scritch-scritch of Byleistr's stylus on the parchment before him. In the far distance, they could hear the distant clash of swords at practice and the call of the changing guards.

Helblindi's shadow, filling the dull ray of light which poured in through the door, spread unwavering.

Farbauti's eyes glazed as he gazed down at the edges. He could almost imagine it becoming sharper as the light grew.

"We are alone?" asked Laufey carefully.
"Yes. So," Helblindi said, "is it true? What I hear?"
"What is it you heard?"
"Whispers," the tall prince did not turn his head. "This... this does not sit well with me."
"Agreed," Farbauti laid his hand on his beloved's callused palm. "Things have spiraled beyond our control. We should leave this place."
"If we return to Jotunheim," Laufey sighed, "we return empty handed. Our efforts will have been in vain. No. We have no choice but to go forward. Our people need a sign of hope."
"And the dead?" Farbauti's fist clenched. "What hope do they have? Even if the Casket were to be returned to us, even if we were able to claim it – what good would it do?" He ended on a harsh whisper. "You – we all know the truth!"
"The Casket could work!" Byleistr turned in his seat then.
"Not without..." Farbauti trailed off and glanced at Helblindi uneasily.

Not without a True Heir. Like unwieldy stones, the unspoken words sunk into the silence which followed. Helblindi's shoulders hunched even more and he scowled out into the pale sunlight. The light was growing, and to the prince it did not bode well.

"What did you hear?" Laufey finally addressed his eldest child.
"As you asked, I visited the north guards." Helblindi turned then. "Scout Hulla spoke of rumours – whispers. They filtered into the Marauders camp and were brought to my attention. Traders from within the port have spoken of new arrivals to the Realm."
"New arrivals?" Farbauti leaned forward. "Vanaheim?"
"Not yet, surely," Byleistr half-rose in alarm.
"No. The Princes." Helblindi's words blistered with frost. "The princes of Asgard have returned."
"Both-" Byleistr fell back into his chair. "Thor... and..."
"Yes," Helblindi gazed at his father solemnly. "If he is to speak of your actions on Jotunheim, we could possibly find little mercy in our enemies."
"He would not speak of his connection to Jotunheim," Laufey said.

Yet, the monarch hesitated.

"We need Loki if we are to use the Casket," Helblindi stated bluntly.
"Yet I do not imagine he will return to Jotunheim," Byleistr said softly.
"If we asked-"
"Even if we hoped for a favour, we may not ask for it," Laufey cut off Farbauti. "If he were to return, there would be an uproar among the people. Those who worship the ancient times would move to replace Helblindi with the – with the... Then there would be others – those who hold to the traditions of our fathers – who would attempt to kill him, particularly in order to win Helblindi's favour."
"Still-
"With the Casket," Laufey continued inexorably, "Helblindi may have a chance." 
"I-" Helblindi stopped suddenly.

I have no ability and you know it, Father! Even with the Casket in my hands, it would be but another weapon of destruction – not the instrument of creation it was meant to be. This is not my battle. Even I can see the futility now...

"It is more complicated than that," Byleistr interjected, eyeing his brother nervously. "I told you that I overheard two lords speaking of Lord Metnath and his plans to take the Casket himself. If he were to attempt it truly-"
"He will not succeed," Laufey slashed the air with an angry hand. "The heart of the city is too well guarded for that."
"The noble is certainly foolish enough to try," Helblindi shook his head. "Byleistr is right. We must nip the matter in the bud and draw back our people before further damage is done. I will attempt to find the dissidents and... speak with them."
"If speaking with them does not stop their madness, then you know what to do," Laufey nodded curly. "As for the Casket, we need to ensure that Asgard is aware of our intentions."
"An attempt for the Casket, attacking the Vault and the civilians within the city..." Byleistr sighed. "I fear that it would destroy our chances for a treaty."
"Perhaps you could find and speak with Loki, Bylla. Make him understand our position," Farbauti suggested gently.
"I think he understands our position all too well," Byleistr gave his fylgja a hard stare. "He no longer cares... and why should he?" Byleistr rose to his feet, his cheeks flushing dark indigo. "He has every reason to suspect us and hate us." He paused and glanced down at his journal and added softly, "Yet I do wish to speak to him nonetheless."
"How do you propose we meet-"

Helblindi's question, drowned out by a rising wave of shouts, was never answered. Someone was coming to the door. At the look on Laufey and Farbauti's face, Helblindi's stomach sank. Have our worst premonitions come to pass?

-0-0-0-

As the guards rushed past, Thor found his footing and his voice again. Should they come to their senses, Thor decided, they may attempt to apprehend Loki as well as the Jotunn captives. Without giving the faintly hollering Jotunn a second glance, the Prince shoved his way up the stairs. Grabbing Loki who seemed to have frozen on the spot in something akin to uncertainty and horror, the Crown Prince hustled his now Jotunn-formed brother out of the Vault, through the side hall and up the short steps of a side passage.

"You had it all along!" Thor whispered hoarsely, barely managing to contain his unholy glee. His chuckle echoed down the stone walls and then ended in a strangled yelp as Loki punched his brother on the arm sharply. "What did you do that for?" asked Thor in a wounded tone.
"This is no laughing matter!"
"Well, I suppose not," Thor gave Loki a put upon look. "You have to admit it is a good laugh." The blond-haired warrior sobered. "When did you steal it?"
"I did not steal it," Loki rolled his eyes. "Well, I suppose I did in a manner of speaking..." As the phalanx of soldiers reappeared with the Jotunn in stun-chains and cuffs, he drew Thor further down the passage before admitting, "Father loaned me the Casket for a quest and all I did was... not replace it."
"Since when?"
"It has been some years."
"Loki!"
"The Casket has proven itself useful," Loki shrugged. "You have Mjolnir... why should I not have some weapon for battle?"
"It is useful, I agree. A storm worthy of Mjolnir," Thor agreed, "but I still think my hammer is better."
"You would," Loki shook his head and rolled his eyes.
"So what did you use it for?"
"The Casket? Well." Loki ran his blue hand through his long black hair and grimaced. "That was how I trained the Bifrost on Jotunheim – I froze the Gate and powered the beam into the Realm. It did some damage... and I suppose the Jotunn will not forgive me for that. I doubt they have guessed that their own relic was partially responsible for the destruction of their Realm."
"How many... People. Thor stopped as he realized what he had nearly vocalized. He leaned back against the cool stone and sighed. Jotunn are people too. That is what Steve said. This war will cost more than Asgard. Loki will also lose his family. "How many Jotunn died?"
"None of my family," Loki crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes at the new brother he seemed to have received. "Few Jotunn were caught up in it, but the Realm's wilderness was... the land was wounded."
"That was when Father exiled you to Jotunheim?"
"Yes."
"After you destroyed it?"
"I did not destroy it!" Loki gave his brother an annoyed glare. His thin shoulders slumped a little. "I suppose I did. Last time I... visited... it appeared as though the Utanheim was damaged. The mountains, the islands of the Eybjarg... Hlutí's hut and the forest... perhaps the tunglboms and the healing stone fields... and the wolves..." A pause and Loki's green eyes filled with sadness. "They are all gone now, I suppose. In my haste to protect Asgard, I destroyed some of the only good things about Jotunheim."
"Could you go back and... and fix it?" Thor asked hesitantly. "With our mages – with the Jotunn mages – could you undo the damage?"
"No." Loki looked away, his jaw tight and his blue fingers darkening as they tightened around his the elbows of his leather jerkin. "Not even with all the mages of Asgard could you undo the damage – and the Jotunn mages were killed long ago – at the edict of our father after the Last War." A moment, then: "No. There is nothing to be done."
"Then why do they fight for the Casket?"
"The Casket represents hope, I suppose," Loki shrugged. "I heard stories and I have seen things... visions of a distant past. Born in the snows of Jotunheim when the Jotunn rose from the snow – Jotunn like myself. They were the mages and the creators. They fashioned the Casket out of power and ice and wind with the aid of the Heimsrsal. Only a warrior-mage of Jotunheim who is also a True Soul could meld with the Casket and the Heimsrsal to heal Jotunheim now."

Thor contemplated his scuffed boots. They had been brought to him the night of their arrival along with the rest of his old wardrobe. In some ways, the Asgardian leathers and metal felt jarringly strange and comfortably familiar at the same time. The prince wondered if his brother felt the same way. Loki had once again donned his preferred slim black and green attire complete with throwing knives. Yet Loki did not look happy. We saved the day, Thor mused, but once again it does not feel like a victory.

"You are a warrior-mage," Thor finally said. "You hear the Voices of the Stars, do you not? Could you not save Jotunheim?"
"I could. Perhaps." Loki replied. His voice seemed calm, almost meditative. "I do not know if I wish to."
"Yes," Thor sighed.
He remembered Steve's words.

*If you can understand that when I talk about letting the past go, letting it be, I am not saying that lightly.*

*It just reminds me that there is bravery and honour in everyone. Sometimes less than you would like, but it's there – if you look for it.*

...*Heroism comes in many forms...*

...*being able to see look at something from another person's point of view. That's a great ability. Being able to forgive – that can be heroic. Walking away from an unnecessary fight. Yeah, there are other kinds of ways to be a hero.*

*Heroism is putting your beliefs into action – even if other people don't understand, even if you are hurt as a result. It is one thing to know, it is another thing to do.*

He wished he could say something just as truthful and encouraging for Loki.

"I heard," Thor said slowly, measuring his words, "that letting the past go is difficult. Sometimes it feels – sometimes it is – impossible... but that is probably the greatest form of heroism. At least, that is what I have learned in the past year or so."

"Heroics?" Loki tilted his head. "I do not remember pursuing that kind of ideal."

"Hm."

A pause.

"If you never pursued a noble end with great bravery, what was attempting to protect Asgard about?"

Another pause.

"That was..." Loki fists curled tighter and he looked away. "That was a short madness."

"And trying to warn Midgard about Thanos, trying to save me?" pursued Thor. "Loki, even now you pursue peace and you do not wish Asgard harm. You mourn the loss of the wilds of Jotunheim..."

"All my life, I just... I just wanted to be needed, to be wanted. I – I wanted to be known, to be named, to be – to be loved. I am now. Now I have a people, a name, a family. To protect that, maybe that is heroism, but there seems to be an element of self-service as well. That cannot be heroism, surely."

"Well, we are not perfect," Thor rubbed his chin in thought. "Altruism is a rare thing even for heroes – and you are one, Loki. A different kind of hero, but one nonetheless. You are a good person, Loki."

"How am I supposed to reply to that?" Loki's blue cheeks flushed a little darker, and he blinked away tears rapidly and offered his brother an uncertain smile.

"You do not need to," Thor shrugged. "Still, what do you think we should do? What should I do? What should Asgard do?"

"We need to think clearly," Loki said. "We need to consider the long-term problem at hand, which is Thanos." Abruptly the slight warrior-mage pushed away from the wall and began to turn into his usual visage of pale skin and brilliant green eyes. "You are right for once, Thor. Jotunheim and Asgard must rebuild their alliances if the Realms are to succeed in battling against the Mad Titan. If that means returning the Casket – or returning with the Casket, that is what we – that is what I – must do."
Thor stepped forward with a frown, mouth opening to say something but Loki's hand cut through the air decisively.

"Thor," he smiled across at his brother. "You have your own burdens – kingship and Jane and Midgard. I have mine."
"If you say so..."
"We need to get moving," Loki jerked his head in the direction of the main passageway. "Something is stirring."
"What-"

Before Thor could quiz Loki, the younger prince disappeared around the corner at a run, followed hard by Thor. Just like the last time, he thought as they hurried out of the main hall and looked across the city. Just like the last time, he echoed himself as he took in the sight of smoke rising from the south near the lower reaches of Skythurs.

"A new engagement," he murmured, swinging Mjolnir experimentally. "Loki," he turned to his brother, face solemn. "We must put a stop to it as soon as may be."
"I am right behind you, brother," Loki grinned.

[...within the harshest winter, hope is born...]
[...the air fills once again...]
[...the song of the fates rises...]
[...the worlds turn once again...]

Rushing out of his tent and bawling at his men to stand down, Odin swiftly mounted his waiting horse followed by a phalanx of guards and two of his trusted generals. Joining him at the head of the small unit, Heimdall began to give the All-Father as much information as he had on what had happened. A small unit of Jotunn, according the golden-eyed Gatekeeper, had trespassed over the line, supposedly looking for food when three lookout archers, newly informed of the attack on the palace, had fired upon them. Fighting had ensued.

"It is spiraling out of control," Odin bit out. "We must draw our men back if we are to remain blameless in this conflict?"
"At the risk of lives?" asked a general stiffly.
"Our lives are not only at risk," Odin glared ahead as his horse raced down the main road to the south. "The entirety of the cosmos is."

-0-0-0-

Fifteen minutes after news of Lord Metnath's plot, Laufey, followed hard by the rest of his family, made his way down to the south where the noble's forces were stationed.

"I should have kept him closer to my side," Laufey bit out, his feet pounding a little heavier than usual down on the cobblestones beneath his feet.
"He is a rash man," Farbauti huffed. "Still, this is odd for a careful plotter such as he."
"Greed and ambition," Byleistr murmured. "A fatal combination. He always had his eye on you, 'Blindi.'"
"I never asked for it."
"I never said you did," Byleistr hastened to reassure his brother. "Yet it is a fact and now this has happened."
"Less talking," Laufey shouted back at the two siblings. "More running!"
Several large domed buildings passed them as Royal family and a phalanx of the guard made their way to the south. Above them, Skythurs seemed loom ominously. Byleistr shivered. **'Blindi is not at fault – yet these events... They do not bode well for us or for Asgard.**

Tattered flags flapped restlessly at the whim of Asgard's capricious wind. Byleistr, remembering the tales of the Heimsrsal of the Realms, wondered if Asgard had finally begun to wake up. **It would be our misfortune for Asgard to regain its power at this crucial point of time,** the scholar sighed. **Father has always had to battle Fate... The Norns have never seemed to be on his side.**

**Perhaps today is the day our doom has come.**

Byleistr, running behind Helblindi dutiful, caught sight of Laufey's familiar scarred back. Judging by the set of his dad's shoulders, Laufey was growing tense and angry.

**Not a great combination,** the Jotun prince sighed to himself. **Even at the best of times. I hope I can find Loki quickly. I hope Loki and Asgard will be able to see reason... I hope we survive this day.**

[...such hopes...]

[...such prayers...]

[...rising up to starlight...]

[...linger...]

As Laufey's company drew near, it became increasingly obvious that already the tired and angry Asgardians an Jotunn had reached the end of their respective wits. Chaos reigned as fists flew, weapons shook and clashed, as feet pounded into battle unhesitatingly, as black curses and hard words raised the blood. Emotions rose, blood boiled, and, as more men, women, and Jotunn rushed toward the ever-increasing conflict, further tension filled the air.

Overhead the shreds of lowering cloud gave way to the astonishing vista of Asgard's mid-day sky which hung clear and crisp in the icy air. As ice rose upward, as it crept along the flagstones and the walls of the Capital, pulses beat short and quick. Plumes of hot breath hung in the frosty air.

Laufey came to a halt on a bridge running overhead and looked down at the milling crowd of warriors and Jotunn. Turning, the King looked north and east. As he hoped, the Odin's red and gold standard, borne above a train of horses, was making its way through the streets.

**Odin.** He thought. **Loki.**

As a stone arched through the air, barely missed his ear, and crashed behind him on an intricately carved baulstrade, Laufey ducked low and dragged Farbauti round and off the bridge. For a brief moment, the King's guard hung back to return a volley of ice and debris.

Once safely behind the back of what might have been a smithy, Laufey glanced back hurriedly at his busy guards before turning to give his family meaningful looks.

"You know what to do," he said quietly.

With a nod, Byleistr and Helblindi parted ways.

[...and the stars looking down...]

[...flared and...]
Loki drew deep hard breaths, eyes squeezed tightly shut as the dark voices within and without coalesced until they were one – one deep whisper holding a promise yet spoken so gently. The echoes however reverberated like a gong.

Grinding his palms into his tired eyes, Loki stumbled as he followed Thor through the devastation of the metalwork district. He caught himself quickly, but Thor was already turning in concern.

...THE WHEELS OF FATE TURN...

...DEATH AND LIFE SWAY INTERLOCKED...

...THIS IS THE DAY OF DEATH...

*She does not wish this – she does not wish this-*

Thor was saying something – his lips moved and his brow was furrowed in concern yet Loki could not hear a sound.

...THIS IS THE DAY OF MY BELOVED...

...LET MY GIFTS TO HER BE FOUND SWEET...

...MY GIFTS TO THE GODDESS OF THE DEAD...

*I met her. This is not her will. This is a lie. A lie! Aliealiealiealiealie.*

"Loki!" From far away it seemed Thor was calling. "Thor," Loki managed to gasp. "He is here!"
"Who-"
"He is here." A pause. "Thanos."
"Which way?" Thor asked, his face turning grey.
"Every way – everywhere."

Thor grabbed Loki by the shoulders and forced his brother to stop.

"I forget. I am a fool. You should have stayed in the city, at the paalce. Your mind and body are as yet unwell. Loki – the healing you actually need has not-"
Loki struggled to continue forward, ignoring Thor's remonstrations.

...ON THIS DAY...

...TWO REALMS WILL FALL...

"Loki. Don't push yourself so hard!"
"I – I need to be here, Thor." Loki shook his head. "There are two many. Look-

The two young men rounded Master Silfe's workshop and stopped at the sight of pikes and lances and harpoons and spears and stakes waving in the frosty air as Asgardians swarmed about roaring Jotunn. Arrows zipped through the air on occasion, and rocks shattered against window pane and stone walls. Ice coated stone and wood and rock and tree – and the mix of Asgardian and Jotunn corpses which were now trodden underfoot.

Mjolnir slid into Thor's palm instinctively, but he allowed Loki to jerk him back around the corner out of sight of the combatants.

"We need to stop them," Thor shook his head. "Now is not the time to hesitate."
"Kill them?" asked Loki.

Thor gave Loki a look.

"I hope not," he said. "I will knock them unconscious. Maybe you can..."
"Can what?"
"Freeze them in their tracks as you did back in the Vault."
"Those were only a handful," Loki harshly whispered.
"You can do it."
"You always say that!" retorted Loki.
"You always succeed," Thor grinned at his brother.

Then his grin fell away and his sparkling blue gaze hardened. In a familiar way, his hand embraced his brother, gripped Loki and held him close in the manner of all warriors of Asgard. Against Loki's supple leathers and slender neck, his own hand seemed cumbersome.

"I know you hear the Voices all the time, Loiki. You are unlike anyone I know. Still... ahhh.... How can I say it... but... don't give into Him. Don't listen to Him. Don't listen to them. Listen... Coulson would tell me this, maybe it will make more sense for you – to you – that is." Thor hesitated just a second before quickly adding, "Listen to yourself." He nodded. "Take care."

Loki did not move for a second – as though he was frozen. Yet his eyes glistened and then flared with living green flame. His own pale hand rose to return the embrace, gripping Thor's neck and shoulder.

"You-" Loki coughed in vain attempt to even his voice. "You also take care, Thor."

With that, the two turned the corner and plunged into the battle.

Chapter End Notes

More goopy brotherly love - and a glimpse into what is going on behind the Jotunn
scenes as well. I've got the next chapter almost done, so let's hope that I can update it soon - with fixed internet at my home, hopefully!!!!

Thanks for reading, guys! Let me know what you think!
Wow! So, last chapter, I heard from some new people. It's so encouraging to hear from new readers and old readers, so thanks to everyone for their encouragement! Hearing from you guys makes me feel encouraged in a positive way (or guilted in a positive way) to finish this epic up.

Speaking of hearing from readers, after finishing this chapter, I hope you guys will cast your eye over the Author’s Note at the end of this chapter. Thanks~!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[...seen and unseen it waged...]

[...a convergence...]

[...set in motion...]

[...when a babe was lost...]

[...and not found...]

As Odin All-Father, General Tyr and Mage Hrotha made their quickest way south, the cavalcade of horses behind them slowly expanded behind them as other riders joined their throng. The king's white brows knitted together in anger at the long line of smoke which curved north and west demarcating the first signs of hostile exchanges rippling through the parallel lines of troops.

"War is spreading."
"This time we are ready," replied Tyr gruffly. "We have survived many battles together. This will not be our last I warrant."
"High Mage Agaeti is leading the initiates in a final round of cleansing," Hrotha leaned forward to yell in Odin's ear as his horse drew alongside the monarch's. They could see a large plume of smoke thickly rising from the south. "Soon the mages will join us."
"If they are of any use-"
"They will be," Odin gave Tyr a sharp look. "We will need all the help we can get."

Odin glanced behind him as he imagined the look on Frigga's face. She would be calm, yet underneath there would be worry – for her husband and for her children.

*Take care of our boys. That is what she would say,* Odin thought. *Those would have been her last words.* The elderly warrior turned to gaze forward grimly as his stallion veered sharply around one of the towers, ever drawing closer to the source of the conflict.

Overhead, the red and gold banners snapped ominously in the rising wind. As the company rode up and over a bridge, they could see warriors and armed civilians breaking ranks below and running through the city to join the fray. Jotunn also seemed to be similarly intent on the altercation – pounding their way through parallel streets to join their comrades. Descending from the bridge, the company raced down a side ramp to the street running below and joined the mad throng of running
Asgardians. Jostled about, the monarch led his men to the heart of the fray.

Now the sounds of battle were on them. Odin raised a hand and his men drew to a stop behind him as they surveyed the tangle of men and women and Jotunn before them.

He could hear his son already. Thor had joined battle, judging by his familiar roar among the others and the whirring blur of Mjolnir smashing through the ranks. Loki. Odin squinted through the haze of smoke and plumes of hot air rising through the cold. Where is Loki?

-0-0-0-

As Thor rushed into battle, Loki hung back momentarily, closing his eyes and drawing a deep breath. Reaching out, the warrior-mage allowed himself to open up. He was a swallow swooping low over the deceptively calm waters of the Cosmos. A dark wing tipped and skimmed lightly across the surface, drawing a thin line of ripples in its wake. In response, the clear chimes, the thin, high, cold Voices echoed back.

…we hear you…
…we touch you…
…Other-Soul…
…Other-Soul, we are one…

Asgard drew breath.

[…glory flames bright…]

[…once again…]

[…once again…]

[…the Mages go to war…]

Thor, vainly attempting to catch everyone's attention, batted away a slew of ice aimed at his head. Hollering at the Asgardian warriors and peasants to stand down, the tall, blonde Prince tried to push back the men and women.

No one was listening.

[…once again…]

Rising from his knees, the High Mage Agaeti sighed in satisfaction. The Well now burbled, its waters flashing clear. Around it, the grass was already growing green before their eyes. The barest sprigs of yellow evermorn and pale blue dawnlight blossoms struggled upward and slowly began to open and turn their face toward the sun. Above them, the last remaining tree began to flower.

"It is done," he said, turning to his aide. "Now I may go."
"To join the All-Father?" Karna, the High Mage's aide, set her hands on her hips and her lips narrowed as she eyed the ominous, smoke-filled horizon.

"I will lead the first company of mages," Agaeti nodded. "Our work here is done. Flarathir's curse has been fully purged from this land. The second company will remain here to guard the Well and Academy. The third shall return to Odin's Palace to aid the Healers – as well as protest the people."
"It will be done," Karna bowed her head slightly.
"Odin needs us." Agaeti strode toward the waiting skiffs. "We must end the fighting before it is too
"Asgard is safe now," the female warrior-mage frowned as she watched her aged Asgardian Master mount carefully into the skiff.
"It is not Asgard for whom I worry," Agaeti grunted.

Karne blinked at the High Mage's words. Then she shook her head and strode off to give the new orders. *The High Council always hold themselves in such great mystery. Norns know what they see – far further than I for certain!*

[*what one sees…*]

[*what one Sees…*]

[*such conflicts…*]

Loki leaped upward, caught hold of a twisted hanging piece of wood which might have once been a shutter and scrambled up the side of a short building and then, from its slightly slanted roof now filled with gaping smoking holes, took a chance for a quick breather as he reassessed the damage from below. *Thor and I had hoped to stop this before it got worse, but… it has gotten worse regardless of what we have done.*

From the pig market, along High Cross Road, and down to the Artisan's District, the alleyways and streets were packed with heaving masses of warriors and Jotunn. Cracked cobblestones, smoking rubble, sheets of ice thickly layered, jagged ice, and a growing amount of injured attempting to extract themselves from the heart of the conflict made for rough going. Flags and curtains and gaily coloured rugs were now enflamed as the Asgardians attempted to combat the ice with their own favoured modes of attack. The clash of steel, the roar of the warriors, and the rumble of destruction rose in a great clamour about the young warrior mage.

His green eyes widened slightly and then his eyebrows knit together in consternation as he took in the destruction about him. *I thought I had left this all behind. All behind with the Chitauri army and their enslaved mages; but in the end Thanos won – war has come to Asgard at last.*

In the distance, Loki caught a glimpse of a vaguely familiar tall figure. A toughly muscled young Jotun, wearing a thick, well-made leather belt and dark blue and black kirtle.

*Brother. No. Helblindi. Not my brother,* he corrected himself. Yet, watching Helblindi force his way down the street farther to the East, Loki felt a familiar ache rise within his chest. *Not belonging. Even now there lies such a chasm between us. Our lives so different, so separate – like night and day. Even now, I have no idea what he would think of this whole mess. Does he support the actions of his people – of – of his father? Or is he as torn and divided and uncertain as myself?*

Tearing his thoughts away from Helblindi, the warrior-mage turned away and nearly slipped and fell through a large jagged hole in the wood and thatch frame of the roof upon which he had perched himself. Within the attic, Loki caught a glimpse of a small truckle bed and an abandoned pile of toys which had no doubt belonged to a girl judging by the gaily festooned doll which lay hidden underneath the bed.

*This is someone's home.* Loki's green eyes hardened. *This Realm, this Cosmos, is my home – all of our homes – and now it lies under threat. How can we lose this peace so easily.*

[*and when the stakes are high, unable to lose…*]

[*we fight on…*]
"Your Highness," Lady Sif shouted as she drew her horse up and dismounted without looking back to check whether her comrades-in-arms had caught up with her. "We must escort you from the premises at once."
"Sif," Frigga continued to watch over a warrior as he was lifted up on a stretcher onto the back of a large wagon. "We are moving the last of them."
"The effects of the fighting is spreading," Fandral glanced about nervously. "We come from the north – and our Jotunn counterparts are not far behind."
"All the forces move to join the fray," Hogun said simply in explanation.
"Well, that was the last of the wounded. However, my work is not done. We must stop all of this nonsense before it gets worse," Frigga gathered up her skirts and headed to her waiting mount. "The All-Father and the princes will do the best they can, but the more hands the better, perhaps. I would help them-" Here, Frigga surely and swiftly mounted her horse. "-yet first my duty to the sick and wounded must be discharged."
"The Jotunn coming on-"
"Will have to be dealt with by us," Frigga said, face hardening. "If they will not see reason, if they attack the injured. Form the company at the rear of the procession – the better to ward off attack."
"You will need this," Sif offered her second sword.

Frigga's blue eyes were steel blades in and of themselves as she accepted the weapon.

"Quickly now," she said. "We are running out of time."

Skidding round the corner of an herbalist's shop, Loki failed to find purchase on the ice beneath his boots, hooked his arm round a handy wood post festooned with dried cloves and mistletoe, and swung about just as several pieces of ice barely missed his head.

At this rate, he thought grimly, we will all be dead by nightfall.

As he whirled about, letting fly several daggers – aimed at the giants' legs, Loki caught the dull glint of spears row on row headed by a familiar white head of hair.

Father.

Recognizing the familiar pounding of feet behind them, Frigga jerked hard upon the reins, spurring her horse onward as she wheeled about to face the enemy. The company drawing close about her on either side drew their swords, gave a cry, and charged at the small group of Jotunn before them.

Judging by the intricate workmanship of his kirtle and belt, the tallest, most musccularly built Jotun was the leader of the pack. Ancient scars ran across his forearms and chest, a testament to his experience. Grey wire hair clustered between his great horns – a sign of age which flickered also in world-weary eyes. He did not move.

Frigga raised her hand, yelled sharply – so much so a few stallions reared and nearly bolted. Everyone drew to a nervous halt a few yards away from the intruders.

The two groups stared at each other suspiciously.

Yet the Jotunn Lord and Asgard's Queen did not break their gazes, nor did they move a step.
As tension built, Sif's grip tightened on her sword hilt, and Hogun's crossbow creaked. Fandral drew his own rapier up at the ready. Yet Frigga spoke no command.

"I have heard of the fairness and beauty of Asgard's Queen," the ancient Jotunn's rumble finally broke the silence. "The tales fall short, Daughter of Vanaheim."
"You have me at a disadvantage," Frigga bent her head graciously, hiding her confusion. "To whom do I speak?"
"I am Lord Aldra of Jotunheim – and I seek you out in these troubled times to find an agreement – for I represent those of the Jotunn who are wearied and who have lost hope."
"Troubled times have come to us all," Frigga greed. "The All-Father, I know, wishes that we may find unity in the face of a larger threat. This battle does not show us all in a favourable light to say the least."
"I have lived through troubled times. As a babe, I was born into a war into which my father had also been born; as a child, I grew up in war; as a full-grown, I abandoned war; and now, as an Elder, I watch my children's children march to a battle I never wished to see again. This is not, I think, what any of us wanted."
"That I can agree with. What is your counsel then?"
"My counsel is to end this conflict before all lives are lost. To that end, I will join the front lines and withdraw any of my people and companies who may have become entangled. Those who agree with me are also on their way to attempt the same."
"Asgard and Jotunheim will thank you for your wisdom," Frigga gave the Jotun a small smile.
"Asgard will thank us in other ways," the Jotun stepped forward. "Promise me you will give us what Jotunheim needs."
"The All-Father already decided, I believe, to return the Casket."
"The Casket? Ha!" Lord Aldra waved a hand dismissively. "Those who remember the Ancient Ways handed down to us by the tales of our forebears… They know, those who remember. We remember the truth."
"The truth?" Frigga asked, her sword lowered.
"The Casket is useless alone. It comes truly, it is said, of a pair. Two become one. The One is the True Heir. The True Heir of the Line of Kings. This One, we have come to believe, is your son – and that is what our Realm needs – a True King. Prince Loki."

Despite the initial hope raised by the sight of the All-Father, Loki knew that the conflict would not so be easily suppressed. Everything had spiraled out of control. Odin's forces attempted in vain to corral the soldiers. Thor's attacks met repeated resistance with ice and muscle. Loki's illusions could only keep the hordes at bay, he knew, for a short time.

The fighting had spilled out into streets branching away from the heart of the attack. Already six homes, eight shops, and a variety of small artisan stalls had been more or less leveled, creating a large field of heaped rubble and stone.

Ice and fire rose around the combatants, combined with the sporadic hail of exploding arrows and blaster fire. The dead and the injured impeded any progress, and slowly the fighting became less centralized if still chaotic. Upon various heaps of stone and on the once neatly set cobblestones of the Artisans' District, Jotunn and Asgardians battled on, paying little heed to the roar of their superiors.

Then, Laufey burst on the scene, bawling at his men to stand back. Tucking himself behind a corner still standing which had once belonged to a tanner, Loki watched as the King of Jotunheim attempted – and failed – to halt the violence of his own people.

"Loki! Loki!"
Among the rising voices, it was hard to distinguish who was calling his name. At first he thought it was Thor, but as Loki disentangled himself from his memories, the husky voice became more familiar.

_Byleistr… Byleistr is here?_ Loki instantly was back in the quiet Royal Archives at the King’s Court. Dim rooms with pale cold light slanting down through tall, inset windows and the heavy scent of ancient leathers and papers and dust. _Byleistr is here?_

_Byleistr, my gentle brother. He is a scholar who has no business being here. The art of war does not – would not – suit him, but I suppose even Byleistr would not be exempt._

"Loki!"

_Why is he looking for me?_ Loki frowned as suspicions rose within him. _How did he discover my presence here? How could the Jotunn already know Thor and I arrived? Well, Loki corrected himself. Perhaps discovering Thor’s arrival is no surprise… Still._

Swirling in a graceful arc, Loki’s fingers formed a simple sigil, a quick working which cloaked him in invisibility. After watching Byleistr blunder past, Loki sighed.

Regardless of what the Royal Jotunn family wants with me, this entire squirmish has gone too far.

He could almost hear Thor’s voice in his head yelling at him: "What are you playing at?!"

_I have tried all options. I have exhausted all of my own ideas. There is no other way._ With a grimace and a short sigh, Loki let the working dissipate, summoned the Casket to his fingers, and stepped out of the shadows.

---

Breath came hard and fast as Byleistr wound down and around another set of stairs for the tenth time. It was difficult to search this winding, congested labyrinthine field of war. Pushing past several lamed Jotunn, Byleistr bit back a cry as several chunks of dully gleaming coal dusted across his back. Ducking beneath an archway, Byleistr set his palm to stone, spread ice across the wall, and leaned back on the cool comfort it offered.

_Loki. He thought. Where are you?_ Byleistr cursed his inability to find his younger brother. _Loki, I am sure, does not expose his Jotunn nature to the Asgardians. Those myths may be true – the famed abilities to shift shape. Perhaps Loki draws upon a natural ability… It is said the Prince Loki of Asgard has black hair, pale skin, and green eyes… but in this confusion, he could be anywhere._

Byleistr tried to ignore the pit of fear which grew in his stomach.

_Little Brother is a mage and a scholar of Asgard. Loki could be dead._

Shaking his head and gritting his teeth, Byleistr burst out and up another flight of stairs, only to discover that he had somehow arrived at the center of the battle within the large square, except he was now on the other side. Blinking through the stinging smoke, Byleistr’s eyes narrowed as he caught a glimpse of a slight shadow slipping out from behind a building.

_Surely that is not…_

---

Looking down at the corpse of Lord Metnath slain, it appeared, by the blades of Asgard, Helblindi
sighed. *We have lost too many good men – and for what?* Cursing inwardly, the Jotun prince glanced at the men gathered about them. Their stolid faces showed little concern or surprise at the sight before them. *From Utanheim, judging by their garb and speech...* Helblindi mused. *I do not know them as well as I should. I wonder what they make of all this.*

"He was cut off on his way back, it seems," a foot soldier offered as he leaned down to pick up a spare sword left behind.

"A good fight it seemed, but there were too many," spat another.

"Well, we are in their Realm," Helblindi let the ice forming around his fist fall and shatter. "It is no surprise to meet fierceness and desperation. Let us return. I need to report back to the King."

"Prince," Commander Vel'ko laid a gentle hand on Helblindi's arm. "I think we should take our time returning, and hoard our energy for the day is long ahead."

Helblindi's red gaze hardened and narrowed with suspicion.

"Why should we hoard our energy when others die for our cause uselessly?" he asked, pulling back, shoulders tensed.

"You are our Prince," another spoke up.

"As Crown Prince," the Commander explained calmly, "you represent the hope of your people."

"My people?"

"Those loyal to the throne. Those loyal to you."

"I am not the Crown Prince," Helblindi bit out, finding the agony of such a confession refreshing. It cleared his head and his mind now raced as he judged the distance of the far arch and the direction of the road back. "Your concern is mistaken at any rate. A poor King I would make if I could not care for myself – and so I must return," he repeated, and without warning, he wheeled about, twisted round the far edge of the group and began to run back as a sinking feeling began to form within his belly.

*Why do they hesitate? How far have they led me away from the battle? When did they really know the end of Lord Metnath? Surely this is not... This is not...*

-0-0-0-

For a short moment silence reigned. In the distance, bombardments fell with heavy thuds and the clash of steel and whine of blaster fire echoed ominously. The horses stirred restlessly. Still, Frigga seemed unmoved.

Volstagg's familiar harrumph and gruff guffaw rang out loudly.

"Loki is a Jotunn? He is too small!" A pause then ensued as the red-headed warrior looked about him uneasily. "This is ridiculous... is it not?"

Sif gave Hogun a dark glance, but the stoic, dark-haired warrior just shrugged in his usual calm manner. *Hogun, hailing from Vanaheim, obviously is not as concerned about Loki's true ancestry, the young woman realized. Use and ability is of greater importance to him. As for the Queen...*

Following her train of thought, Sif's gaze turned to the Queen in expectation. Frigga's shoulders remained squared even as she sheathed her sword. The muttering and spluttering of the Asgardians died as they realized with horror that the Queen was not about to refute Lord Aldra's claims any time soon.

*So Loki is a Jotunn. That... actually makes sense. How long did she know?* Sif mused with a small smile. *From the first – or soon after? Loki could fool many of us but obviously not the All-Father or the Queen.*
"Loki's parentage aside," Frigga replied quietly, raising her hand to calm the warriors behind and about her. "This is a matter for the Jotunn – and a treasonable act also. Treason against King Laufey. Loki, I know, would not wish to be supported by those who betrayed their previous monarch."

"How many years of war and desperation have I survived?" Lord Aldra asked, lowering his spear and appearing to settle down for a serious discussion. "How many long, hard winters have I weathered? No. Raising a hand to the King is not the road I take. I am an ancient jarnvithr with roots deep within a cold and barren land; I am patient. Others who follow the path of folly will make that mistake for me."

"How fortuitous," Frigga said. "You expect the throne to be empty and ready for the Prince?"

"Like a frozen river in winter, the Jotunn carry deep rivers of change will flow unceasingly if slowly. Change is coming to Jotunheim. It must – or we die."

"It is a weighty matter," Frigga agreed slowly. She gave the Jotun noble a hard look. "For this reason, I cannot make a promise such as this on Prince Loki's behalf. Yet, I would be willing to mediate a meeting with him if that is what you require."

"That would be enough," nodded Lord Aldra, tipping his great horns downward in a sharp motion of respect. "I hope."

"I can promise nothing however." Frigga reminded the Jotun.

"Understandable." The Jotunn noble jerked his head at his group of warriors. "We make for the south."

"Let us escort you," Frigga smiled graciously. "We have no time to lose."

With that, everyone was off.

[...and once again...]

[...the Mages go to war...]

For the first few seconds, Thor and those about him – Jotunn and Asgardian alike – glanced each other in confusion as an unfamiliar howling wind suddenly whipped up. With cruel fingers, the winter breeze searched every crack and cranny around them and stabbed with sharp knives of cold to their deepest bone.

Then came a frost so heavy it filled the air like a thick cloud, a heavy blanket which muffled all sound and threatened to steal away one's breath with each passing minute. It was white and grey – and the green and red and gold world of Asgard seemed to fade to a dimness Thor had only experienced once or twice in his long lifetime.

Through the swirling mists of frost and then thicker snow, Thor caught a glimpse of his opponents' faces. Such looks of delight and horror combined, Thor could not help but shiver. He had just been about to drag Lord Narvil (a particularly rowdy Asgardian nobleman) back from the fray, but now the Crown Prince's hand fell away from the tough warrior's armoured shoulder.

Calling Mjolnir to his hand, Thor twisted about, smashed ice that suddenly began to creep about the ankles of his boots. He looked up and nearly dropped his hammer.

_Loki._

It was Loki but not the Loki he knew. Not the hard shell of Kol'la of Shax's Battlehouse. Not the cynical, tough Kol'la of Asgard's stables. Not the mischievous trickster of the Mage's Court. Not his uncertain, willful brother who knew everything.

This was a being. A being of such power, Thor knew he would think twice before grappling That Who Was Loki. It was Loki – Loki's dark skin. Loki's flaming red eyes. Loki's dark wild hair blown back and whipped about by the wild winter winds barely contained within his palms.
But it was Loki no more. For when this Loki spoke, it was an ancient tongue Thor could not recognize – and the Voice carried upon the winds was more like a cacophony of elements. It was cold. It was brass. It was rock and snow and wind. It was power.

And Loki – Loki, the Other-Soul – stood firm in the midst of the storm which now blistered outward from the Casket within his hands. No longer a Casket. A swirling mass of blue and white and grey and black - and in its deepest recesses, Thor fancied he saw the stars.

[...He who sees...]

Ice ran. Ice poured. Ice and snow and the blizzards of all the Winters which had gone before. Power and Magick and the song of Jotunheim's cold stars rang out, rippled outward like a massive shock. It was greater than the blast within the Vault. Like a massive wave of winter, it spread outward and outward – faster and faster, enveloping all in ice and snow, holding all fast in its wind's clutches.

Loki stood hand in hand with his Other Soul.

[...He who Hears...]

For a few seconds it lasted, yet it was enough. To Loki, it seemed as though ages past – ages in which everyone came to a halt. That which it touched, the ice captured in shackles of ice and will. His inevitable transformation seemed to last forever as Loki's hands and then his arms – his torso, his chest, his neck – all changed before the shocked gazes of his people.

… both your people…
…you straddle as always so many worlds…
…a King like no other…

"I am no king," Loki whispered.

… not yet…

The stars chimed in return.

… not yet…

-0-0-0-

Byleistr, moving forward across the ice with no thought to the danger about him, drew closer to the center of the storm. Almost bowed in half due to the force of the wind about him, the young Jotun found the going difficult, yet he dug his heels into the rising snow and ice, refusing to be beaten back. His eyes, fixed with wonder at the sight before him, were unwavering in their gaze. This, he thought, is legend come to life.

[...he who Hears...]

[...he who Sees...]

Sliding and slipping to a halt, Helblindi drew sharp breath at the sight before him. What had once been a congested street of warriors was now thickly layered in snow and ice, trapping all of the combatants. Arms raised, feet fastened to the ground, the Jotunn and Asgardians alike struggled to free themselves from the rapidly expanding power of snow and ice which whirled through the narrow alleys and streets.

Helblindi, realizing that he too was in danger of being halted, moved as swiftly as he could, shoving
past the Jotunn and Asgardians in his path. Ahead of him, at the head of the street, the world was a wall of white which slowly cleared away to blue.

_The storm is dying down?_ He wondered.

Then he arrived at the head of the street and found himself gazing over what had been the center of the battlefield. A battlefield it was no more. Just like the streets behind him, everyone was frozen in their places, excepting those like Helblindi who were arriving late. Several Jotunn and Asgardians were hacking themselves free.

Thor was already crunching his way across the ice. Odin and his men were slashing their way past a forest of icicles which blocked their path into the square. Byleistr seemed to be halted in his tracks, his eyes fixed upon the blue-skinned, dark-haired Jotun standing beneath a wooden, now very iced and snow burdened, overhang. _Loki._

All eyes were upon Asgard's second prince who stood, red glittering eyes wide, with the Casket of Ancient Winters within his hands.

"Loki! You did it!" Thor was yelling over and over in jubilation. "I knew you could!"
"Loki! We need to talk!" Byleistr stirred and began to move forward with renewed determination.

Helblindi, however, noticed that Loki did not stir. The young warrior-mage seemed similarly transfixed as his red eyes focused on something happening at the far end of the market place. Confused, angry and anxious cries were rising as Asgardians and Jotunn alike cursed the ice bonds which had stopped them in their tracks. Among the outcry, another hoarse cry could be heard.

It was by a particularly large piece of rubble where Laufey and Farbauti had apparently entrenched themselves. Except Laufey was no longer on his feet.

The King of Jotunheim was falling.

Helblindi's stomach wrenched as fear took hold. Farbauti was pulling on Laufey's arms, attempting to lower his mate more gently onto the snow which was now stained in red and purple. _So much blood._

"Byla!" Helblindi yelled and began to plow his way across the battlefield.

At his brother's call, Byleistr turned. The scholar's eyes widened at the sight of his fylgja now lying in Farbauti's arms. Farbauti who bellowed with anguish.

"What happened-" Helblindi found himself talking to no one in particular as he made his way past Asgardian and Jotunn. "Someone call the Healers!"

_Fylgja. What happened._

[…silence fell…]

[…and in the silences…]

[…a Voice called out…]

A grey-haired Asgardian warrior attempting to raise a spear at Byleistr and block the Jotun found his arm frozen in place by another rush of ice beckoned by the twitch of Loki's fingers. Loki grimaced as he watched Byleistr make his way across the market to his father. Then, tucking the Casket away with his magick, Loki himself began to follow his older brothers.
"They are my brothers whether they wish it or not.

"Loki." It was Thor now at his elbow. "What happened?"

Another brother.

"It is Laufey. The King has been injured – or worse," Loki said shortly. "We must attempt to keep everyone calm."
"No!" Thor's blue gaze now fixed itself on the group of Jotunn gathered about the fallen King.
"Without King Laufey, no Jotunn will see reason."
"It is possible more trouble will ensue. Perhaps it can be stopped."

Thor glanced back at Odin who now stepped into the square and began to bark at his men in short, sharp commands.

"Father is trying to get our men in line, at least."
"I am sure the Jotunn will see reason in light of what has happened to the King," Loki huffed. "If Helblindi keeps his head."
"Helblindi?"
"The Crown Prince of Jotunheim."

Loki jerked his head in the direction of the rubble heap which they approached carefully.

"You will meet him soon."

It was no easy business for the two to cross what remained of the Artisan's District. Wood and stone and ice and snow littered their now treacherous path. Pieces of timber and cloth and vats and frozen dyes and pieces of glass and metal jumbled together. Thor and Loki, by the time they arrived at the fallen King's side, found themselves a little out of breath.

"He needs a healer!" Farbauti was saying. "Someone – we need to save him!"
"A healer is on the way," Byleistr attempted to calm his faetha. "'Blindi has already sent for one."
"It will be too late!"

A chill crept in Loki's bones as he looked down at the prostrate, barely conscious figure that once had been a giant, a figure of greatness. Like Helblindi, Loki mused, this person was someone I feared and admired and... when I was so young – so young – this was someone, I wished to be worthy of. Not anymore. Not for a long time have I given thought for these... creatures... for these people who are mine.

And yet...

And yet...

Is this what you wished for, Loki? Truly? It sounded like Elska. It sounded like Frigga. It sounded like a wiser Thor. What was it you wished?

I did not wish this, he admitted. I never wished this. Not for Jotunheim, not for my brothers... not even for these two who could have been my parents. Not really. I never wished this.

"I did not wish this."
"Loki?" Thor asked in quiet undertones, recognizing what the tension radiating from within his brother truly meant.
"Let me..." Loki, forcing down the bile of fear and hatred, stepped forward. He coughed and tried to speak again. "I have some abilities. Let me see what I can do."
"There is a stab wound in his lower back. His lower back," Farbauti was finding it difficult to remain coherent. "His lower back – and it was not very deep."

"This smells of treachery," Thor grumbled.

"Treachery," echoed Byleistr numbly. "From within our ranks… It is as I feared," he ended with a sigh. "I had hoped my fears would be unfounded… Now Fylgja has paid the price."

Spreading his hands above the King's body, Loki closed his eyes and extended his life force down and into Laufey's body. He had reached out this way to Elska, to Thor… and to various sick and ill when he had been in training at the Mage's Academy. *It is not something natural for me,* he sighed, *but I can attempt something.*

As the green magick wound its way through the foreign organs and blood of the King, Loki's dark brow crinkled and a frown marred his face. A dark force lurked, eddied through Laufey's veins.

"Poison," Loki said, his mouth suddenly dry and lips thinned in anger. "On the blade, more than likely. If we could isolate-"

Loki broke off with a short gasp as a rough hand suddenly clenched his wrist, forcing his hand away from its position above Laufey's torso. Laufey's hand.

Fa-

Gritting his teeth, Loki raised his eyes for the first time to meet his father. The last time their gazes had met, they had stood alone on the edge of the Eybjarg and had gazed into the Abyss together. Then, in Laufey's eyes there had been something – something that Loki could not read, could not understand. *Would he find the truth now, or would his fa- would Laufey as always turn away?*

"No." Laufey's voice was faint but firm.

It cut like jagged glass into the silence and brought forth a broken, stifled sob from Farbauti.

"This-" Laufey coughed. "This is my time."

"Why?" whispered Farbauti harshly.

"It is for…our sons, our people." Laufey did not turn his gaze away from Loki as he pushed Loki's unresisting hands back. "Save your power, save your energy, save your gifts for – save them for Jotunheim… for those who… those who…" He coughed. "Deserve better."

"Love-"

Laufey's gaze drifted upward to meet Farbauti's face which now furrowed with grief as great tears formed and fell, half-frozen onto the snow. Surrendering his hand into Farbauti's, Laufey smiled.

"I go now to the Halls of the For-Eldra, where my father and his father wait for me and where I shall wait for you as well, my love and my children. You were always with me, beloved Farbauti, and we made something together of great worth… I think." His red eyes slowly moved to Byleistr and Helblindi who now had knelt down on one knee to draw closer to their father. "Helblindi, be the… the older brother you have always been – and… and remember that those who walk blind, walk on thin ice. Byleistr… never… never give up… You are different… but that is no bad thing… Knowledge is as great as any Jotunn's spear."

Laufey choked back a short cry as his hands clenched in pain. The poison, Loki guessed, was now rapidly taking its toll.

"And… L-"

He could no longer seem to speak easily now. Time was running out. Loki rose jerkily to his feet,
swaying. The world spun as the warrior-mage staggered back a few steps. As Laufey's red eyes slowly dulled and lost their light.

The King of Jotunheim drew breath and uttered his last words – an odd phrasing, an ancient ritual, heavy and laden with meaning Loki could not –would not- understand.

*Within a barren winter*
*springs there a tunglblom*
*whose leaf will not fall nor wither,*
*Aevi'a Engi'Enda Sumar.*

Chapter End Notes

Well, it's the end of an era... Three more chapters left and DIT is done! After that, I may start planning a sequel although I'll need to take a writer's break from this world. It will all depend on reader's response as well. I really ought to be working on original stories that I can sell, but this is such a baby of mine and I am so invested in it (emotionally too!)... so writing a sequel will happen... and it helps to know that others are one board for a sequel as well.

Author's Note: There are some of you who are gonna so be happy with what happened in this chapter to Laufey. Please refrain from sending me reviews saying things like "I'm so glad he's gone." I'm gonna be honest with you - Laufey has become something complicated and dear to me... As I wrote the ending, Aragorn's coronation song from the Lord of the Rings soundtrack came on and I nearly began to tear up! So, in the end, I am open to thoughtful critique and commentary - but this moment is not a moment that should elicit character bashing. Maybe there are others out there who are more like me - who enjoy complicated people and situations. This moment was written for you. Others who like feel-good stories and simple straightforward narratives can go have a cup of tea. Thanks for your understanding.
New Paths Carved Out

Chapter Notes

Recently I took up reading again, which also includes fanfiction. I was reading some well-written HG/SS Potter fic and was slightly shocked by the amount of smut therein. Gosh... I've reverted to my asexual dislike of gratuitous sex. Well, it wasn't gratuitous per se, but I realized something...

You guys are awesome. All of you. You guys have favourited, followed, and reviewed a story that has only offered you half-cocked love affairs and the death of the romantic partner. Not to mention the amount of depressing content, heavy descriptions, and slow build... to... character building and world building.

Thank you guys for supporting this fic with such patience! For waiting for so long for updates! For just being awesome!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[...stars flare brightly...]
[...and flicker out...]
[...candles of the cosmos...]
[...and yet...]

Across the Realms and the galaxies found therein, the mystery of death is contemplated by many. On the planet known as Ploor, the indigenous tribes mark the sky with great care and note each star's passing. With each creature's death, they say, a star dies. The end of the universe, when all life is gone, is total darkness. The natives of Xandar similarly believe the universe will collapse upon itself, leaving nothing but remnants of matter unable to coalesce for eternity.

Yet not all embrace the dark; neither do all forsake hope. There is, the Asgardian mages tell, another World, an Endless Realm: the Halls of Valhalla, to which all are welcome who believe. It is a golden land flowing with mead, honey, and the endless riches of the gods. On the ice world of Jotunehim, upon death, one travels to the Eternal Realm of Starlight wherein the ones who have passed before wait with the For-Eldra [1]. A place of joy and hope for the endlessly burdened peoples of the Icy Realm, the Darkness is gentle beneath the embrace of Starlight.

[...for was we know...]
[...for each star's death...]
[...another is born...]

Laufey's words faded. His last syllables died, carried on the stirring wind. The great King's eyes closed as he took his last breath. Farbauti, bent over his life-long mate, wailed openly. Byleistr shed silent tears, and Helblindi half-turned away to quench his grief in private.
Loki did not turn away. There for all to see in his Jotunn form, the Prince of two Realms now stood at Thor's side, stayed by his Asgardian brother's firm grip. Thor could not know that Loki would not have moved anyways. Perhaps he knows, Loki thought disjointedly. Perhaps he understands somehow. The two stood there, frozen – Thor uncertain what to do and Loki uncertain what to feel.

There was only breath. Cold breath and ice and memories. Memories of nothing but darkness and disrespect and disdain. Memories of an abandoned temple. Memories of gossip whispered among the Jotunn of Utgard: tales of great King Laufey and the beloved Royal Family. Memories of Laufey's arrogance and aloofness. Memories of a battle – the holmganga, the Dauthr'ganga. Memories of a victory dimmed by a father's disgust. Memories of an abyss and a quiet revelation: those unreadable eyes suddenly understood.

Those hard red eyes now closed.

.Closed forever, Loki thought in a daze. No longer will he rise to meet the dawn, to fight for his people, to scheme, to sneer. No longer will Laufey and I meet in this world. No longer does hope exist for some kind of peace to be found between us. No longer will I be able to ask that question I have always feared to ask: Is there to be eternal enmity between us? Did I imagine what I thought I saw within your eyes…?

A dark voice within him whispered. WHY SHOULD YOU EVEN CARE?

Because... He inhaled sharply. Because...

At the seemingly distant sound of Thor's voice, Loki turned, feeling stiff and numb as though he had been transformed into some metallic automaton.

"Father is making his way over here," Thor was saying. "He will know what to do."
"Yes, of course," Loki meant to say but although his mouth worked, no sound emerged.
"Thor," Odin's calm hard voice drew everyone's attention toward him. "The men are standing down and withdrawing. I need you to oversee the generals as the forces retreat."

.To ensure no more conflict ensues, Loki guessed.

"Loki. I need you to remain. We just received word your mother-" Odin paused, his blue-eyed gaze shifted uncertainly to the close group of Jotunn now surrounding the fallen King. "The Queen will be-"

Drowning out his words, a massive fleygja-skip [2] from which streamed mages in a purposeful manner. It was clear they and already taken note of the change in orders – war was over, and rehabilitation must begin. Moving from fallen warrior to fallen Jotun, the mages began to search for the wounded among the ruins and the dead. As the uniform blue and white robes of the apprentices parted, the three men of the Asgardian royal family caught a glimpse of and recognized the golden-haired Queen of Asgard, finally disembarking from the dark vessel.

As she climbed carefully down the rope ladder hanging from the side of the hovering vessel, Frigga glanced about. Her confusion was only momentary as her gaze was drawn to the tableau spread before her. The grieving Jotunn family on top of rubble, surrounded by the dead. Then, as her blue eyes traveled around the market, she seemed to relax at the sight of her two sons and husband, all looking unmarked and well.

"Odin," her voice was lowered in respect as she drew near. "That is not-?"
"It is," Odin remarked briefly. "Unforeseen on my part-"
"On all our parts," Thor's voice was heavy. "I do not know what to think."
"We must act swiftly," the King noted. "Thor, get to the generals. Loki, you should remain with your mother. Frigga, perhaps you can oversee the Mages?"
"I will keep them on task," Frigga laid a hand on Loki's forearm. "Loki-

Struggling with the desire to draw her into a needy embrace, Loki looked at his mother as if seeing her for the first time. He nodded wordlessly.

"The High Mage and I will handle the Jotunn directly," Odin then turned away abruptly and strode off, barking orders at his personal guard.
Frigga sighed. 'I have a feeling today will be a long one."
"Even the longest days end," Thor pointed out. His accompanying smile, if a bit tight, attempted to lighten the dull mood about them.
"A deep thought," Frigga smiled at her son fondly. Then she added somberly, "You could say that about one's life as well."

Loki shrugged, as he struggled to get a better grasp of the world about him. A world I never really imagined. A world destroyed by a war I had never hoped would come to pass. He frowned and ran his blue hand through his stiff black hair. Brushing off the dusting of light frost and ice which had caught on the long dark strands, his wild curls now freed sprang outward wildly. Loki sighed. I must look a fright. He glanced downward at his scuffed boots and stained clothing. And it will be some time before I will find the time to regain my usual standard of cleanliness. Ah well, he shook his head. It is not as if you have been exactly been at your best for a long time.

"Loki?"

It was Frigga who looked more concerned than Loki liked.

"Well," he said lightly, forcing a small smile, "this day will not end if we do not get to work."
"Good point," Thor agreed and strode off, waving his hammer high and calling any soldiers who lingered to him.
"Your father will ensure your… family will receive proper hospitality," Frigga reassured Loki as the two watched Laufey now being lifted (under the supervision of Mage Hrotha, six mages, and two Jotunn) onto a hastily made pallet. "King Laufey, your father, will receive the respect he is due as well."
"He is not my father," Loki said.
His red eyes glinted as the Jotunn royal family trailed after the body of the fallen King.

"Loki. Odin and I – we never expected you to feel the need to entirely repudiate your-"
"He was my mother," Loki offered Frigga a bitter smile. "That is the closest way to describe Laufey, I suppose. A mother. It is hard to imagine. A poor mother, by the least of standards. Now he is gone. It matters not."
"It matters quite a bit, I think," Frigga corrected her son gently as her hand rose to embrace his adoptive son's thin shoulders. 'And that is… quite all right."
"It really matters not," Loki repeated with a grimace. "A lot has happened today… I am not entirely certain that I have – that any of us has – come to terms with everything. Yet," the Jotun prince gave the area a quick look over, "that will come with time. With time. With thought. All will be well. Things will return to normal."

Frigga squeezed her son's shoulder. Loki's eyebrows rose at the sharp look of disbelief she gave him.

"Mother," he turned then to face her fully and drew her into a quick embrace. "I will be – I will be fine. I assure you."
"Know that I am always here for you, Loki," Frigga returned his hug. "If you need to talk, I am
always ready to listen."
"I know," Loki nodded. "Now," he inhaled sharply, allowing his pale skin and green eyes to return.
"Where do we start?"

The aftermath of a battle is never a simple matter. Warriors energized by the adrenaline of war return
to their quarters slowly. War looms as a threat as small squirmishes continue in the slow
disengagement of a battle that stretches over multiple fronts. The invaders, seeping back like a slow
tide in retreat, find it difficult to turn their back on the victors. With a difficult road upon which to
return home, they carry the burden of despair and loss. Much is lost in war on either side.

As the sun set on Asgard's capital city, the Battle of Fe-Kaupstefna (the Battle of the Cattle Market,
marked within the 2,552nd year of Odin's reign) ended in a similar fashion.

The more boisterous warriors, chortling over the name they called it among themselves, 'Griss-
Kaupstefna Hlokk [3]', finally were rounded up and brought within the first ring of city defenses for
the night. Lured by their women and the promise of drink and hot food, many withdrew easily. The
few who were more eager to put paid to the enemy were kept under strict surveillance at the behest
of Thor.

Once the wounded, Jotunn and Asgardian, had been removed and taken to their respective
infirmaries, the Mages (headed by an exhausted Loki and Frigga) were also forced to withdraw as
the sky turned a deep gold with the setting of the sun. Most of the bodies had been sorted. In the
morning, the Asgardian fallen would be carried in all state to the sea and cast adrift to sail to the stars
and Valhalla waiting beyond. That would be after when night had fallen and when fires burned
brightest.

The Jotunn were to be dealt with first. Once a peace treaty was swiftly signed (with Helblindi
standing in as the unofficial leader of the Realm), guards and borders were set for the night for the
mutual safety of both peoples. Odin offered the return of the Casket. The bone of contention between
the Realms would finally return home, he promised. Other officials rushed to agree that the return of
the Casket was tantamount, but the Jotunn royals merely looked at each other, obviously too tired to
consider the matter at hand. With a short nod, Odin gave the High Mage Agaeti a satisfied look.

Upon the sun's rising the following day, a new contingent of better rested peasants, women, Healers,
and mages departed to tend to the dead. The stasis and protection spells placed upon the bodies had
kept overnight quite well and the work, although unfamiliar to many of them, was easily carried out.

Among the Jotunn and the Asgardians, quiet wailing and sobs rose as each of the dead were
discovered and named. Side by side, their tears joined as one, the two peoples saw the pain now
mined and shared between them.

This, Loki thought as he passed by the trains of mourning relatives, has brought new perspectives to
both peoples. Perhaps... perhaps there is a chance that peace will be found. True peace borne of
understanding.

Having managed a quick bath and a new set of clothes (delivered to the house in which he had been
stationed for the night), Loki felt more like himself than he had in a long time. No longer was he
wearing the baggy uniform of a miner, or the demeaning garb of prisoner, or the armour of a warrior-
mage slave, or the simple Midgardian dress (comfortable though it had been). He was back in
familiar leathers and cotton, no doubt rescued from his bedroom by his mother— and even better, the
world before him promised signs of healing. Already the mages were beginning to aid the lower
classes in repairing what could be repaired with simple workings. The warriors had set aside their
axes and swords to pick up the shovel, the saw, and the chisel. Loki, heading up three meetings with
Mage Hrotha right through lunch, felt rather accomplished. Judging by the work already
commencing on the city, no one had remained idle that day.

Even now as he made his way down through the city to the Bifrost where Odin, Frigga, and Thor
oversaw the return of the Jotunn to their homeland, he could see the long line of Jotunn bearing their
dead within their arms or upon pallets roughly woven from wood and torn fabric. Other lower Jotunn
servants and mercenaries, boarding the few remaining ships, made ready to carry the last of the
Jotunn supplies to the skies and from thence to the Icy Realm.

As Loki had guessed, the entire process of returning the Jotunn to their land took some time. Not all
of their ships were capable of flight thanks to Asgardian saboteurs and missiles – but the Bifrost
would more than suffice. However, knowing its destructive power, Heimdall allowed only groups of
thirty at a time to travel down to the Innahelm.

Knowing that Laufey would be the last to leave, Loki paused a moment to stop in at small inn and
grabbed a few bites to eat. Now that his meetings were done, his stomach began to growl in protest.
Taking a seat in a corner of the inn, Loki waited for the buxom maid to come round. Few
approached him, he noticed. No doubt the rumours have spread, Loki's fingers curled into a tense
fist. The stranger they never trusted has now shown his true colours. As a comely maid with loosely
curled, dark brown hair set down a massive bowl of stew before him, Loki's dark eyebrows rose in
astonishment. His green eyes, now filled with confusion, met her hazel ones.

"Ah-""The prince will have a long day ahead of him, I fancy." She offered him a big smile and a saucy
wink. "We will all need as much nourishment as we can get."
"Thank you," Loki managed to get out.
"I will be getting your pint of mead as well in a moment," the maid curtseyed again and rustled off
with a rather come-hither swish to her hips.

Loki, finding it rather difficult to focus on the stew at hand, broke the bread accompanying it and
started upon his quick combination of breakfast and lunch. There is no way I can finish this all, he
lamented. If only I had the stomach of Thor.

Nevertheless, after a pint of mead (he turned down ten offers within his half-hour meal) and most of
the bowl of stew, Loki felt well satisfied. Perhaps I have not been eating as well as I ought, the
warrior mage conceded. That is all that Thor has been mentioning lately. He glanced at his bony
wrists. Being tortured and beaten for months on end and then traveling through space-time in a
sarcophagi would of course have great negative impact on one's body. Time and proper rest and
food will help. The stew is a good start. Loki, accidentally meeting the quite friendly gaze of the
maid, fought down a rising heat to his pale cheekbones. And the barmaid as well.

But I should not be thinking of such matters, he castigated himself. Now is not the time, Loki. There
are other matters at hand. Other matters, such as Laufey. Laufey and Jotunheim and the Casket of
Ancient Winters.

Just thinking of the Casket filled him with a mixture of awe and unease. It whispered to the Prince,
filling him with a kind of spiritual warmth he could not name.

Such power. He wondered what level he would be at. Eno'ko? Certainly. Yet holding the Casket...
something greater flowed through me. Eno'ah, undoubtedly. Perhaps at its height... it would be
greater? Loki recalled his moment in the Sarcophagi. He had screamed. He had become one with
Light - something beyond Light.
It is time, Loki thought resolutely, tossing a few coins onto the table, nodding to the maid with a small smile, and exiting the establishment.

[...we say farewell...]

[...but do you not know...]

[...farewell is not forever...]

Laufey was the last on the most splendid bier that could be made overnight. His hands now folded over his breast. His wiry hair combed back to complement his strong jaw and straight line of a nose. His markings, artificially darkened with ink, bore silent witness to the lineage from which he descended.

Ice ghosted around and about the king in graceful spires. Tall, proud Jotunn bore him in silent file. Six Jotunn mages, three on either side, chanted in ancient tongue the lifeless rituals. The words, Loki caught and for a moment his heart stopped at a familiar refrain once spoken long ago.

...all fall into the Starlit Lands...
...but few return to the Realm of the Cold Suns...

No. He thought with a frown. That is not quite right. That was not how it went, I am certain of it. So much knowledge has been lost. So much in Jotunheim has fallen into shadow.

Loki glanced at Farbauti who paced by the head of the bier, gaze fixed on his mate. Behind Helblindi and Byleistr walked, surrounded by Jotunn nobles. There was a pause. Odin and Frigga stepped forward, now standing hand in hand and dressed in their most ceremonial mourning robes (dark velvets, somber cottons, black leathers, and only the barest hint of armour). After a short pause during which a variety of Asgardian bugles resounded round the head of the bridge, Odin gave a short speech.

Loki, turning his head ever so slightly, noticed with pride that almost all of the nobles, warriors, and mages had attempted to attend the ceremony. There was also a surprising amount of respectfully quiet peasants and merchants as well. Laufey would probably never have guessed what his death would achieve, Loki mused. Perhaps this is why he did not fight to the end. Perhaps he saw something of the future as well.

After a short word from Frigga as well, bows were exchanged, upon which the queen passed a sheaf of barley gently bound in leather cording from which dangled runes of immortality and prosperity. The bugles sounded forth again, the last group of Jotunn moved forward and the King began his long journey across the bridge to the Observatory.

As the nobles passed by, Helblindi and Byleistr spoke with one at the head - Lord Aldra, judging by the banner his servant bore. The old Jotunn nodded slowly and the two princes hung back, allowing the others to pass. Then they caught Loki's gaze and drew closer. Thor, catching a look from his father and mother, stepped back, allowing Loki to face the two he had once thought of as brothers. Loki, putting more distance between his Asgardian family and the two Jotunn coming to meet him, moved forward. They met and looked at each other measuringly.

"Smarbrothir," Byleistr began, attempting to look as official as possible. "As Officiator of the Realm
of Jotunheim, I speak for my brother, the erstwhile Crown Prince of Jotunheim, on a matter of urgent business."

"Officiator?" Loki blinked. "I mean," he recovered, straightened his back, lifted his chin, and met his brothers' gazes with an imperious one of his own. "Of course. As promised."

His fingers moved gracefully in their familiar arc, pulling at will the Casket forth from its hiding place. Magick swirled about as he clasped it between his palms. Already his fingers were returning to their natural violet-blue. Raising the blue and grey relic upward, he smiled.

"The Casket of Ancient Winters."
"Keep it," Helblindi shook his head. "Bring it with you when you return."
"When I…" Loki's arms fell a little at his older brother's words.

Paying his now darkening complexio no heed, Loki glanced over at Byleistr. The firm look on the scholar's face did not bode well. Surely not…

"Surely not…" Loki fell silent, nonplussed. "You cannot mean…"
"Exactly," Byleistr smiled proudly then. "Your intuition and acuity shines through, even in this dark hour. You understand what we need, Prince Loki, what we request."
"But-"
"We formally request the return of the Casket of Ancient Winters in the hand of the True Heir, the Half-Soul of Jotunheim's Heimsrsal, the Voice of the Stars, and He Who Communes with the For-Eldra. Together with King we call Loki, Jotunheim will be renewed."

Loki's now red eyes were wide. Helblindi tipped his head.

"I fought to take your destiny, Smarbrothir," he said quietly. "With each step I took, I came better to understand the depth of my inadequacies-"
"I am not adequate," Loki interjected.
"-and the Heimsrsal demands it," Helblindi continued on firmly. "I am not my mother's son for nothing. I may not Hear – or See – as you do, but my heart tells me that this is the only way for our land to fully heal."
"Please," Loki turned his head a little to eye Frigga and Odin with a barely masked plea. "Take the Casket and be the king you always wished to be, Helblindi. This is something I cannot possibly succeed at, something I cannot do-"

Helblindi knelt then and placed a hand on Loki's fist which had tightened about the handle of the Casket.

"My ambitions were undermined long ago, and today they are a mere shell of what was." Helblindi replied gravely. "You are my brother and the True Heir, Jotunheim – and I – will bow to no other."
"I am – I am nothing," Loki bit out. "Tradition says – you have no idea what my kind did to Jotunheim long, long ago, and I assure you, it is not a story that ends well."
"We will make a new tradition," Byleistr replied firmly. "If we are to move forward, we must put our back to the past. Certainly there are dangers, but there are dangers to ignoring what is necessary as well. I will take my chances and stand behind you."
"You need not come with us now."

Helblindi gently pushed the Casket back to Loki's chest, resisting the urge to place a hand on Loki's long wiry hair which curled outward down the back of his neck. The younger Jotunn seemed almost paralyzed by the proposition.

"I know this decision is not easy, and the choice is yours."
"The throne of Jotunheim will await your return," added Byleistr.
"Jotunheim cannot afford to be leaderless," Loki pointed out acerbically. "Come to your sense and take the Casket."
"Loki," Helblindi finally withdrew his hand from the Casket and gazed at it sadly. "I am unable to wield it appropriately – and none of our Mages have any connection with the Realm's Spirit. It has been many a year and none have been born with any ability. In our hands, it would be nothing but a weapon. That is not what Jotunheim requires."
"Take your time," Byleistr nodded. "Helblindi will act as Steward and I as Officiator until your return."

Loki with a jerk sent the Casket back to his hiding place and glared up at his two brothers.

"I promise nothing," he said stiffly.
"We understand," Byleistr's soft voice held a note of sadness which caused Loki's eyes to burn and his mouth to form in a thin hard line.
"Will you think on it?" asked Helblindi, rising.
"I will," Loki conceded. "I will think on it. That I can promise."
"We look forward to your answer, Smarbrothir," Helblindi said. "Thank you for your aid."
"I have not done anything yet!"
"Yesterday." Helblindi reminded Loki. "For yesterday."
"I was useless yesterday," Loki muttered and looked away. "In the end... your – your Father died."
"You ended a war," Byleistr folded his hands. "Stop sulking and accept our thanks for that. It is no fault of yours that Helblindi's supporters took such drastic measures."
"You are welcome then," Loki sighed.
"We will be off," Helblindi turned away then. "We look to your coming, Loki."
"Farewell for now, Smarbrothir," Byleistr offered a smile.

With that, the two brothers strode down the Bifrost to the Observatory where the King was now prepared for his journey – tightly encased in ice to protect him during transportation. Loki, watching them leave, sighed. They are gone, he thought, but somehow it is as if they have not truly left.

It seemed to him that the Casket, within its hiding place, flared, called out, and burned. The relic wished to return home and heal its people. Loki mentally cursed his luck. Calling upon his Asgardian disguise, the young prince silently returned to Frigga's side. Frigga took his hand, smiled, drew him alongside her, and wisely said nothing.

"Well, that is over, thank the Norns," Odin smiled. "Better than I expected, if not as well as I had hoped."
"Jotunn politics seem to be rather complicated," Thor said soberly. "A tragedy we could not foresee has bound our Realms closer than ever."
"It is the nature of politics to be complicated," Loki rolled his eyes.
"You never have struggled with politics," Thor admitted. "You were born for complicated maneuverings."
"I am not always successful," Loki had to point out when he noticed a raised eyebrow from Odin. "No indeed," Odin grunted.
"Everyone makes a mistake or two in their lifetime." Frigga put in, leading her boys back to a waiting fleygja-skip [2]. "Politics are as dangerous as a huntsman's trap. It is no wonder that mistakes in that arena are plentiful."
"That is one way of phrasing it," Odin mounted the small steps offered for easy embarking. "I am certain the Utanheim will disagree."
"Father," Thor winced at Loki's face which fell at the words.
"Loki needs to learn that as a King, his decisions when gone astray have graver impacts than most. As you learned while on Earth, Thor."
"Loki understands that as well-"
"I am not a King," Loki sighed, interrupting Thor's heated rejoinder.  
"You were offered a throne today," Odin nodded. "As I guessed would happen eventually."  
"As you planned, you mean," Loki bit out. "You knew all along who I was."  
"We never intended to push you in any direction," Frigga gave her husband a hard glare.  
"If I was not to be King, I was to be Thor's advisor," Loki deflated then. "I know you did not push me. In fact, it felt… it felt nice to be pursued, to be wanted. I felt as though it was not enough, but when you all," here, he gave an exasperated laugh, "adopted me, it was enough. To be an advisor, to be a mage… It was enough. It is enough. I do not need Jotunheim's throne to be Loki."  
"No, you do not," Odin slowly said. "Yet, Loki, in my heart, I believe you were born to be King. Thor's intuition is right – you have natural abilities which you undoubtedly gained from your, ah, Sire… and you learn well from your mistakes. Most of the time."

"Whatever your choice, Loki," Frigga smiled, looping her arm around Loki's in a comforting manner, "you are the son of my heart – and gruff Odin is your father."

"And I, your brother," Thor laughed. "If you were king of Jotunheim – what adventures we would have."

"Adventures-" Loki looked at Thor as though the warrior had grown two heads. "You are supposed to be cured of adventures!"

"We can still go out on a quest now and then!"

"Thor-" Loki pinched the bridge of his nose in exhaustion.

The fleygja-skip now came to a halt in front of another set of stairs in the palace's main courtyard. Thor disembarked first, helped his mother down, waited for Odin to descend and then Loki. Loki, flapping a hand at his brother, stalked off to the garden.

"Loki! Where are you going?" Thor yelled after him, confused. "Hogun and Fandral are waiting at the gates for us!"

Loki yelled something back about needing to think.

"Thor," Odin laid a hand on his son's muscled bicep. "Let him be. He has a lot to consider."

"He needs to relax. He has been on the go since he landed on Midgard," protested Thor.

"On the go?" Frigga blinked at the odd expression.

"Ah," Thor scratched his head.

"Midgardian nonsense," Odin shook his head and made his way to the main hall.

"Have fun and take care," Frigga gave her son a kiss before following her husband inside.

-0-0-0-

The gardens were abandoned and quiet due to the fact that the entire palace staff had been sent out to exert the best of their efforts and expertise on rescuing and rehabilitating the trees and greenery of the city. Loki settled back with a sigh in his favourite thinking spot. It was here that he had mentally written his best treatises on magick. It was here that he found emotional and mental peace after particularly trying quests with Thor. It was here that he had come up with his insane plan to stop Thor's coronation.

Now bright and cheerful, not grey and dreary like the rainy day on which he had last visited it, flowers of blue and purple and red and orange and pink bunched together gaily beneath the spreading sheltering branches of the great oaks and elms. He sat with his back now against the rough bark of his favourite tree and glanced up at the remaining golden dappled sunlight. The sun had moved across the sky. Soon it would set.

Another day ended. So many more to go, Loki thought. So many paths to walk. So many journeys to make. So many decisions to ponder.
He could hear Byleistr's voice resounding in his mind over and over.

We formally request the return of the Casket of Ancient Winters in the hand of the True Heir, the Half-Soul of Jotunheim's Heimsrsal, the Voice of the Stars, and He Who Communes with the For-Eldra. Together with King we call Loki, Jotunheim will be renewed.

And Helbindi's bent knee and humble admission.

With each step I took, I came better to understand the depth of my inadequacies and the Heimsrsal demands it. I am not my mother's son for nothing. I may not Hear – or See – as you do, but my heart tells me that this is the only way for our land to fully heal. My ambitions were undermined long ago, and today they are a mere shell of what was. You are my brother and the True Heir. Jotunheim – and I – will bow to no other.

That brother who had stood with such pride and assurance was now gone. So much has changed, Loki’s mind raced through all of the options which now lay before him. Each choice is laden with responsibility and sacrifices and opportunities… Frigga and Odin say they will support me regardless of what I decide. Thor…

He remembered Thor's words.

Altruism is rare thing even for heroes – and you are one, Loki. A different kind of hero, but one nonetheless. You are a good person, Loki.

And another voice. A soft voice with a hint of steel beneath: Mal's voice.

…from such travesty, there is salvation. There is hope.

Loki. That is a beautiful name, a promise of greatness, I think. A mighty worker of Fate.

Loki contemplated the thin pale hands before him. If they were in their Jotun form, they would carry the markings of a King. Yet, somehow I do not feel like one. Perhaps that will come in time too. If it is my Fate to shoulder such a burden, then may I not believe that I was created with the strength to carry it?

Mal saw hope. Thor sees hope. Frigga has carried such hope. Perhaps I may grasp hold of it as well and allow it to carry me forward.

Rising to his feet then, Loki dusted off his pants absently. He contemplated his choices. He could stay underneath the tree until nightfall, or he could join Thor and the others. Or neither, Loki decided. I have not been able to visit my room since my exile. Now would be the perfect time to get settled back in… perhaps have a look at what I was experimenting with last I was at home.

A third option, he mused, as he made his way up the stairs to his out of the way bedroom which overlooked the sea and the city slanting down to the shores and the Bifrost. That is perhaps what I am missing. Perhaps my question of whether to be king or not is limited by my vision of what it means to be King – of what my reign will consist. Perhaps to be king will mean something even more than I imagined.

…Other-Soul…

…so much more…

A third option, whatever that may be.

He opened the door to his room and found that his room was not in the state of abandonment he had
imagined. The surfaces of his desk, his bookshelves, his tables and chairs gleamed with recent
dusting. His bed was neatly made; his clothes carefully folded within their dressers and chests; his
small herbal garden on the balcony still tended. Mother. He smiled fondly. Just as she promised, she
waited for my return. How could I have doubted her welcome?

Because you are an idiot, said a voice within him that sounded a lot like Mal.

Loki shook his head, made his way to the balcony and contemplated the city-scape which slowly fell
into shadow as the sun sank behind the palace. Before it fell completely into dusk, Loki lit the lamps
in the room and a good fire on the hearth.

At a hearty knock on the door, Loki sighed. Thor. I hope he is not too drunk to handle. Opening the
door reluctantly, Loki's eyebrows rose. Thor looked a little relaxed, but not overly tipsy. Hm. At the
sight of a small metal box in his brother's hands, Loki tipped his head.

"I forgot I had a few things for you," Thor confessed and pushed his way past Loki into the room.
"Coulson gave them to me. Here." He opened the box with a small key and retrieved a packet from
within. "Your possessions such as they were when they found you in the van explosion on
Midgard."

Loki unwrapped the parcel and paused at the sight of the torn, but scrupulously cleaned prison
uniform he had worn on the day of his rescue. Wrapped carefully inside the uniform, a plastic bag
sat, holding an odd piece of metalwork – a circle with spirals set within. A key. A small box the size
of his thumb. When he took off the cap, a familiar slot emerged.

"Some kind of a USB. You would call it a data packet, I suppose." Thor explained. "That is what
Coulson told me. They found it in your breast pocket."
"A data packet," Loki frowned. "Did they find what was on it?"
"Nothing but gibberish. That is what he said. Look at the paper."
"Paper…" Loki unfolded the last item – a small square of paper which opened up to reveal a line of
flowing script and a set of numbers.
"Can you read it?"
"No. Can you?"
"No," Thor shook his head regretfully. "Those are numbers, are they not?"
"Yes," Loki said. "The Standard Units for counting in most galaxies."
"What do you think they are?"
"If they are what I think they are…" Loki blinked.
"What are they?"
"But why?"
"But why what?" Thor asked. His patience starting to slip away from him. "What is going on, Loki?"
"I think they are coordinates," Loki explained. "Using a very specific notation that I am familiar with
– notations used on specifically piloted ships: Phylloxian ships."
"Coordinates for what location?"
"Thor," Loki rolled his eyes. "You can hardly expect me to know. It is not as if I am a star chart
database. This will require research and some thought."
"Research." Thor's interest immediately died.
Loki chuckled. "I am glad," he said, "to see that some things have not changed."
"I am glad too," Thor beamed back at his brother. Then he mock frowned. "Hey now, Loki, I could
say the same for you!"
"Well, thank you for remembering these," Loki smiled at Thor and set his new treasures aside
carefully.
"Thank you for stepping up to the plate."
"Stepping up to the plate?" echoed Loki. "When did I step on a plate?! I saw a lot of rubble in the
"It is an expression," Thor laughed. "Midgardian," Loki guessed. "It is a reference to baseball."
"Baseball."
"Baseball," repeated Thor. "A game on Midgard that involves a bat hitting a ball and people running about in circles from plate to plate."

Loki's brow wrinkled as he imagined humans flinging about flying rodents to hit balls (somehow) and the kitchenware must be -

"Wait," he said incredulity rising. "You cannot tell me that the humans actually play these kinds of nonsensical games. I am not believing that, Thor."
"It is not nonsensical! It is a very serious game. As serious as football or basketball!"
"I do not – I do not want to know…" Loki paused. "Where do they put the kitchenware?"
"Kitchenware?" Thor asked, confused.
"The plates."
"Ohhh…" Thor snorted. "They do not use plates as in… Oh dear. Look, this is how it goes –"

With that, the two brothers sat before the fire, shared a bottle of Loki's hidden stash of Vanaheim ale, and entered a serious discussion about the mysteries of Midgardian culture.

Chapter End Notes

Well, some humour and some talking - and more setting out for plot I might approach in a sequel. I hope you guys enjoyed~ If you did, let me know. Kisses!

p.s. I am posting Distortions in Time: Book 1 on Wattpad as well as Inkitt. These were substantively edited (not proofread). If anyone wants to become a proofreader (punctuation and grammar) for Distortions in Time, let me know.

p.p.s. For those curious, the books I've been reading lately: "Idoru" by William Gibson, "Jane of Lantern Hill" by L.M. Montgomery, "Icons of Evolution: Science or Myth?" by Jonathan Wells, "Magicians of the Gods" by Graham Hancock, among other titles.

[1] Ancestors
[2] Flying skiff
[3] Clash of the Pig Market
Well, now we are at the second last chapter. I hope you guys enjoy this small piece. Next chapter is our last one. For those who have reviewed every chapter, feel free to get in touch with me either through PM or through email (kakashidiot at gmail), for a small gift - if you want a lovely poster made out of the front cover the book.

I'm also working with the lovely thaliaarche to edit Book 1 of Distortions in Time which I will be posting on wattpad under scarecrowslady.

Wattpad and Inkitt (both under scarecrowslady) will hold all of my original work as well as polished fanworks which I wanna showcase.

Thanks to those who took the time to review the last chapter! Your kind words were encouraging!

ALSO... This chapter could be called "Kakashidiot's Hiddles Foot Fetish". His feet are gorg. If you don't believe, rewatch Only Lovers Left Alive. OMG.

Next morning, Loki woke with a mild headache. Mumbling curses at himself and Thor and Vanheim ale in general, the warrior mage fumbled blindly for the second iron handle of his small side dresser in which was held a variety of potions and medicinal aids. After taking a dose of herbal pain reliever and sipping some water from the glass bottle on top of the dresser, Loki sank back into his beloved, much missed pillows.

When was the last time I spent a peaceful, worry-free night here? He wondered. Loki remembered his day of adoption. A moment of happiness. Yet, then there followed a slow ensuing realization in the days after that Thor would never be one hundred percent manageable; that said Prince was not ready for the throne; that no one would listen to the adopted Prince's concerns; that it was up to him to save Asgard from its loveable, well-meaning, yet dangerously thoughtless, Crown Prince. Perhaps never. Not for a long, long time at least.

Now things are different, Loki hummed happily to himself, rolled over, and hugged one of the large goose-down pillows to his chest. Everything is back to normal – better than normal.

He dozed off then for a short period, relishing his soft pillows encased in newly starched forest green pillowcases. As usual, runes of comfort and cool were embroidered into the cotton slip-overs. Mother had figured out early on how much I preferred being kept cool, Loki thought drowsily. He smiled to himself at the thought of his mother. She knew then what I truly was – or guessed until... Well, probably one of the times I ended up dragged to the Healers Hall after being wounded during one of Thor's insane quests. Mother was never pleased... Loki mused. She is, after all, very wise and does not bear thoughtlessness well. Why did I not tell her my troubles and fears earlier?

Loki knew the answer now: fear. Fear goaded by Thanos. Fear grown over a lifetime. Fear harboured by me.
Rubbing his eyes, Loki released the pillow in his arms, turned on his back, and gazed up at the ceiling above him. Lovingly carved yet simple in its lines, the beams of this room remained ungilded. *The way I like it. Beautiful in simplicity.*

His leisurely gaze moved down to the heavily laden bookshelves across from him and then the chest at the foot of his bed. Against the rounded chestnut top of his potions chest and the muted décor, Loki’s long pale feet stood out. With a small smile, Loki wriggled his toes and then stretched back like a cat, enjoying the slide of well-worn cotton over his thighs and the firm give of the mattress beneath him.

*It is good to be home,* he smiled to himself, but then the smile slipped away as an unexpected thought flitted into his mind. *If only Mal could see this – if only…* Loki sat up then, clenched his eyes shut, and drew as steady breath as he could before forcing himself to gaze at his bony fists which bunched among the sheets.

"I am sorry, Mal," he apologized out loud to the room in a soft voice. *I am sorry, but in a short while I will have the time to mourn your passing. In a short while.*

A few moments of silence passed. Loki did not move. Then, tossing his light blankets aside sharply, Loki rose, dragged on his favourite dressing gown (a deep mahogany affair gifted him by Mother), and wandered out of the corner of his room in which his bed laid. He bathed slowly, savoured the luxuriously warmed (but not too warm) water. *Clean water,* he sighed.

Then, gathering a few things he needed to consider – a notepad, a quill, an inkpot, and the paper Thor had brought him the night before – Loki went out to his balcony to dry off. On the way out, the prince noticed that his manservant had already brought his breakfast. Loki returned to the side table and picked at the meal. The tea was cold and the toasted bread a little stale, but Loki did not mind. *I have had worse.*

A familiar mantra.

As Loki overlooked the busy Realm which now spread before him in the clear morning light of Asgard’s rising sun, Loki felt very lucky. Far off, he heard the bells toll ten. The day was getting underway – without him. Loki reviewed his schedule mentally. Frigga had set apart the entire morning for rest.

"Food and rest is what you need," she had said as she surveyed his bony frame.

Food and rest, he now had. At the thought of Jotunheim and Asgard, however, Loki felt restless. *There is so much to do. So many decisions to make.* He glanced at the waiting notepad and quill and then turned back to looking up at the blue sky.

The warrior-mage nibbled on another piece of toast, gave his flat belly a long considering look, and reminded himself to regulate his diet. *The last thing I need to do is make myself sick,* Loki grimaced. *My stomach will need time to return to its regular capacity… and I will need to take up some regular exercise in order to regain my muscle.*

Out of the corner of his eye, a slight breeze tugged at white paper. *The white paper Thor brought,* Loki mused. Reaching over, he gently tugged it out from under the ink pot.

Loki’s green eyes slowly perused the script. *It looked familiar – yet unfamiliar.* All-Speech, a spell which allowed for understanding of any spoken language within the Realms, did apply to written language. *The coordinates, however, would be easily followed with the right ship. Nesta. Nesta and*
the Noradians… and an ancient history of a lost, blue-skinned race: the Phylloxians, the Lesser Kindred. And… the Trowatal. And Mal. This had been put in his pocket. Who had put it there? Mildy? Jace? Karl? Or… Mal?

The numbers tugged at his curiosity, asking to be discovered, to be deciphered.

Loki set the paper aside, once again pinning it down by the ink pot. Rising he walked over to the edge of the balcony where his plants still grew. The herbs and flowers faithfully tended by the servants and his mother, no doubt. Beyond their green leaves, the golden city of Asgard lay. My home.

…for now…

For now, it is my home, Loki told himself firmly. Yet, he also knew. A mystery called. Another world, another time, another people. His people. The Lesser Kindred. The Lesser Kindred, who dreamed of returning home.

Home? What is home? Home, Mother would say, is where the heart is. My heart wanders; my home is everywhere and nowhere then. Perhaps that is as it should be. Asgard is my home now – perhaps Jotunheim will one day also become my home again.

Loki's consciousness, brushing against the Casket he still held in his possession, felt the gentle call of Jotunheim's Other-Soul.

…Jotunheim waits…
…it is always waiting…

Your destiny was never easy, he told himself. It was never simple. You are a being straddling the edges, the fringes, of many Realms. Thor, he understands, I think. His heart is on Midgard with Jane. My heart… perhaps never left the Utanheim. That is not a bad thing, perhaps.

Loki sighed.

Enough thinking. The day will not stop for Prince Loki.

-0-0-0-

In the afternoon, Loki ran an errand for his father. Odin needed Heimdall to cast his eye on Midgard to ascertain whether the Midgardians were recovering well from the attack. Frigga, realizing that her youngest son was too restless for his good, sent Loki down to the Observatory to carry Odin's request.

"The boy has no need to go," Odin said, slightly scandalized. "We have servants for that-"
"He has much on his mind," Frigga gave Odin a look. "Too much on his mind. There is so much Loki needs to process – his experiences in the Midgardian Realm, his duty to Jotunheim and to Asgard… You might not realize it, but a mother knows. Loki needs time to process all of it."
"Hm," Odin drew his wife close, his arm find its way around her waist. "I will defer to your intuition, Frigga. As always."
"Hmph. Always? I wish it was always. We would have a lot less trouble for our boys if you had not made decisions of your own will." Frigga shook her head remembering Odin's return home, heavy-hearted with news of Thor's exile. At least she had been there to say goodbye to Loki. "I would have liked a say in their punishments."
"It was meant to be." Odin replied simply. "My heart told me that their journeys would bring them home – and they have returned with knowledge and experience you or I may not have gifted them
otherwise. Still it was not easy for me either."
"The Norns could have found another way to inform us concerning Thanos," Frigga sniffed. "If I
was in charge of Fate…"
"The world would be a better place," Odin laughed then, "and very well ordered."

With that, Odin kissed Frigga gently on her temple, and the two sat for their prescribed hour of lunch
in thankful peace.

-0-0-0-

"Many visit the Observatory," Heimdall noted from his traditional stance with his sword in hand on
top of the Observatory's dais, "but few have the courage to stand so close to the edge."

He spoke to the straight, slender back for the dark-haired prince. What Loki thought of Heimdall, the
dark-skinned Asgardian could only guess. Annoyance and distrust, perhaps. Heimdall's golden eyes
softened. The feeling is mutual, I suppose. Always he has managed to slip past my gaze, but it has
taken me some time to learn something I never thought important: trust is a matter of the will, a
question of faith – and faith is not a matter of the eyes. It is the will of one's heart. A matter of choice.

"I am ever standing on the edge," Loki's soft voice finally broke the silence between them. "Always
have I faced fear."
"Fear of what, my prince," Heimdall asked.
"What anyone fears," Loki turned then and offered the Gatekeeper a half-smile. "The fall and the
dark."
"You have faced both," Heimdall reassured the young man's unspoken question. "You faced your
fears; you overcame them with courage; you grasped ahold of destiny… It acquitted yourself quite
well, Prince Loki."

Loki turned to give the endless vista of nebulae and stars before him a final glance. Then he
approached the Gatekeeper with his chin held high, shoulders back, and a confident stride. The
swing of his favourite dark leathers gave the well-groomed prince a mildly rakish air.

"You think so," Loki raised an eyebrow. "You think a path of destiny lies before me?"
"All beings within the Nine Realms have their own path."
"Do you see kingship in my future?" Loki's green eyes glinted and his jaw tightened a little. "Last I
saw you, I recall you having doubts about my abilities."
"If I had doubts," Heimdall replied gravely, "I no longer harbor them now."
"Hm."

Loki's gaze ran over the newly recreated podium – the Observatory's activation mechanism. He
turned to gaze up at the rounded, lovingly carved ceiling and the runes of protection etched into the
equally gilded beams. As usual, the architects, the carpenters, the workers, and the mages had
lavished as much finery into the building as they could practically allow.

"You are skeptical," the Gatekeeper noted.
"The last time we parted ways," Loki had to point out, perversely, "your Observatory was dropping
off into the abyss of a black hole."
"That was a particularly spectacular failure," Heimdall had to agree. He smiled then. "The motivation
was admirable. The execution needed finessing, however. Perhaps a successful result was something
none of us desired. The King and Queen hold to the traditions of Asgard. There are tales of when
Asgard and Jotunheim's people were at peace – a long time ago before even the All-Father's
memory. The ancient peoples of Asgard and Jotunheim aided each other… Perhaps we will find
such peace again."
"You think an actual alliance will be forged in the wake of this disaster?"
"I believe it will happen. If not in the All-Father's lifetime, then when Thor is King and you sit upon the throne of Jotunheim."
"I do not know if that is where my path of destiny will lead me," Loki said stiffly.
"Neither do I," Heimdall agreed. "These eyes were not born to see the future."
"Still you hope."
"I still hope," echoed the Gatekeeper.
"At any rate, before I take up the throne of Jotunheim – if I am to accept Helblindi's offer – I have other things I must do," Loki ran long fingers through his dark hair, rumpling it.
"A quest?"
"Quests," Loki huffed. "I have had enough of those. No. Enquiry is probably a better term to use."
"You will not leave too soon," Heimdall turned to give the prince a hard look. "I am to understand that the Queen has planned a victory banquet tomorrow."
"Oh yes," Loki said. "I will be there. If I was not, I am certain Mother would pay you a visit and hunt me down."

Heimdall smiled.

"We all deserve to celebrate."

Loki glanced across the round room to the open archway which led out to the stars. For a moment, something that looked like sadness passed over his face. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but then thought better of it and refrained. Giving Heimdall a stiff smile, the Prince nodded politely and made his way back to his waiting mount.

"I suppose we do," the warrior-mage agreed. "Well, I should return to the palace. I will carry your reply to All-Father right away."

Heimdall turned to watch the prince ride away over the bright humming Bifrost.

Loki, as usual, was a mystery. Just like his future.

Chapter End Notes

Well, one more chapter to go! Exciting! Let me know what you guys think!

What do you think Loki wanted to say at the end of this chapter? Hmmm...

-KI

p.s. I saw Civil War. Surprisingly I am on Captain America's side regarding supervision and 'who will watch the watchers'. I wouldn't trust the UN with a cat let alone a bunch of superheroes. But that may just be me. I will say that Ant Man and Spiderman were awesome as well. Black Panther was cool too. I love cat-like heroes.
The Story Begins Anew

Chapter Notes

It's done. 95 chapters. Around 475,000 words. Two and a half years later. Now I have come to the end of an era.

To be honest, it feels strange to imagine not worrying about updating this anymore. It feels strange to imagine a life without Distortions in Time. It's been a long road - upon which I have gained and lost readers, but all in all had a great time.

For those interested in my writing, feel free to PM me at any time. I post original fic for free on inkitt (dot com) as well as wattpad under scarecrowslady.

I finished an original fic a week or two ago, so I'm feeling fairly accomplished this year. This summer I hope to work on another original fic, as well as a new fanfic. Probably a Star Wars fanfic.

For those interested in what is gonna happen with Distortions in Time in the future, read my announcements at the end of this chapter~!

Thanks to all who have reviewed over the years. I hope you had fun reading this! To new reviewers, don't be shy. Leave a review letting me know what you guys think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[...all things come to an end…]
[...but it is not the end, surely…]
[...for with each ending…]
[...there is…]

After dismounting by the Royal Stables, Loki made his way around a few newly carved pieces of stone which would be used to rebuild the outer wall of the King's courtyard. The city is already healing from the war, he thought, but it will take some time to smooth out the edges. Everyone will be looking to the Royal Family. We are the first examples for our people. As such we will have to work hard and persevere. Speaking of persevering... Is that Thor?

At the sight of his older brother making his way down the far steps, Loki's initial direction changed. It is his first day back within Odin's Council, Loki remembered. Thor probably needs an outlet for his energy. Although it is odd, for he does not bear Mjolnir. Perhaps it is not a quest in the making, but the tavern.

"Thor," Loki called, drawing his brother's attention toward him as he approached cautiously. "How did it go?"

"The usual," frowned Thor. He grimaced as he glanced upward at the sun now overhead. "You would think that a war and the near destruction of Jotunheim would bring some kind of unity to the Asgardian people. Apparently not."

"I am sorry to hear that. 'Old habits die hard, and ambition festers for eternity'." Loki noted sagely. "They are all old men who wish to die with great honour and in comfort. Their personal goals will always play a part in their politics."

"Ah, quoting Elder Havarthar at me now?" Thor shook his head. "It is a pity he is not alive in our
time. He would save Asgard from itself. I will work hard, but no matter how much I listen and speak, I wonder if anything can be gained."

"Peace and wisdom will come. In time." Loki offered what encouragement he could, knowing how hard it was to wrangle Odin's Counsel. "The fact that you remained so long in the meetings tells me that your will has changed for the better. The people will respond in time."

"The will is there," Thor sighed, "but the body grows restless. How long was I cooped up in that room? It feels like forever."

"Perhaps a drink is in order," Loki clapped his brother on the shoulder.
"Ah, that would be nice," Thor smiled then. "Sadly we do not have the time."

"We do not?" Loki raised an eyebrow.
"I should say, 'I do not'. I have… I have something personal to do," Thor shrugged awkwardly then.
"You will return for the banquet, right?" asked Loki.
"Of course. Mother would kill me if I did not arrive on time."
"So you will be back within the hour."
"Yes," Thor looked away. "There is something I must do."

"Would you wish me to accompany you?"
"It is fine, Loki." Thor sighed and then admitted. "I am merely going visiting the Observatory."
"To ask after Jane," guessed Loki.
"Foolishness, I know, but…"

"No," Loki stepped back. "If there is someone you care about, someone worth caring about in your life… It is one's duty and one's joy to watch over them. Do it, Thor, while you can."
"You are like Father," grunted Thor, waving at a stable boy and shouting for his horse before turning back to Loki. "You do not approve."

"No. That is not what I meant," Loki stopped. Then he started again with a frown. "Perhaps Father and I sound similar when we speak of Jane, but our motivations are different. I merely wish to warn you that time is precious and life is fragile. Enjoy what you can – now – while you still have it. Jane is a mortal. She will not be here forever."

At Loki's words, the taller blond warrior turned his gaze away from his horse which was being brought out of its stable. Thor stared at the spare frame of his younger brother and remembered Loki's quiet admission. There had been someone for Loki who was now lost to his younger brother. Someone Thor had never met, someone who had for a short time found joy and love with his younger brother, someone who had left her mark on Loki. That someone had disappeared – or died.

"I am sorry, Loki," Thor shook his head. "I did not think-"

"It does not matter," Loki said lightly.
"It does," Thor drew close to his brother and raised his hand to settle it upon Loki's thin shoulder. "You should know out of everyone here the pain of loosing someone you love. You have not been given the chance to grieve her loss or avenge her death."

"Vengeance was not quite what I had in mind," Loki laughed shortly then. He drew a sharp breath as though in pain, his green eyes glittering. "But it does have a certain appeal. I will go in search of her and discover the truth of what happened that day in the ship."

"The coordinates."

"Those, too," Loki nodded. "The Mage's Circle is well on its way to recovery, but after I have helped Mage Hrotha and High Mage Agaeti as best I can, I will leave Asgard for a short time. There are things I must do."

"I will wish you well," Thor drew his brother close in a bear hug of an embrace. "Of course, I offer my help also. If you wish Mjolnir at your side, I will join you. If not, Mother, Father, and I will be waiting with open arms. You will always have a place to return to as long as Asgard remains."

"I know." Loki drew back then. "I will not forget." Noticing that the horse was now saddled and bridled and ready, the dark-haired prince punched Thor playfully on the shoulder. "Go on then, you have a girl to check on. Say-"
A shout resounded across the courtyard as the Warriors Three and Sif burst out of a side door of the south tower, looking tired but cheerful. Sif, dressed in smart leathers, did not look like she was headed to a banquet. Loki's eyebrows rose, but he held his tongue.

"We are returning home to prepare for the banquet," Sif said, giving Loki a look that meant 'I know what you are thinking'.
"Really?" Thor asked. "You all look great."

Loki sniggered as Fandral looked with horror at Thor. Hogun stared down at his mud-caked riding boots, and Volstagg patted at his rather wild beard.

"Thor," Fandral sighed theatrically. "Tell me you are joking."
"Only a little bit," Thor laughed. "But I am glad you are all coming."
"It would not be the same without us," Fandral reminded Thor, ignoring Sif who rolled her eyes.
"The girls would be devastated as well."
"The food will be delicious. How could one say no to that?" asked Volstagg.
"That is one way of looking at it," Hogun muttered.
"I think it is a good way to celebrate our new life," Sif said. She smiled then at the princes. "To celebrate peace with Jotunheim, to celebrate Thor's and Loki's return... So many things to be thankful for. It is not just the Palace either – the entire capital will celebrate. I wonder how Loki is going to attend the Mage's Banquet and the Court Feast."
"Illusions," Loki waved his hand grandly and gave a short bow.
"And the way we know that it is you depends on how much you talk? Trust the Silvertongue to show up at the Court Feast. There are more heads to turn there," chuckled Volstagg. "Ow!" He glared at Hogun, who had hit him on the shoulder suddenly.
"Well, I hope you are at the Court Feast," Fandral smiled. "The ladies will weep if you do not attend, especially considering how... exotic you have become."
"I – what?" Loki blinked. "Exotic?"
"The Jotunn element, Loki, the Jotunn element. Girls always enjoy something different- Ow!"
Fandral rubbed his arm where Sif had hit him.
"Loki is not going to parade his heritage for some wenches," Sif frowned. "The people of Asgard may be interested in Loki's Jotunn colours, but if he wishes to retain his privacy, that is his prerogative."
"Loki is a babe magnet," Thor chuckled. Mounting his horse, he looked down at his friends and noticed their blank expressions. "Oh. I mean – a person who attracts girls. Babe magnet. As a friend of mine would say, 'Chicks dig guys who are blue'."
"Thor, I have no idea what you are talking about," Fandral grinned, "but it sounds about right."
"Well, I am not going to be blue tonight," Loki said mildly. Then he glanced at the men curiously. "They really... think that my blue skin is... attractive?"
"Uhh... Yes," Fandral slung a comradely arm about Loki's shoulders and gave his friend an earnest look. "Yes, Loki, they find it very attractive. It might be the powerful warrior-mage image you have created as well... The fact that you are a Prince of two Realms and an Heir Apparent of one."
"Asgardian women do not find Jotunn attractive," Loki frowned. "I heard them on many occasions--"
"Giant Jotunn are not attractive," Sif sighed. "I cannot believe that I am having this conversation. Look, giant Jotunn are not attractive. So, in general, having only seen Giant Jotunn, Asgardian women have not found Jotunn in general to be attractive. Now we discover there are... smaller built ones who are great fighters and powerful mages. Well, that changes things."
"Oh," Loki said in a daze as his world began to shift yet again and was now turned on its head. "So, if I were you," Fandral said, "I would prepare myself – for an onslaught of delightful company. Dress well and be yourself – and have a great time which you no doubt deserve."
"Also be prepared for a whole night of drinking and eating," Volstagg cheered.
"The whole night," Sif agreed. "A few taverns have reopened. If the feast ends too early, we can always relocate the celebration."
"A good plan, huh?" Volstagg smiled.

Loki looked up at Thor uncertainly. Thor smiled down at his younger brother.

"It will be just like old times," Thor smiled. "Even better than old times."
"Yes," Loki glanced at the people he now could accept as friends. "Better than the old times. I had… I had better go get ready."
"Oh goodness," Volstagg's eyes widened as he noticed the passage of time. "I had best head home. Must not be late!"

With that, the group split up, hearts filled with excitement.

[…]for with each ending…
[…]there is…

Loki found Frigga in her sitting room, ready for the banquet. Today, the queen was dressed in a beautifully draped blue dress cinched with a pale gold belt which matched her delicate earrings. Other than the belt and earrings, her only ornamentation was a delicate necklace holding a single sapphire – a small gift from Odin several years back, Loki remembered, and her favourite.

Next to her, Loki cut a somber figure, dressed in deep greens and blacks with only the hint of gold within his clasps and buckles. He wore a dark green long coat over well-cut trousers, a white cotton shirt, and well-tailored vest. Without his armour, Loki's height and spare frame was even more apparent. Glancing only briefly at himself in the large mirror within his mother's sitting room, Loki noticed that his cheekbones were particularly sharp as his face had lost a lot of weight. There is nothing to be done about it, Loki reminded himself. Illusions would be silly. You are a survivor of imprisonment, torture, and war. There is nothing to be ashamed of.

Still, he approached Frigga slowly. Some traitorous part of him, a dark voice deep within, whispered that he would never be good enough. Loki shoved it down and moved forward. Catching sight of her son, Frigga rose swiftly and moved forward. Her blue eyes lit up instantly at the sight of him, which once again renewed Loki's confidence.

"You look quite dashing," she smiled. "All the ladies will approve."
"I hope so," Loki blushed just a little. "I mean–"
"I know what you mean," Frigga reassured her son and winked at him. She sat down in her favourite chaise. "It will be a long night, I imagine. I am sure everyone has already planned after party drinking and whatnot. Have you prepared a speech?"
"A speech?" Loki took a seat on the small couch opposite her. "You think I will be asked to give a speech?"
"So, you have thought of what to say." Frigga nodded approvingly, recognizing Loki's prevarication for what it was - the usual lack of self-confidence. "You always were well-prepared when it came to feasts and teas."
"A lifetime of diplomacy and manipulation."
"Diplomacy," Frigga assured him firmly. "Let us just leave it at that. You will need diplomacy tonight – with everyone asking you questions about your future. You know how these busybodies get."
"Yes." Loki sagged back against his mother's couch.
"Just confuse them with the truth."
"The truth?"
"That the future is uncertain," smiled Frigga. "There are many things in this world that I do not know, but one thing is certain – your path is your own and, as always, it is unique to you. Step forward in confidence; people will eventually come to understand."

"I–" Loki hesitated. "I am not as concerned about the court's opinions…"

At the familiar look of uncertainty which Loki so often tried to hide, Frigga rose from her seat and joined him, taking his hand in hers. They felt cool within her warm grasp – cool and hardened and roughened. A warrior's hands.

Loki also gazed down at her hands and remembered the many days Frigga and he would sit together and talk in her garden. They would plan and they would gossip, and yet…And yet, Loki admitted, I would never tell her the full truth of what I truly struggled with. Fear destroyed my trust and hope. It isolated me. It made me weak in so many ways. I became easy prey. Not again.

"I do have some idea about what I need to do," Loki finally said. "During my exile, I came to understand that there are others like me – small Jotunn who are often gifted with magick. They shapeshift as I do and hide on planets within other societies. I want to… I want to find them – the Lesser Kindred – and perhaps bring them back home to Jotunheim."

"The Lesser Kindred. So the ancient stories are true." Frigga smiled. "They survived to this day! Where?"

"I do not know – but I have some ideas of where to start. Besides that, Mal left me a message which I really ought to pursue."

"Mal?" Frigga gave her son a gentle inquiring look.

"Ahhh…" Loki glanced away then. "She was…" He sighed gustily. "Mal was a captain who saved me. She was…"

"Someone you loved?" asked Frigga.

"Love," Loki said wistfully. "Perhaps. Respect and joy – that is what we shared."

"Shared?"

"Since I last saw her, I have walked among the Stars. When I passed through space and time to reach Thor's side, when I wielded the Casket, I could not find her, could not feel her. I must make certain the worst of my suspicions."

"I am sorry."

"As am I," Loki gazed down at their joined hands and smiled sadly.

Frigga said nothing for a long while, merely rubbing Loki's back as the young man struggled to keep his tears at bay. Eventually Loki raised his head and allowed his mother to draw him into her arms. He slouched then, gratefully laying his dark head on her shoulder.

"But she left you a message," Frigga wondered aloud after a short while when Loki's breath had steadied. "Can you guess why?"

"I cannot read the message." Loki shook his head, sniffing a little but finding strength again with each passing minute. He pulled back a little, but still held tightly onto Frigga's hand. "Not the writing at any rate. There are the coordinates. I will find a ship and follow them."

"Be careful, dear."

"I will," Loki gave his mother a crooked smile.

"Be careful about what?"

It was Odin in full feast regalia – a deep crimson cape over his best finery. Over the softest, whitest cotton, Odin wore a deep black and red vest traced with patterns of gold. Gold trimmed his undercoat as well as his overcoat. His trousers were neatly pressed, and his boots shone. At the sight of her husband, Frigga rose, exclaimed in admiration, and drew her husband close for a kiss. Behind her, Loki rose as well.
"You look quite fine," Frigga finally ended her examination of Odin's outfit. "Very handsome."
Realizing that Odin was more interested in what they had been talking about, Frigga sighed. "Loki was just telling me his plans for the near future."
"They are nebulous," Loki added hastily, "but, in short, I hope to rediscover the Lesser Kindred of he Jotunn, as well as follow Mal's coordinates."
"Who is Mal?" Odin's brow furrowed suspiciously. "Not another Midgardian?"
"No," Frigga gave Odin a look. "A girl who Loki met while exiled. They were together for a while."
"Hmph. It would be too much to hope she was from Vanheim or Asgard," Odin muttered. "Skrull, actually." Loki battled down annoyance. "I owe her my life – and I need to find out what happened to her after I left her."
"And the Lesser Kindred. Is that in any way related to the mythical being on Jotunheim from the Ancient Days?" asked Odin.
"Yes," Loki nodded. "I have discovered that there are some on Midgard, but I got the feeling that the situation is very delicate and complicated. Midgard is a very complex society, and to go in without understanding the full situation could damage a peaceful relationship."
"They are on Midgard?" Odin did not look too happy.
"They are not dangerous, Father," Loki sighed. "They just want to live peaceful lives."
"Deceiving the Midgardians."
"Which Asgard has done for millennia."
"For their own good," Odin insisted.
"For our good as well," Loki shook his head. "I agree with the policies of Asgard in general. Non-interference has been the best path for Midgard... and Jotunheim. Until now. Perhaps the time has come for a change - but we must have care in how we reveal ourselves, how we build our relationships."
"Jotunheim perhaps," Odin said reluctantly. "Jotunheim needs our aid if only for the sake of survival against Thanos."

Loki stamped down on his rising anger.

"I will do my best to make a decision that will aid as many people as possible," Loki finally said with a calm firmness. "The path I take to that route may not be expected, but I will do my best to choose the right path."
"Well, I suppose I cannot expect any other way than that from you, Loki," Odin gave his son a small smile. "You always fought for your own ends. Whatever decision you make, we will stand behind you. Your mother would not have it any other way."
"Absolutely right," Frigga nodded.

"Father is a complicated man, Loki thought with an internal sigh. A complicated mixture of King and father and man. On so many levels, he makes decisions, but I can play that kind of a game too."

"I am not certain about my level of commitment toward Jotunheim," Loki shrugged. "I may return for a short while at least to help them heal their land with the Casket. However, I am not sure what I can do exactly. The practical side of helping Jotunheim still escapes me. There must be rituals of some sort. Perhaps the Lesser Kindred could tell me – or the King's Archives or the Jotunn Elders on Jotunheim."
"You may search the Asgardian archives. The Elves also may have some information."
"I could look," Loki said, unconvinced as he remembered is previous experience researching in Alfheim. "The archives in Alfheim were a bit vague about the Jotunn."
"I was also thinking of the Dark Elves."
"Ah," Loki nodded, remembering the pale still face of Malekith. Malekith knew of the name of Loki, after all. However, enlisting his aid may be well night impossible. "I did not think of that."
"Well, it sounds like we will all be busy," Frigga drew the two men close to her in a large hug. "I am very happy to hear my boys getting along so well. The future is as bright as we make it, I always say.
– and the future has never looked so hopeful."
"Hope," Loki murmured thoughtfully. "A precious thing…" He smiled at his parents then.
"Whatever happens, I will hold onto hope for our Realms, for all the Realms."
Odin grunted, "We will need all the hope we can get – and then some, if we are to face Thanos and survive."

Loki remembered the words of the Heimsrsal, the one who was not Elska: *I thought you could bring hope to Jotunheim.* The Stars ever spoke of the eternal dance between Life and Death. *Neither will lose,* Loki smiled to himself, *neither will win.* Death's words returned to him then: *All of our children have their own ascension and descent, brilliant stars as they are in the tapestry we all weave. Those closest to our hearts, we shelter as we may.* Loki’s grin broadened. *There is hope, while we still have time – and time has been given to me over and over.*

*Thanos lost long ago; he just does not know it yet.*

[...a broad horizon spreading before you...]
[...you have come to rest...]
[...places called home welcome you...]
[...is this the end?...]

An hour and a half later, the banquet was in full swing. Beneath great banners and the flags of Asgard's domains, Odin gave a speech about Asgard's hard won victory, about the sacrifices of the warriors who had fallen, about the return of his sons, and about Asgard’s future of peace. Loki noticed that although the All-Father mentioned future battles to be won, Odin had said nothing specifically of Thanos. Loki understood and approved.

The people need a rest before they come to grips with what warring against the Mad Titan will entail, Loki thought grimly. *Doom and gloom is not what is wanted at a victory feast.*

After a few requests, Frigga also rose and spoke a few words thanking everyone for their hard work during the short war with Jotunheim. Unlike Odin, Frigga openly encouraged her people to show clemency toward the Jotunn and encouraged the Asgardians to look to their neighbouring Realms with a willingness to give and take. Applause resounded around the hall as the beautiful Queen took her seat, and Loki, who sat at her side as was his wont, joined the throng. His heart swelled with pride.

*When I – If I become King,* Loki corrected himself, *I hope to bring as much hope and encouragement to my people as Mother does.*

Thor whooped and yelled in the wake of Frigga's speech. More like a battle cry, it raised the energy of the room even further, and Loki could not help but smile. Following Frigga's speech, jesters and entertainers joined the nobles, jumping, dancing, and twirling. Bards moved about slowly, standing by various groups of noblemen and singing songs. Stories were bandied about at the top of the warriors’ voices.

Great trays bearing fruit and meat and bread and wine were brought in and passed around the room. On the Royal Dais, where Odin and his family as well as his generals and a few mages sat, servants brought small delicacies which High Mage Agaeti, Frigga, and Loki preferred. Thor had already eaten his fill of venison, potatoes, and mead, and now picked at a fruit cake slowly while discussing provisioning with General Tyr.

A small flourish of trumpets sounded, and Loki's eyes lit up at the sight of familiar, small, white bowls. He glanced at Frigga who met his inquiring gaze with a smile and a nod. Mint pudding.
"We have several servings for you, dear," Frigga told her son, in a conspiratorial voice. "Feel free to ask for more, when you are done."

She patted Loki's hand and turned to Odin, offering him a bowl of pudding. The King set the dish beside his plate, smiled at his youngest son and his wife, and shook his head in amusement.

"Thank you, love," he said. 
"You know how--"

Frigga stopped as someone yelled up at the dais in a strident voice which somehow overrode the clatter of utensils and tumult of the Court's combined conversation.

"Thor!"

The areas closer to the dais fell to a murmur as one of the younger lords, obviously rather drunk, rose to his feet with a glass raised.

"Prince Thor! A tale of your victorious exploits on Midgard!"
"Oi! Thor! Tell us of Midgard!" Volstagg roared in agreement. "The final battle you fought before arriving in Asgard!"
"Thor! Thor!" The crowd chanted.

Thor rose, his hand raised to calm the crowd. He stood up, but he did not jump over the table and cheer, neither did he call Mjolnir to egg his people on, nor did he stride to the front of the dais to start his tale.

"Aerth. Volstagg. Everyone." Thor stopped when the entire hall fell silent, hanging on his every word.

Almost everyone. Thor glanced sideways down the table at Loki whose attention was focused on his second helping of mint pudding.

[...perhaps it has now come to an end...]
[...all things come to an end...]
[...but it is not the end, surely...]
[...for with each ending...]
[...there is...]

"To be honest, Aerth. Volstagg... This tale is not mine for the sharing."

The room fell utterly silent at Thor's unexpected words. All of the servants froze. The young warriors tipped their heads back in confusion. The young ladies stopped whispering. The older warriors and courtiers and ladies set down their knives and pints of mead to properly look at the Crown Prince in slight shock. Loki's spoon hovered over the pudding as Loki looked at his older brother in surprise.

"You have to understand that by Asgardian standards, my years on Earth was spent in a rather unremarkable way. I learned some important lessons, but these lessons everyone here would perhaps find rather dull on a night like this. Such lessons – on wisdom, patience, and compassion – are better for another day. As for the final battle on Midgard... The end of my stay in Midgard ended with a battle, true, but the roots of the battles and the wars we experienced, both on Midgard and Asgard, have roots deep within a past few here know or understand."

Odin, leaning back in his chair, gazed up at his son with pride, and Frigga dabbed at the corners of her eyes with her handkerchief. Mesmerized, Loki raised his cup of pear cordial to his lips; his eyes
were fixed on Thor, wondering what his newly matured brother would do next.

"This is, I think, Loki's tale."

Loki choked on his drink as Thor's hand gestured in his direction.

"He is, after all, a master storyteller."

For the barest second, nothing was said. Then, from within the crowd a mage shouted.

"Hear! Hear!"
"Loki!" Sif shouted. "Let us hear the tale already!"
"Silvertongue!" bellowed a few of the bards. "Silvertongue! Silvertongue!"

Loki, his pale cheeks just a little flushed, rose to his feet, refusing to meet Thor's or Frigga's gaze.

"It is a long tale," he warned them, "and rather complicated."
"We have all night," chorused a bunch of mages.
"We do not!" Volstagg roared. "I have an appointment with a tavern!"

Laughter ensued, drowning out the warrior's grumbling. Several tables began to chant Loki's name. Loki turned and glanced at his family. Frigga's blue eyes twinkled in encouragement and Odin nodded. Thor roared and stomped his feet, which all the younger people in the hall emulated immediately. As Thor took his seat, Loki bowed and then moved from his seat round the side of the long table to the front of the dais.

Recognizing that the famous storyteller was about to being, the crowds fell silent in anticipation.

[...a new beginning...]

As he strode down the front of the dais, Loki's hand swept through the air, casting the room into soft darkness. Above them, the lamps dimmed and became one with the illusion of an endless vista - stars shining and twinkling. About the Court, hills of snow rose, blanketing the wall-hangings and the stone carvings of Odin's great hall. The pillars became empty ruins of a broken city.

Loki began his tale.

[...the skies are empty in Jotunheim...]

"The skies are empty in Jotunheim."

Loki whirled to cast the great cold suns into the empty dark sky. His smooth voice spoke the images into being as his memories rose within him and channeled themselves through his hands.

[...so wrong...]
[...there is life even here...]

"Yet, those tales are so wrong, for there is life even here in the Realm of Snow and Ice. Long ago, before the forgotten wars, Jotunheim was filled with starlight and the magick of its people, and the beasts of Jotunheim roamed wild and free. But then... in the name of power and greed, the greatest cities came to ruin, and the land of Jotunheim fell silent. All that remains today are the few cities of the Greater Kindred: Utgard, Griotunagardar, Gastropnir, and Utgard. Utgard, the westernmost citadel, stands as a sentinel at the chasm's edge. This is the Eybjarg, and here – here, too – is silence. It is the deep calm before the storm of war. Asgard has brought the war with Jotunheim home."
The scene shifted to show a looming dark altar, a blood-stained floor, and a small dark-skinned baby overshadowed by an icy ledge.

"Yet, in the midst of loss and destruction, hope, perhaps, was born for Jotunheim. I could not believe it myself for many years, but now I see it as the truth. Can you hear it?"

[...can you hear it?...]

"Fate's tapestry reveals a new path for the Realms, and the Spirits of the Realm sing out with joy. This joy reaches down within cold starlight to the babe and wraps itself around the abandoned Royal Child, the unnamed, unwanted Crown Prince of Jotunheim. It wakes."

A child's frail cry echoed through the now enthralled hall of Odin.

"It cries. Will no one hear it?"

Footsteps approach, and a grizzled old Jotun appears in the doorway, looking puzzled.

"Yet, it is even here, in the silence, that Fate will be born anew."

The End

Chapter End Notes

Done. And done!

Now you guys know who/what the [...speaking stuff...] is all about~! At least, now you should know. If you still don't get it, private message me or email me at Kakashidiot at gmail. I love roundabout stories and this is the ultimate roundabout epic. Although I must say that I am the type of person who geeks out about roundabout story telling, others may just be like 'meh'. Haha. But I've been planning this forever, so it's nice to see the culmination.

Anyways... Let me know what you think!

I'll miss hearing from many of you. Don't be a stranger... You can always get in contact with me on gmail (Kakashidiot) or Tumblr (dappled-things/kakashidiot/) or here with private messaging or on inkitt (scarecrowslady) or wattpad (scarecrowslady).

Original Fiction I'm writing will be mostly sci-fi, science fantasy, fantasy, mystery, action-adventure. You can definitely check out Night Runners: First Year on Inkitt!

Also be sure to keep an eye out on Distortions in Time: The Untold Tales. I may add small short stories to that little collection in the future.

My future plans for Distortions in Time go thusly:

1) I will be editing the story again with the help of the wonderful Thalia Arche.

2) I will be posting the edited versions on inkitt and wattpad along with maps and pictures and etc.
3) I will be splitting the books into 3 parts.

4) I will also be open to sending people physical copies of my final edited books, when they are finished. The hard copy books will be cheap because they aren't for profit. The price (paid via PP) would only be the cost of shipping and printing the book. If you are interested, email me at kakashidiot at gmail. Important Note: Folks who reviewed every single chapter of this story will be eligible for a free poster of the front cover of DIT. V beautiful.

5) At some point in the future, I will begin planning the sequel to DIT (Book 4-6).

Well, that is it!
Love you guys! Ja ne~
(bows)
(exits stage)
As you may have guessed, I have successfully outlined the first book of my new Distortions in Time trilogy and sketched out an outline for the trilogy as a whole. I hope that you guys will enjoy this new set of journeys and adventures that I have cooked up! I have really enjoyed writing the first "trilogy", so hopefully everyone as well as I will enjoy this next outing!

You can bookmark and fav the new story on my dashboard!

[A long, long time ago, there was a great kingdom of ice…]

[…]an enchanted realm, cursed with an Eternal Frost…]

[…]nothing could grow there, it is said…]

[…]and the Beasts slowly died out…]

[…]it is silent on Jotunheim…]

Loki slowly woke, clinging desperately onto a short vivid dream which began to slip through the fingers of his memory. A soft voice reading aloud. Elska? He wondered. Or someone else?


So familiar… and yet not…

[…]it is silent…]

Thor stood on the edge of the Bifrost and contemplated the starry horizon before him. A long day of councils had left him even more fatigued than usual.

I am tired, he thought. Tired of the bickering. Tired of the senseless discussions. Tired of the politics.

His hand fingered the hilt of Mjolnir.

Tired of time passing without change.

[…]yet the Voices of the Stars…]

[…]tied to the Weaving…]

[…]bring about the Eternal Fate…]
Jotunheim Glossary:

Aldinn Stathr – Ancient Place
Almror’ganga - Long Range Weapon Contest
Arlang’leith – the Annual Caravan
Atfirth – energies
ausa’songr fugl - flow-songbirds

blakkrbjorr – black beer
Blakkrbjorn – black bear
blakkrgras – black grass
blargras – blue grass
blar’iss hros - black ice horse
Blaufe’irsteinn - blue fire stone
Brandr’ganga - Unarmed Combat

Dagaheim
Dauthr’ganga - Death Duel
dvegr – dwarf
dyrspeki – zoologist

Eybjarg (Chasms of Forever)

Faetha’snaer - "Mother", "who births the snow"
Farbothr – the Destroyer
fauld – a part of armour around the lower midsection
Fjor’fylgja – Life Mate
Flara River – Treacherous River
fleygja-skip – flying/shooting ship
For-Eldra – Ancestors
Forn Vegr – Old Ways
Frothleikr’ganga - Battle of Magick
Fylgja’snaer - "Father", "who aids the snow"

Gastropnir
Glima’ganga - Battle of Swords
Gnaefki-Seggr – High Guard
Gnottvatn (Lake of Abundance)
Gothahus – temple
Grarfjall – Grey Mountains
grarulfr – grey wolves
Griotunagardar

hafnathr – sea serpents
heillgrjot – healing stones
Heimsrsal – Soul of the Realm
heithrsker – crystal flowers
hjarr’veithr - rabbit chaser (a kind of eagle)
Holdra River – Hero’s River
holkimurtr – small flat fish
Holkn Vollr – Flat Plains
holmganga – a method of ending feuds/disagreements
hota-eik – white oak
hvaeta – wheat
hvitr'steinn - white fire stone

Innaheim – Inner Realm
iss'hona'by - ice honey bee

jarnkottr – iron cat (beast which Laufey released in Thor)
jarnvithr – iron wood

Kaldrfjall (Cold Mountains)
Kero Fornvetr – Casket of Ancient Winters
kostrboth – a method of proving virility for the purpose of marriage

lagreinn – small one (epithet)
lag'hyggr – fool
Lengi Ofrihr – Long War
luthrblom – trumpet flower

manisilfr – moonsilver
Meir'brothir – Older Brother
melrakki – white fox
Muthr'a'Ginnung - the Mouth of the Void, black holes
Myrkr Skogr – shadow forest

Nattura – spirits
Northri Stjarna – North Star

rjothr'auga haukr - red-eyed hawk

silvralmr – silver elm
silvrfiskr – silver fish
Sithr Efingi – True Heir
Skalldi
skordyr – Jotunheim goat
Smar'brothir – Younger Brother
snaerharra – snow rabbit
snjarlang'hvartha - snow camel
Storhholl – Great Hall

thurblakulfr – giant black wolves
tunglbom (moonflower)

Utanhjem – Outer Realm
Utgard

vaetki – nothing
ventrmellin – winter melon
villrkyr – wild ox
Virtha Aevi – Coming of Age
Vit'ganga - Battle of Wits

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!